



STATEMENT OF RETIRED ASSISTANT CHIEF CHARLES F. DOWD, FORMER COMMANDING OFFICER, COMMUNICATIONS DIVISION-NYC 911, NEW YORK CITY POLICE DEPARTMENT AND NOW VICE PRESIDENT, PUBLIC SAFETY BROADBAND TECHNOLOGY ASSOCIATION BEFORE THE UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS.

“Ensuring VA's Security: How Can Congress Best Support VA's Law Enforcement?”

MAY 16, 2024

Good morning, Chair Kiggans, Ranking Member Mrvan, and members of the Subcommittee. I am retired Assistant Chief Charles Dowd, former Commanding Officer of the New York City Police Department’s Communications Division and the NYC-911 system, and now Vice President of the Public Safety Broadband Technology Association (PSBTA). On behalf of our membership, I want to thank you for the opportunity to discuss with you the opportunities Public Safety has today to support and improve service delivery by using broadband technology.

The PSBTA is comprised of the nation’s leading Public Safety executives and associations. The professional backgrounds of our leaders all include extensive experience with, and knowledge of technology related to Public Safety communications. Our diverse group of executives understand Public Safety needs and requirements, and most importantly in the context of this hearing, those related to Public Safety communications. Communications that began with call boxes, then analog radio systems, to modern Public Safety radio networks, and now advanced broadband communications and the supporting technology, with applications and solutions harnessing broadband. We are dedicated to advancing Public Safety communications through *Advocacy, Outreach, Education, and Leadership*. Our focus is on advancing America’s Public Safety Broadband Network, the congressionally created Nationwide Public Safety Broadband Network (NPSBN).

The goal the PSBTA works toward for all of our communities is effective and dedicated communications for first responders. This is paramount, so that Public Safety can best keep our communities safe and quickly intervene during emergencies to reduce the negative impact on life and property. Many of our communities have disparate communications systems that support limited or non-existent interoperability between the agencies and jurisdictions utilizing varying technologies. Not only does this create safety and response issues within the community, but also puts Public Safety professionals at risk. Today’s current broadband solution being discussed, solves those communications problems. It improves interoperability,



situational awareness, coordination of effort in response to critical incidents, and allows innovation to rapidly advance new applications for Public Safety.

In 2012, Congress, at the request of the nationwide public safety community, established the First Responder Network Authority (FirstNet Authority) as an independent authority within the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) under the Middle-Class Tax Relief and Job Creation Act of 2012. The FirstNet Authority is tasked with ensuring and overseeing the deployment of the Nationwide Public Safety Broadband Network, also known as FirstNet. FirstNet is designed to provide reliable, uninterrupted communications for every first responder in the country, regardless of level (federal, state, local, tribal) and location (urban, suburban, rural, tribal). It is the only dedicated, nationwide, wireless broadband network built with and for public safety.

Today, modern technologies have created a breakthrough of innovation for Public Safety communications. This is not limited to just voice communications, but also exchange of data and other information. These emerging technologies enhance situational awareness, improve the safety for our Public Safety professionals, and facilitate better communication of voice and/or data, and coordination between agencies. Some examples of these technologies are:

- Voice/Data interoperable communications networks: Interoperable communications are seamless and timely between multiple jurisdictions. Each responding jurisdiction may have a different type of response to an incident, but still have the same overall goal to end and resolve the incident safely for all involved.
- Land Mobile Radio (LMR): Land mobile radios are the traditional equipment the public is accustomed to seeing law enforcement officers and fire personnel use during an emergency. The term encompasses the use of voice & data signaling over narrowband radio channels. You can now bridge disparate networks over the NPSBN allowing the users of these system to communicate with each other
- PTT over broadband: To define this easily, "Push-to-Talk (PTT), is a means of instantaneous communication on a smart device, such as your iPhone, use an application to replicate at PTT network. Benefits of this application developed for Public Safety include not having to build expensive LMR radios system nor purchase expensive dedicated radios for that system. It provides for the ability to communicate across the nation not just within your local footprint. There are significant other benefits to include real-time situational awareness. video exchange, security, and other enhanced features
- Body cameras: The ability of this technology to operate reliably in the field to upload data for evidentiary and/or investigative purposes, as well as aid in officer safety.
- Telemedicine: Improved detailed medical information can be shared in real time from the field to hospitals and vice versa. This equates to more lives saved.



- Geolocation services, also known as situational awareness: Improved location and management of the locations of incidents and the people who are affected translates into more effective Public Safety responses. This has the ability to share key information with local partners to improve response time and capability.
- NextGen911: Immediate and more detailed information coming into and being shared by your 911 Communications Centers. Additionally, allowing more innovative technologies to be implemented in these centers creates efficiencies around staffing, community support, crime trends, and much more.
- Artificial Intelligence: This is a new evolution and will be exciting to see how Public Safety utilizes this technology to enhance our effectiveness within our communities. This can only occur with a robust, secure, and dedicated public safety broadband network.

