

FirstNet opens to feds, DHS on board

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FirstNet formally initiated a federal consultation process this week with more than a dozen federal departments and agencies to see how they can best take advantage of the nationwide public safety network.

Overseen by the Commerce Department, the First Responder Network Authority (FirstNet) was created to empower the nation's first responders with state-of-the-art communications tools. It will use 700 MHz wireless spectrum and high-speed Long Term Evolution (LTE) services to provide interoperable wireless communications for emergency responders nationwide.

A meeting was held in D.C. this week to enhance federal agencies' understanding of FirstNet's consultation process and to discuss future engagement between FirstNet and its federal partners. FirstNet has already held consultation meetings in 11 states and territories to date, with more scheduled for 2015.

DHS Under Secretary for the National Protection and Programs Directorate and FirstNet Board member Suzanne Spaulding opened the meeting by discussing the unique opportunity that FirstNet is providing the public safety community, noting that "although we have a mandate to build the network, there is no requirement for you to subscribe" to it.

But officials at the Department of Homeland Security believe the forthcoming national broadband network for emergencies and public safety could be a way to expand its mission capabilities across its component agencies.

"We're looking to leverage FirstNet and looking at what it could do," said Wolf Tombe, chief technology officer at Customs and Border Protection, during an AFCEA DC panel discussion on DHS procurement and mobile capabilities. "It has huge capability. It could open up communications at the border," where cellular communications can be spotty.

"We're invested in FirstNet," said DHS Deputy CIO Margie Graves.

Graves and Tombe said FirstNet is just one of several emerging mobile communications technologies DHS is seeking to exploit.

They both said DHS wants to create mobile apps more effectively and efficiently. Tombe cited the success of a CBP app made available to cargo inspectors at U.S. ports that cut approval times substantially, allowing shippers to implement just-in-time delivery for goods entering the country.

Graves said apps that helped agents sift through mobile phone images submitted by the public after the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013 were crucial in the investigation. The apps "didn't replace gumshoe detective work," but they sped up the job considerably, she added.

FirstNet could provide the high-speed, interoperable public safety communications network to support these applications.

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