



## The Daily Dish

# FirstNet Reauthorization

DOUGLAS HOLTZ-EAKIN | JANUARY 27, 2026

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, first responders struggled with intermittent service and inability to connect using their public safety communications networks. First responders dealing with Hurricane Katrina faced the same problems. After the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing? Same story. This week hundreds of millions of Americans faced a severe winter storm. While there were some worries – wine shortages, forced confinement with one's children, the evil Patriots triumphing over what is good and right – the ability of first responders to communicate during any emergency was not on the list.

### What happened?

Among other advances, in 2012 Congress created FirstNet, a public-private partnership to make the recommendation of the 9/11 Commission for a dedicated first-responders communication network a reality. (Hat tip to the late Senator McCain who made this an issue in his 2008 presidential campaign and whose 2010 First Responders Protection Act was a precursor of FirstNet.) In 2017 AT&T, the only commercial carrier to bid in the initial phase, was awarded a 25-year contract to build out FirstNet.

FirstNet's authorization expires in February 2027, so one of Congress's tasks this year is to reauthorize the entity. There would seem to be no reason not to simply re-up the program. All 50 states, the District of Columbia, and several U.S. territories have voluntarily opted into the program. FirstNet uses a band of spectrum known as Band 14, which can be cleared and dedicated to emergency use as needed. (AT&T has access to Band 14 at other times.) The network operates under government supervision and there are funded plans to continue to upgrade the network.

As Congress has begun work on the reauthorization of FirstNet, other telecom carriers have suggested that the AT&T contract should be re-thought. Presumably the attraction is the

partial access to Band 14 – all spectrum is in high demand these days – but Congress will have to weigh not only breaking the contract, but upsetting the current governance structure and geography of access.

Congress will not do much in an election year, and there is not much that needs to be done. Reauthorizing FirstNet, however, is on the short list.