

CWA Promotes Awareness Of FirstNet Broadband Network

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The Communications Workers of America (CWA), a labor union, is promoting awareness of the benefits of FirstNet, an independent government authority established in 2012 to build and deploy the first-ever nationwide broadband network dedicated to first responders.

“Once people know what it is, they get excited,” says Bianca Garcia, CWA's FirstNet Program Coordinator. AT&T, the only unionized wireless carrier, was chosen as the private company tasked over 25 years with building out the nationwide network.

FirstNet network features include no throttling or slowing down of data speeds, prioritizing calls to avoid congestion on wireless networks, and preemption to enable first responders to communicate and coordinate during emergencies and large events.

Public Service Stakeholders

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These features ensure the network is always available for use by first responders, including law enforcement, emergency medical service (EMS) and fire departments. The network uses encryption to ensure privacy of sensitive information. Public service stakeholders using a single network can promote coordination of mutual aid and help to solve challenges of communication.

CWA is seeking to bridge an education gap among first responders related to FirstNet, including all public safety stakeholders – professional and volunteer, urban and rural. *"If they are looking to upgrade their communications abilities or think about their work in a more comprehensive way,"* they should embrace FirstNet, says Garcia.

Involvement will also ensure first responders help to guide how the network evolves over the next 25 years. *"Public service should be at the forefront of how the network develops,"* says Garcia.

FirstNet-Compatible Devices

The union makes information about FirstNet easily available at FirstResponderVoice and through their Facebook page, a monthly newsletter, a downloadable fact sheet, webinars and other venues. FirstResponderVoice is a source of information, news and analysis about FirstNet and public safety communications more generally.

Among the tools CWA uses is a FirstNet Tool Kit, providing a step-by-step process detailing how first responders and public safety decision-makers can inform their communities about FirstNet and the benefits it brings to their public safety programs as the first interoperable LTE broadband network.

The Tool Kit includes a FirstNet fact sheet, introductory PowerPoint, rates for FirstNet plans and a list of FirstNet-compatible devices. It outlines step by step how first responders can subscribe to FirstNet and share sign-up information with colleagues.

Emergency Response Stakeholders

There are also suggestions on how emergency response stakeholders – including fire department chiefs, colleagues, city council members, volunteer first responders and other emergency-response workers – can educate one another on FirstNet.

FirstNet is not intended to replace land mobile radio (LMR) because it does not include mission critical voice capabilities

FirstNet is not intended to replace land mobile radio (LMR) because it does not include mission critical voice capabilities. The goal is to provide additional capacity, coverage and interoperability. The system has already proven successful in several high-profile disasters in recent months. For example, Panama City Beach, Fla., relied on AT&T FirstNet for communications in the wake of Hurricane Michael, which caused outages last October in the jurisdiction's broadband and LMR systems.

AT&T and FirstNet also set up a Satellite Cell on Light Truck (SatCOLT) to enhance cell service for first responders who were battling California's Camp Fire last November. They brought mobile cell service back to the city of Malibu, Calif., in the aftermath of the Woolsey Fire in November.

Wireless Broadband Network

CWA has been involved with FirstNet from the beginning and was an active member of the Public Safety Alliance that supported the creation of FirstNet. Discussions first began after 9/11 about the need for FirstNet. CWA also supported Senate Bill 3756, the Public Safety Spectrum and Wireless Innovation Act, which allocates 10 megahertz of spectrum known as the 'D block' to public safety for a nationwide interoperable wireless broadband network. Passage of the bill, in effect, created FirstNet.

CWA includes professional public safety members around the country in addition to their membership of communications workers. In all, CWA represents 700,000 workers in the U.S., Canada and Puerto Rico, working in telecommunications and IT, the airline industry, news media, broadcast and cable television, education, health care and public service, law enforcement,

manufacturing and other fields.

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