As an organization, the PSBTA always recommends the best technological decisions to be implemented for each agency and their communication needs combined with the ability to communicate with your local and national partners. Though, some of the above technology examples to be discussed have a common thread: These technologies benefit from the dedicated Public Safety Band 14 spectrum that Congress reserved for emergency response personnel and priority access and preemption on the single, dedicated nationwide Public Safety broadband network, FirstNet.

**New York Experience:** Like other jurisdictions around the country, New York City has had the same experience over the years in the need to be able to coordinate between the multitude of Public Safety agencies that coexist in the New York City metropolitan area. By using, modern broadband technology, incident management training and tabletop exercises we have been able to coordinate between multiple law enforcement and other public safety agencies in order to be able to handle large scale incidents such as September 11th, the Northeast blackout and hurricane Sandy.

**DC Metro Area:** The DC Metro Area, where you live and work, is comprised of multiple jurisdictions and includes multiple Public Safety disciplines from police, fire, and emergency medical services (EMS). One of the breakthrough innovations is how fire emergency transport vehicles are implementing a whole blood transfusion program in the field. Previously, this could only be done in a physical health care setting, like a hospital. Now, with a dedicated, secure, and reliable FirstNet connection, first responders are able to track in real time their whole blood supply in the field, saving lives. Emergency Medical professionals need to track temperature, location, supply, etc. all the time. This is believed to be the beginning of how EMS will evolve throughout the United States. Also, there are numerous agencies that support national events in this area, including incidents on the vast waterways. All of these agencies' daily communications are connected through FirstNet.



Please understand the DC experience has the common thread of using FirstNet for all local and multi-organization communications. But FirstNet does not have to wholly replace your LMR systems or other technology platforms. It can enhance and complement existing systems, and allow for the convergence of many solutions, serving as a common platform to breakdown longstanding communications silos and allowing your traditional LMR systems to communicate with other disparate LMR systems on FirstNet.

As we understand, the VA appears to have a critical need for interoperable communications both locally and nationally that will allow them to talk directly to their partners and to share critical information such as situational awareness. I recommend their communications solution should be looked at from a holistic national purview that not only provides a communications solution for the VA's law enforcement but may include additional elements of technology for other divisions of the VA and the local, state, and federal mutual aid partners. This is recommended so there is a nationwide, sustainable, common solution, and we would encourage the VA to harness advanced broadband solutions that can integrate with the Nationwide Public Safety Broadband Network. There should no longer be a need to encourage disparate systems for one organization because of geography anymore.

If asked, we would be happy to discuss, with VA Executives and decision makers, some of our high-level recommendations such as:

- Establish a Joint Task Force: This task force should consist of representatives from the VA Police and surrounding city police departments and to include partners such as fire, EMS, and emergency management. Its aim would be to foster better understanding, streamline communication, and coordinate responses more effectively.
- Policy & Procedures: Assess if these are current for the VA. Then look at how these fit in with or need to evolve to work with other agencies to improve communications.
- Cross-Training Initiatives: By creating opportunities for shared training exercises, they can enhance the skills of all involved parties and build a stronger, more united front in public safety. While creating new jurisdiction relationships across agencies and building on that momentum of trust and commonality.
- Funding: Every great solution still needs to be funded. Funding for training, equipment, and the proper technological solution for communications is next on the list for others to decide.

The Veterans' Administration has more than 1,300 health care facilities, providing care to nine million enrolled Veterans each year. The VA has dedicated uniformed federal law enforcement resources. They are responsible for the protection of VA Medical Centers (VAMCs) and other facilities, such as Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs), Health Care Centers (HCCs), annexes and other facilities operated by VA. In addition to Law Enforcement, other important Public Safety functions are managed by the VA Office of Emergency Management (OEM).



Communications is critical to coordination and effective response for Law Enforcement, fire, EMS, 911 Services and Emergency Management. The VA is already harnessing advanced broadband capabilities to support care delivery for Veterans and equip its Public Safety and Emergency Response personnel with essential tools and resources, but opportunities to improve remain untapped. In recognizing the importance of emergency communication systems, we took notice of the introduction of the Advancing VA's Emergency Response to (AVERT) Crises Act of 2023. This bill has bipartisan support and was introduced in the U.S. Senate last year. A companion bill does not appear to have been introduced in the U.S. House as of yet.

Thank you for convening today's hearing. We hope our testimony will help inform the committee's review of the needs facing the VA's Law Enforcement and broader Emergency Response personnel. Technology offers real and live-saving capabilities to Public Safety, and we urge Congress to adopt policies and make the necessary investments to fully equip Public Safety with the advanced broadband tools to enhance safety and help them accomplish their important mission.