

FirstNet gets five new board members: Dowd, Fitzgerald not reappointed

Urgent Communications By Donny Jackson

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Five of the 12 appointed members of the [FirstNet](#) board will be new faces—and public-safety representatives Charles Dowd and Paul Fitzgerald have been replaced—according to an announcement made this afternoon by U.S. Secretary of Commerce Penny Pritzker.

FirstNet board member Ed Reynolds is the lone member with an expiring term to be reappointed by Pritzker. Former Chairman Sam Ginn announced in June that he planned to step down from the board. Dowd and Fitzgerald were the other board members with expiring terms, and [both expressed a desire to be reappointed](#) , but neither was.

In addition, Craig Farrill—a telecom executive who filled the roles of acting general manager and acting chief technology officer during his stint on the board—and former Denver Mayor Wellington Webb both recently expressed a desire to step down from the board, according to [National Telecommunications and Information Administration](#) spokeswoman Heather Phillips.

Today, Pritzker appointed the following people to the FirstNet board:

- Chris Burbank, chief of police, Salt Lake City Police Department;
- James H. Douglas, former governor of Vermont;
- Annise Parker, mayor, city of Houston, Texas;
- Frank Plastina, technology executive, North Carolina;
- Ed Reynolds, retired telecommunications executive (reappointed); and
- Richard Stanek, sheriff, Hennepin County, Minnesota.

The appointment of Douglas is particularly notable, because many criticized the initial FirstNet board appointments in 2012, because they did not include a member that was a state official at the time. Federal government officials noted that board member Teri Takai had filled state roles previously, but she was working for the federal government at the time of her appointment in 2012.

“I greatly appreciate the willingness of these individuals to serve our nation in the critical task of ensuring our first responders have the tools they need to perform their live-saving work,” Pritzker said in a prepared statement. “Over the past two years, the FirstNet board has made progress toward fulfilling the mission mandated by Congress to create the country’s first nationwide broadband network dedicated to helping firefighters, police and emergency responders to communicate more effectively and keep communities safe. The new members of the board bring great experience to help carry out FirstNet’s important mission.”

Lawrence Strickling, assistant secretary of Commerce for communications and information and NTIA administrator, echoed this sentiment.

“With these new appointments, I’m confident that the FirstNet Board has the right combination of public safety, wireless network, and state, local and federal government expertise to oversee FirstNet as it continues its work to get this historic network up and running,” Strickling said in a prepared statement. “We are grateful that they’ve agreed to take on this challenge, and welcome the fresh thinking and energy that new board members will bring to FirstNet.”

Last year, three of the four board members with expiring terms—Sue Swenson, Jeff Johnson and Teri Takai—were reappointed by Pritzker. The lone change to the board in 2013 was Barry Boniface replacing Bill Keever, [who announced that he would not seek reappointment to focus on running his family’s winery](#) in California.

Both Fitzgerald and Dowd said they wanted to be reappointed to the FirstNet board, but their status has been the subject of considerable speculation in recent months.

In April 2013, Fitzgerald [made a series of allegations regarding FirstNet board practices](#), claiming that the [FirstNet](#) board at the time did not operate with appropriate openness and transparency and that some members of the board had a “possible conflict of interest.”

Fitzgerald’s openness and transparency allegations were investigated by an internal committee

of FirstNet board members—headed by Webb—and [no wrongdoing was found](#). The conflict-of-interest portion of the investigation was referred to the Inspector General last fall, but no announcement of any findings has been made.

Meanwhile, Fitzgerald's e-mails regarding FirstNet that were sent from his e-mail account in Story County, Iowa—where he serves as sheriff—were the subject of an open-records dispute, when Story County was prepared to release the e-mails in compliance with state open-records law. In July, [a federal court ruled that the e-mails are the property of FirstNet](#)—an entity that is exempt from disclosure laws—despite the fact that they resided on a Story County server.

Calls to Fitzgerald were not returned in time to be included in this story.

Dowd, who recently retired from the New York Police Department (NYPD), was one of the earliest and most-outspoken public-safety proponents of broadband connectivity for first responders, and he was a key player in the public-safety lobbying effort that ultimately led to Congress passing legislation that established FirstNet in February 2012. Last month, Dowd cited support from several organizations—including the National Fraternal Order of Police and the Major Cities Chiefs Association—in expressing his desire to be reappointed to the board.

"I'm disappointed about not being reappointed, but the secretary [of Commerce] has the right to make the choices; that's the way the legislation is written," Dowd said today during an interview with [IWCE](#)'s *Urgent Communications*. "Chris Burbank is a great guy—I know him pretty well—and I am sure he will do a good job."

Dowd vowed to remain engaged in the effort to bring a nationwide broadband network to public safety.

"I have no intention of going away," Dowd said. "I am going to be involved in this in any way I can. I didn't get into this six years ago to not be involved, so that will continue. In whatever capacity I can contribute, I will contribute.

Today, Charles Ramsey—president of Major Cities Chiefs Association—praised the FirstNet

appointments in a release.

“Public-safety agencies will be well served by appointment of law-enforcement officials from the front lines,” Ramsey said in a prepared statement. “Chief Burbank brings a distinguished record of achievement to the FirstNet board, and he will be an articulate voice for all police who rely upon emergency communications to protect the public we are sworn to serve.

“Sheriff Stanek is our partner from the major counties, and we are grateful that he will join the FirstNet board to represent county sheriffs and their deputies across the nation.”

Ramsey also expressed thanks to Dowd for his service.

“Chuck Dowd was a driving force to secure passage of the legislation and establish FirstNet,” Ramsey said in a prepared statement. “What exists today we owe to his many years of hard work and steadfast commitment.”

The [Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials](#) (APCO) also issued a press release applauding the appointments to the FirstNet board.

“Each of these new members brings a high level of expertise that will be valuable to the deployment of the nationwide public safety broadband network.” APCO President John Wright said in a prepared statement. “APCO appreciates the service of the departing board members who played a formative role in FirstNet’s development.”

“We look forward to working with the newly-constituted board, led by Chairwoman [Sue] Swenson, as well as FirstNet’s dedicated staff to ensure the success of this critical endeavor for public-safety communications. We especially welcome the opportunity to work with Sheriff Stanek and Chief Burbank, who join existing public-safety board members Jeff Johnson and Kevin McGinnis. Their accomplishments and considerable experience will ensure the public-safety community continues to be well represented on the board.”

Jim Pasco, executive director for the National Fraternal Order of Police—the largest police organization in the country, with more than 335,000 members—expressed disappointment that Dowd was not reappointed.

"We were obviously disappointed," Pasco said during an interview with IWCE's Urgent Communications. "We feel that, of the available pool of law-enforcement personnel and you look at the qualifications for that board, Chuck [Dowd] was right at the head of the class.

"Our position is that he's still a subject-matter expert that we're going to rely on heavily, whether he's on the board or not."

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