

Hiring, procurement are pain points for FirstNet

FCW By Adam Mazmanian

March 11, 2015

The development of a nationwide broadband network for first responders is being hindered by cumbersome procurement rules and delays in hiring, said Sue Swenson, chairwoman of FirstNet, the federal entity tasked with building the network.

FirstNet and its parent agency, the Commerce Department, have twice sought rapid hiring authority from the Office of Personnel Management, according to Swenson's testimony during a March 11 hearing of the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee. They were turned down once and are awaiting a reply to their second request, which was made in August 2014.

Swenson testified that it can take up to nine months to hire new staff, and the agency currently has just over 100 dedicated employees.

"The federal government is failing you," Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.) said.

FirstNet has a big job and has experienced growing pains from the beginning. The goal is to build a broadband network for emergency services that uses dedicated spectrum parceled out by the federal government and covers the entire United States, including rural and urban communities. The effort is funded by \$7 billion raised through a recent spectrum sale, but it is expected to cost much more than that over the project's life cycle. The Government Accountability Office has said the network could cost \$12 billion to \$47 billion over 10 years.

Part of what FirstNet officials must figure out is how to become self-funding. State, local and tribal entities that opt in will use the network on a fee-for-service basis, and officials also hope to generate revenue by delivering excess network capacity to commercial broadband providers while securing priority use for emergency responders as needed.

"There are a great many things that can go terribly wrong unless good decisions are made right now," committee chairman Sen. John Thune (R-S.D.) said in his opening statement.

In addition, state governors can choose to build and run their own radio access networks to interact with the national network, as long as their systems are interoperable on a continuous basis with the FirstNet core. That complicated web of mutual obligations between states and FirstNet is spelled out in more detail in a [proposed statutory interpretation](#) released for comment on March 9. If a significant number of states decide to build their own networks, it could complicate the funding picture.

"The public safety agencies aren't obligated to sign up," Swenson said. "We have to create a compelling value proposition that gives them more value than they have today."

If it works, the project could transform emergency response in the U.S. Now agencies that share missions and overlapping jurisdictions are often hamstrung by the lack of interoperable radio equipment. Indeed, the push for FirstNet grew out of interoperability problems experienced during the response to the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

In addition to interoperability, FirstNet is expected to deliver text, image and video capabilities to first responders.

"Just as smartphones have changed our personal lives, FirstNet devices and applications ultimately will change the way public safety operates," Oklahoma City Fire Chief G. Keith Bryant said.

FirstNet's next big deliverable is a request for proposals from vendors that want to create and run the network, which is expected to take advantage of existing long-haul transport resources where possible but also build new infrastructure. The RFP will include more specifics on funding, including projections for revenue from user fees and the leasing of excess capacity.

The RFP is due to be released at the end of the year, and Swenson said that so far, FirstNet is hitting its milestones. However, she added, "my expectation is that we might see a few bumps

along the way."

There have been some bumps already, including a [report](#) by Commerce's inspector general that is critical of the practices in place for FirstNet board members, who are permitted to maintain industry ties, to disclose conflicts of interest. A

[GAO report](#)

, meanwhile, found that FirstNet has lagged in creating a plan to extract lessons from a handful of "early builder" projects.

FirstNet is facing a statutory deadline of 2022 to have the system operational. Asked if the deadline would be met, Swenson silenced the hearing room with her response: "If we don't, we should be shot."

[Link to Article](#)

[Link to FCW News Articles](#)