

Inspector General Cites Myriad Problems With FirstNet Board, Offers Recommendations

Bloomberg BNA By Brandon Ross

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The First Responder Network Authority (FirstNet) didn't file timely public financial disclosure reports and improvements are needed in procedures for monitoring conflicts of interest, among other issues, according to a Commerce Department Office of Inspector General [report](#) .

The Dec. 5 report on the planned international first-responder network, an independent authority within the National Telecommunication and Information Administration (NTIA), found a number of other problems, including with contracting procedures, sparking some congressional criticism. FirstNet was created to establish and deploy an interoperable Nationwide Public Safety Broadband Network (NPSBN).

“The Inspector General’s report confirms what we have suspected and long feared—that FirstNet had been operating without proper processes and with disregard for laws that guard against impropriety,” House Communications and Technology Subcommittee Chairman Greg Walden (R-Ore.) said in a Dec. 9 statement. “Questions of ethics threaten the legitimacy of FirstNet’s efforts and ultimately undermine its important mission to build a nationwide public safety broadband network.”

FirstNet and the NTIA responded to the IG's draft report recommendations in offering an explanation of some of the report's findings.

“Although administrative requirements may not have been fulfilled in several instances with respect to certain disclosure reports, as far as we were aware, Board members made the material disclosures necessary to identify and address potential conflicts,” NTIA said in a response within the report. “While certain board members did appear to late-file certain public disclosure reports, this should be considered in the context of the other significant efforts that were dedicated to identifying and addressing potential conflicts.”

The OIG has asked for an action plan from FirstNet within 60 days of Dec. 5.

Pledge of More Oversight

Walden promised more oversight and hearings on the NPSBN early next year and said the committee expected substantial progress in implementing the OIG recommendations for remedying the issues.

The IG made recommendations on:

- financial disclosure noncompliance,
- internal controls pertaining to financial disclosure and conflict of interest at FirstNet,
- the submission of initial disclosure and final public filer termination reports, and
- the routine updating of lists of entities presenting potential conflicts of interest and contracting procedures.

Senate Commerce Committee Chairman John D. Rockefeller IV (D-W.Va.), encouraged FirstNet members to adopt the OIG's recommendations as well.

“The Commerce Inspector General’s report serves as a note of caution to everyone involved in FirstNet—they must be diligent about following the rules,” Rockefeller said in a Dec. 9 statement. “It has to carefully balance the need for both effective government oversight and the autonomy necessary to launch.”

Rockefeller said that he trusted that FirstNet was still in the hands of capable leadership.

“I understand that FirstNet has already taken steps to remedy many of the problems documented by the Inspector General,” Rockefeller said. “I continue to trust that FirstNet is in good hands, both with the Board and its executive leadership team, and I am confident that they will make sure to carefully abide by all applicable rules and regulations going forward.”

“When complete, FirstNet will be the first nationwide, high-speed wireless public safety network to enable police, firefighters, EMS workers, and other state and federal first responders to communicate wirelessly when responding to natural disasters or other crises,” Rockefeller said in a press release.

FirstNet's creation was a response to the failure in communications systems for first responders during the rescue efforts on Sept. 11, 2001, the IG report said.

OIG Complaints

The OIG office said that it made the recommendations to four primary people: The secretary of FirstNet, the general counsel, the chairman and the senior procurement official.

“FirstNet contracting practices lacked transparent award competition, sufficient oversight of hiring, adequate monitoring, and procedures to prevent payment of erroneous costs,” an abstract of the roughly 50-page report said.

For example, the report found that \$11 million in unsupported cost had been incurred and that a representative for the FirstNet contracting officer had approved duplicate charges.

“We found that the Department’s confidential and public disclosure monitoring procedures were inadequate,” Andrew Katsaros, principal assistant inspector general for Audit and Evaluation, said in a Dec. 5 letter addressed to Uzoma Onyije, board secretary for FirstNet and Lawrence Strickling, assistant secretary for Communications and Information, NTIA.

Five new members were appointed to the FirstNet's 15-member board in September.

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