

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-15-407](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

For communications during emergencies, public safety officials rely on thousands of separate systems, which often lack interoperability, or the ability to communicate across agencies and jurisdictions. The 2012 act created FirstNet within the Department of Commerce to establish, for public safety use, a nationwide, interoperable, wireless broadband network, which will initially support data transmissions. The 2012 act established numerous responsibilities for FirstNet, provided \$7 billion for network construction, and required FirstNet to be self-funding beyond this initial allocation. As part of the effort, FirstNet is working with five “early builder projects” that are building local and regional public-safety broadband networks.

GAO was asked to examine FirstNet’s progress in establishing the network. GAO assessed (1) FirstNet’s progress carrying out its responsibilities and establishing internal controls, (2) how much the network is estimated to cost and how FirstNet plans to become self-funding, and (3) what lessons can be learned from the early builder projects. GAO reviewed FirstNet documentation and public-safety network cost estimates, surveyed all state-designated FirstNet contacts, and interviewed FirstNet officials and public safety stakeholders selected for their telecommunications and public safety experience.

What GAO Recommends

FirstNet should complete its risk assessment, develop standards of conduct, and develop an evaluation plan for early builder projects. FirstNet concurred with the recommendations.

View [GAO-15-407](#). For more information, contact Mark L. Goldstein at (202) 512-2834 or goldsteinm@gao.gov.

April 2015

PUBLIC-SAFETY BROADBAND NETWORK

FirstNet Should Strengthen Internal Controls and Evaluate Lessons Learned

What GAO Found

The First Responder Network Authority (FirstNet) has made progress carrying out its responsibilities established in the Middle Class Tax Relief and Job Creation Act of 2012 (the 2012 act) but lacks certain elements of effective internal controls. FirstNet is charged with the complex and challenging task of establishing a new, nationwide, wireless broadband network for public safety entities, in consultation with federal, state, local, and tribal stakeholders. The network will initially support interoperable data communications, and later integrate mission-critical voice capabilities as public safety standards for voice communications are developed. FirstNet has made progress establishing an organizational structure, planning for the network, and consulting with stakeholders. FirstNet has also begun establishing policies and practices consistent with federal internal control standards. Officials told GAO that they plan to continue to do so. However, FirstNet has not fully assessed its risks or established standards of conduct—which is an important form of ethical guidance for its personnel. Given that FirstNet faces numerous risks to achieve its complex objectives, fully assessing risks could help FirstNet achieve its objectives and maximize use of its resources. Developing standards of conduct could also help FirstNet address any performance issues in a timely manner.

A nationwide public-safety broadband network has been estimated by various entities to cost billions of dollars, and FirstNet faces difficult decisions determining how to fund the network’s construction and ongoing operations. These estimates indicate the cost to construct and operate such a network could be from \$12 to \$47 billion over the first 10 years. The actual cost of FirstNet’s network will be influenced by FirstNet’s (1) business model, especially the extent of commercial partnerships; (2) use of existing infrastructure; (3) efforts to ensure network reliability; and (4) network coverage. For example, the cost of the network may be higher if FirstNet does not utilize partnerships and some existing infrastructure. To become self-funding, FirstNet is authorized to generate revenue through user fees and commercial partnerships. However, FirstNet faces difficult decisions in determining how to best utilize these revenue sources. For instance, widespread network coverage can attract more users and revenue, but is expensive to construct and maintain, especially in rural areas.

FirstNet has taken steps to collect and evaluate information and lessons from the five “early builder projects” that are developing local and regional public-safety networks, but could do more to ensure that the lessons are properly evaluated. For example, FirstNet has asked the projects to report on the experiences of their networks’ users and has assigned contractors to collect and log lessons. However, FirstNet does not have a plan that clearly articulates how it will evaluate those experiences and lessons. Although FirstNet told GAO that it remains in close contact with early builder projects, GAO has previously found that a well-developed evaluation plan for projects like these can help ensure that agencies obtain the information necessary to make effective program and policy decisions. Given that the early builder projects are doing on a local and regional level what FirstNet must eventually do nationally, an evaluation plan can play a key role in FirstNet’s strategic planning and program management, providing feedback on both program design and execution and ensuring FirstNet has not missed opportunities to incorporate lessons the projects have identified.