

2014: A Mixed Bag for FirstNet

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The effort to build a nationwide broadband network for public safety faced its share of ups and downs in 2014.

The good news: The First Responder Network Authority (FirstNet) passed some real milestones this year. In April, the FirstNet Board made key appointments, naming Ali Afrashteh as CTO and Jim Gwinn as CIO. Afrashteh, a telecom industry veteran with vast wireless experience, leads planning and deployment of the network. Gwinn, former CIO for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farm Service Agency, is in charge of FirstNet's internal IT and communications.

FirstNet officials also met with Maryland first responders in July, marking the beginning of state-by-state consultations that will dictate the new network's blueprint. And a few months later, FirstNet's governing board released an RFI seeking industry input on the network's design, a precursor to an actual RFP for the project.

But FirstNet also had high-profile stumbles, the biggest of which were accusations that the board bent government personnel rules to hire pricey consultants who were friendly with FirstNet Chairman Sam Ginn. Ginn, former CEO of Vodafone AirTouch, resigned in May, as did board member Craig Farrill and FirstNet General Manager Bill D'Agostino, both also former Vodafone executives.

In addition, there was grumbling throughout the year that industry hotshots weren't consulting enough with public safety representatives who'll actually use the network.

T.J. Kennedy, now FirstNet's acting general manager, may be an antidote for the latter issue. Kennedy is a former cop, paramedic and firefighter who's earning praise for helping the agency regain its footing.

But FirstNet will need to be firing on all cylinders going into a busy 2015. The agency intends to release a network RFP in March, and ultimately it must develop a network platform and a pricing model that will attract enough state and local users to support the ambitious new service.

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