



FRATERNAL ORDER OF POLICE

Testimony of
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"Public Safety Communications in the United States"

before the Subcommittee on Communications and Technology of the
Committee on Energy and Commerce

Good morning, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Matsui, and the other Members of this distinguished Subcommittee. I thank you for the chance to submit this testimony for the record on the state of public safety communications and the urgent need to reauthorize the First Responder Network Authority (FirstNet).

The Fraternal Order of Police is the oldest and largest law enforcement labor organization in the United States, representing more than 382,000 members in over 2,200 local lodges in every region of the country. We represent rank-and-file law enforcement officers who serve in departments of all sizes—from small rural agencies to large urban departments. Our members are on the front lines every day, protecting our communities and relying on effective, reliable communications to do their jobs safely and effectively.

Public safety communications are the lifeline for law enforcement officers, firefighters, EMS personnel, and other first responders. In an emergency, seconds matter, and the ability to communicate seamlessly—whether coordinating a response to a natural disaster, a mass casualty event, or an active threat—can mean the difference between life and death. Our members depend on these systems not just for operational success, but for their personal safety and the safety of the public we serve.

I know this from personal experience. Just over twenty years ago, I was working as a Deputy Sheriff with the St. Charles Parish Sheriff's Office and I was among the thousands of law enforcement officers and emergency responders who prepared for and responded to Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath. I authored a book about my experiences entitled *Chest Deep and Rising, The Hurricane Katrina Nightmare*.

While no communications network could be expected to remain fully operational in such extreme conditions, responders like me were operating in an environment in which the communications infrastructure was crippled; repeater sites were incapacitated by floodwaters, structural failures, and extended power outages which rendered nearly all communications tools inoperable at a time when the need was the greatest.

Fifty-two 911 communications networks were disrupted, and in many cases, communications centers had to be evacuated due to flooding. Vast areas of the affected region had no regular telephone or wireless service. Thousands of the switches and cell towers, which form the region's telecommunications network, were destroyed, inaccessible or left without power. For some agencies, the only means of communication for the first weeks was by personal couriers, which proved impractical due to the level of devastation and flooding that hampered movement. The inability to communicate only compounded the challenges facing first responders. These factors impeded our ability to quickly respond to and subsequently aid the people who needed our help the most during this massive natural disaster.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and while I was serving as the FOP National Secretary, I was invited by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to serve as a member of the *Independent Panel Reviewing the Impact of Hurricane Katrina on*

Communications Networks. As part of my work on that panel, I submitted a report from the law enforcement perspective which can be found [here](#).

Among the issues I outlined were interoperability, the community's lack of access to media outlets to convey accurate information to the public, and insufficient satellite coverage. My recommendations—all made in 2006—included the necessity of training in emergency communications, a credentialing program for technicians working to restore networks in restricted areas, and the need for the assignment of portable communications equipment like mobile towers and antennas.

While we have improved these systems in the last two decades, many aspects of our nation's public safety communications infrastructure remain outdated, vulnerable, and insufficient to meet modern challenges.

Since 1997, the FOP has been an active and reliable partner to the Federal government and to the private sector to find solutions. We have played a leadership role going back to the days of Cyren Call and the Public Safety Spectrum Trust—the ancestors of the First Responder Network Authority (FirstNet) and will continue to do so.

I want to commend recent actions by the FCC that have advanced public safety communications. Last year, the FCC made a landmark decision to authorize the use of the 4.9 GHz spectrum band within the Nationwide Public Safety Broadband Network (NPSBN) and grant a nationwide license to FirstNet to administer it. This was a hard-fought victory for public safety over private profit. The FOP, along with our partners at the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF) and the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), campaigned vigorously to protect this dedicated spectrum from encroachment by for-profit companies, critical infrastructure operators, and transportation providers who sought to use it for commercial purposes under the guise of "local control." A fractured, patchwork approach would have lacked the economies of scale needed to drive innovation, leading to underutilization and leaving vast areas of the country—particularly rural communities—unserved. Instead, by integrating the 4.9 GHz band into the NPSBN, FirstNet can now deploy advanced 5G capabilities nationwide, providing public safety with the speed, capacity, and propagation characteristics essential for innovative tools like real-time video sharing, sensor data from wearables, and enhanced location services during emergencies.

This decision underscores the proven success of FirstNet as a public-private partnership dedicated exclusively to public safety. Since its establishment, FirstNet has built and operated a nationwide broadband network that prioritizes first responders, ensuring priority and preemption over commercial traffic. Our members have seen firsthand how FirstNet enhances officer safety and response efficiency, and law enforcement plays a direct role in its governance through the FirstNet Authority Board and Public Safety Advisory Committee. The FOP is grateful to former FCC Chairman Jessica Rosenworcel and current FCC Chairman Brendan Carr for engaging with us and prioritizing the voices of rank-and-file officers in this process. Moving forward, we

look to FirstNet to continue protecting incumbent licensees, coordinating frequencies to avoid interference, and driving expeditious 5G deployment using existing infrastructure.

