

**Board of FirstNet Public-Safety System Is Criticized Over Conflicts**

The New York Times By Edward Wyatt

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WASHINGTON — The board overseeing a \$7 billion nationwide public-safety communications network paid “no systematic attention to potential conflicts of interest” among its members, several of whom have financial ties to the telecommunications industry, according to [a report released on Tuesday](#) by the Commerce Department’s inspector general.

Members of the board of FirstNet, as the communications network is known, did not file timely public financial disclosure reports, the report said. The board’s contracting practices also lacked the required transparency, the report said, resulting in inadequate oversight of hiring and the payment of erroneous costs during the board’s first year in operation.

In one case, an ethics official took eight months to correct one board member’s failure to disclose a significant financial conflict of interest.

The inspector general investigated the network after a FirstNet board member, Sheriff Paul Fitzgerald of Story County, Iowa, [said in April 2013](#) that the withholding of financial information and conflicts of interest “are killing our credibility.”

Telecommunications companies stand to reap billions of dollars from the construction and operation of the FirstNet system, which was established in 2012 to address the communications failures among public safety officials on Sept. 11, 2001. Six of the board’s 15 members are current or former telecommunications company executives, including the board’s current chairwoman and its founding chairman.

“We found that the department’s confidential and public disclosure monitoring procedures were inadequate,” the report said. One member purposely filed inaccurate time sheets in order to avoid triggering a disclosure requirement, the report said. The board member was not identified by name.

The Commerce Department, whose National Telecommunications and Information Administration oversaw the creation of FirstNet, said in response to the findings that it “concur[s] with the recommendations” to enforce disclosure requirements and to enhance contracting procedures.

“The department has taken and will take a number of steps to respond to those helpful recommendations,” it said.

Representative Greg Walden, an Oregon Republican who leads the House Communications and Technology Subcommittee, expressed disappointment with the findings and promised to conduct hearings next year.

“Unfortunately, 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,” Mr. Walden said in a 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.”

Some of the start-up mistakes and inadequacies resulted from “the challenges of establishing a new organization,” the report said.

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