



What to consider *before* adopting FirstNet

AT&T is now offering FirstNet subscriber plans to the public safety community nationwide. Through their 25-year contract with the federal FirstNet Authority, AT&T committed to an all-bands approach. This approach gives a FirstNet subscriber immediate access to all bandwidth owned and operated by AT&T in Vermont and nationwide. There is no waiting for a public safety broadband network to be built. It is here. But is the network the best option for you?

The new presence of an AT&T public safety network is spurring competition among cell providers for your business. Industry officials predict this competition will result in a consumer win for the public safety community, with lower prices and new network features and services. No one is required to sign up for an AT&T FirstNet subscriber plan. However, the public safety community should stay aware of the buildout in Vermont and evaluate cellular offerings from all companies. Below are a few suggestions of what to consider.

CHECK LIST

#1 Coverage

At this point in time, the cellular coverage area in Vermont remains unchanged. Regardless of what cellular carrier you are using, coverage must be a first consideration. Public safety must have reliable and robust coverage. Don't be hesitant about challenging your cellular carrier about not only the status of your current coverage, but ask about future plans a carrier has to improve coverage in your area. AT&T has a contractual commitment with FirstNet to build new towers in Vermont, along with business-as-usual sites. However, it's anticipated that other carriers will also be building new infrastructure to remain competitive in the public safety marketplace.

#2 Use of the Broadband Network

Your organization may not currently be utilizing cellular networks as part of your public safety communications. However, if reliable coverage was possible in your area, how might you use broadband? If you envision streaming video, that would require a cellular plan with higher data limits. If your team of volunteer responders would like to use a simple application to provide you with alerts and messages, data would be less of a concern. If you are part of a search and rescue team that might use cell phones to communicate in a remote area, you should ask about what deployable units are available for your use. The developing public safety network and its applications are not meant to replace LMR radios, but rather provide an additional means of communication. Knowing how you want to use this technology in the future will help you evaluate the plans being offered to you today. Discuss your options with potential cellular carriers and learn about any added features, such as security and customer support, which would enhance their offer to you.

#3 Pricing

Whether you are a current AT&T customer or you subscribe with another carrier, how is your price for service impacted if you switch to a FirstNet subscriber plan? Anyone who currently serves in a first responder role is eligible to sign up for a FirstNet subscriber plan. A primary user is any public safety organization/individual whose mission and job function is to provide services to the public in the area of law enforcement, fire protection or emergency medical services. When a public safety organization opts to participate in FirstNet, that organization will provide AT&T with a list of the names of people who serve in a primary role. Once a person's name has been submitted to AT&T, that first responder is eligible to subscribe, regardless of whether the individual is paying the cell phone bill or the organization is paying the bill. As you evaluate pricing, consider how it might impact any family plans you currently subscribe to. What will a carrier charge you for a device? Compare the amount of data you currently have and what might be offered to you by another carrier. Who offers you the best price?

The buildout of a nationwide public safety broadband network promises to introduce new technological advances to the first responder community. Such technology includes the development of new geolocation applications, wearable sensors, and mission critical push-to-talk functions. Regardless of what carrier you subscribe to, the greater public safety community will benefit from the new technology, improved coverage and competitive prices. As a public safety subscriber, it remains in your best interest to stay aware of new developments and evaluate all options available to you.