Interoperability is still a critical issue. Despite advances like FirstNet, challenges persist, as evidenced by reports from the assassination attempt on then-former President Trump last year, where communication gaps between the U.S. Secret Service (USSS) and other law enforcement personnel providing protection at the event may have played a role in the security failures that day. Notably, not all Federal law enforcement agencies, of which the USSS is one, fully utilize FirstNet, which exacerbates these problems. The FCC can help by promoting awareness of 5G benefits on the 4.9 GHz band and combating efforts by commercial entities to dilute public safety priorities. Additionally, the FCC's Industry Traceback Group (ITG) plays a vital role in addressing caller ID spoofing, which fuels dangerous "swatting" incidents that endanger officers and waste resources. We encourage stronger collaboration between the ITG, voice service providers, and law enforcement at all levels to trace and prosecute offenders, even when calls are spoofed. Recently, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security has distributed [new resources](#) for "swatting" and hoax threats—which are on the rise again nationwide.

Swatting and spoofing are among the evolving threats and technologies we have to anticipate, as we transition to digital and 5G networks. Protecting these networks from hostile actors—through robust cybersecurity and resilient infrastructure—is critically important. And what comes after 5G? Advances in 6G and beyond will likely be driven by integrating artificial intelligence (AI), edge computing, and expanded spectrum access. This should enable even more sophisticated tools for public safety, such as predictive analytics for threat detection and augmented reality for training. Law enforcement must be at the table to ensure these developments prioritize our needs.

This brings me to the main point of my testimony—the need to reauthorize FirstNet. First and foremost, we agree with the Commission's order that preserves the 4.9 GHz band for public safety, requires priority and preemption over any non-public safety use, and adopts a nationwide framework to support public safety's growing need for dedicated 5G spectrum. This cannot be effectively or realistically accomplished through a fractured, patchwork approach that results in different uses of the band depending upon the geographic area, or even upon the licensee within the same geographic area. This decentralized framework has been in place for 20 years, and the band has remained chronically underutilized. The fact is that for-profit companies in the private sector, critical infrastructure operators, and transportation providers seek to encroach upon public safety's 4.9 GHz spectrum for their own commercial purposes. These efforts are unacceptable to our members whose lives literally depend on the reliability of these communications systems. Organizations like the Coalition for Emergency Response and Critical Infrastructure (CERCI), which represent commercial interests, are making this argument under the false banner of "local control." This approach will not work and the lack of a national strategy could result in commercial entities "cherry-picking" the most desirable areas for 5G investment, while leaving much of the country unserved.

When the FirstNet effort was still taking shape, the FOP and our partners in the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF), who together represent the overwhelming majority of the public safety practitioners that use this equipment in the field, were slowly squeezed out of the policy-making process in favor of providers, big technology representatives, and public safety executives. Law enforcement was barely represented and there were no rank-and-file voices at the table at all. This led the FOP and IAFF to oppose those early efforts, and we risk repeating history if law enforcement officers—the rank-and-file whose lives depend on a healthy and robust public safety communications network—are once again sidelined. While we certainly welcome and appreciate the broad support that law enforcement executive organizations representing chiefs and sheriffs have provided to FirstNet, it is the men and women in the field whose lives are on the line.

The FOP has a representative on FirstNet's Public Safety Advisory Committee (PSAC), which ensures that the needs of public safety are being met. We have a long history of partnership and collaboration to provide our officers in the field. The FOP has confidence in FirstNet, which is one of the reasons we are pushing Congress to reauthorize the program. More importantly, our members who depend on FirstNet have confidence in their communication systems—and it is their lives that are at stake.

The fact is that FirstNet has a decades-long record of success. They have a high-functioning and established relationship with the field and the FOP that has resulted in an ongoing legacy of trust and collaboration. When we need to talk, they listen. When we have a concern, it is addressed. When we have a problem, it is solved.

The FirstNet Authority's authorization is set to expire in February 2027, and without Congressional action, law enforcement officers like those represented by the FOP could lose access to a dedicated, reliable broadband system that has proven its value in real-world scenarios, from hurricanes to active shooter events. Reauthorizing FirstNet—ideally on a permanent basis—will ensure continuity, allow for ongoing investment in 5G and future technologies, and guarantee that public safety remains the priority.

On behalf of our more than 382,000 members, I thank you again for the opportunity to share the perspective of the Fraternal Order of Police with the Members of this subcommittee.