Why GAO Did This Study

Communication systems are essential for first responders in emergencies. In 2012, FirstNet was established by statute as an independent authority within the Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications and Information Administration. FirstNet was charged with establishing a nationwide broadband network for use by public-safety entities. In March 2017, FirstNet awarded a $6.5 billion contract to AT&T to deploy the network, which is currently expected to reach its final operating capability in March 2023.

The statute creating FirstNet included provisions for its authority to terminate in 2027 and for GAO to report on what actions the Congress should consider regarding this sunset. This report examines: (1) FirstNet’s statutory requirements and contract responsibilities that Congress should consider before FirstNet’s authority sunsets in 2027 and (2) options to oversee and manage the network when FirstNet’s authority sunsets and the associated operational implications and potential costs.

GAO reviewed relevant statutes and documents, including FirstNet’s contract with AT&T, and reviewed GAO’s prior relevant reports. GAO also interviewed FirstNet and other government officials and a nongeneralizable selection of public-safety stakeholders.

What GAO Recommends

The Congress should consider reauthorizing FirstNet and ensure that key statutory and contract responsibilities are addressed before the 2027 sunset. In doing so, it can consider organizational options.

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another federal agency, or (3) establish it as a separate federal organizational entity.

Each of the overall options has different operational implications and potential costs. For example, some public-safety stakeholders told GAO that reauthorizing FirstNet would prevent network disruption; FirstNet officials agreed and further added that this option would not introduce new costs. Further, such a reauthorization would enable retention of existing network expertise and experience in engaging with the public-safety community. By contrast, the option to transfer responsibilities to one or more other agencies may lead to additional contract costs and introduce new risks. For example, stakeholders noted that transitioning oversight to another agency or agencies could be problematic for contract oversight, requiring more coordination and potentially leading to inefficiencies.

Regarding FirstNet’s organizational placement if reauthorized by Congress, advantages and disadvantages of each option would vary:

- Keeping FirstNet within the Department of Commerce would result in no new costs for the federal government and align with the NTIA’s mission of supporting the broadband network and managing federal spectrum’s use. However, FirstNet officials believe that the current placement limits their ability to independently oversee and manage the network.

- Some stakeholders and FirstNet officials did not identify any advantages in placing FirstNet in another federal agency. Disadvantages of doing so include incurring additional transition costs, and potentially having to rebuild trust with public-safety entities.

- According to FirstNet officials, reauthorizing FirstNet as an entity separate from another executive branch agency would enable it to exercise its authorities without undue constraints from a federal agency. However, disadvantages include the need to establish mission-support services (e.g., financial and legal support) and the loss of available oversight mechanisms, such as from the Department of Commerce’s Inspector General.