

# 2014-03-11 FirstNet Moves First Gear

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## FirstNet Moves into First Gear

BY: [Bill Schrier](#) | March 11, 2014

The First Responder Network Authority, charged with building a \$7 billion nationwide network for responders and now two years old, moved into first gear this week.

In fairness, FirstNet was never stalled or stopped, although it appeared that way when I wrote "[Is FirstNet Stalled?](#)" on its two-year birthday, February 22. Work was going on behind the scenes, and it burst out onto the stage this week:

A new website appeared, [www.firstnet.gov](http://www.firstnet.gov), freed of the clunky National Telecommunications and Information Administration logo and design; General manager Bill D'Agostino unveiled the [most detailed org chart to date](#), which showed 40 full-time employees and another 50 or so on the way; Leases and office space in Boulder, Colorado, and Reston, Virginia, are virtually complete; Ed Parkinson (Director of Government Affairs), David Buchanan (State Plans) and Amanda Hilliard (Outreach) unveiled a "[high level](#)" [45 step plan](#) for working with individual states to develop a plan and design for the construction of FirstNet in each state; The Strategic Planning process has a bit more detail; At least two FirstNet officials established twitter accounts and followed [my twitter feed](#) in the last week – and I've followed them back. This indicates a new openness and freedom in how FirstNet staff is operating. (But I'm not revealing their names in order to prevent the NTIA enforcement apparatus crashing down onto them for violating some obscure policy.) Overall, I'm encouraged.

As the [State Point of Contact](#) for Washington (the state, not the place inside the beltway), I especially appreciate the additional information we received this week. About 70 officials attended a conference in Phoenix for those of us in the western states who are working to prepare our states for FirstNet. Each state already has a state-and-local-planning grant (SLIGP) for this work. But many of us were waiting for a "starting gun" to launch our outreach and education efforts. These efforts will find every potential Firstnet-using agency in our states: law enforcement, firefighters, emergency medical, transportation, transit, public works, electric and water utilities, schools and everyone else with a public safety mission.

That starting gun is now fired.

We can proceed with that outreach.

We also know – and this is new information – that FirstNet will need to collect some additional detail about potential users: the name of each agency, a point of contact, the number of potential users, the kinds of devices, any existing use of a commercial service and, perhaps, a bit more. We don't know the exact nature of the information to collect. We'll find out the details when FirstNet comes to our states for an initial meeting, probably sometime this summer. And we expect there will be a data portal or template to standardize the way the information is collected.

Everything is not, however, sweetness and light. Many toads remain sitting on FirstNet's roadmap to attain our vision of a nationwide public safety wireless broadband network.

The business plan is still a mystery.

FirstNet officials say there are multiple paths to a viable business plan. However FirstNet needs to build a network which covers a lot more geography than any commercial network – "[every square meter](#)" according to Board Chair Sam Ginn. It needs to do that with about 5.4 million users, compared to more than [100 million each for Verizon and AT&T](#), and [over 40 million each for T-Mobile and Sprint](#). And its per-user subscriber costs need to be comparable to commercial providers, or many public safety agencies cannot afford to switch. [I've blogged elsewhere](#) about elements which might constitute a viable business

plan, including putting FirstNet in [every consumer and business mobile phone](#), or building sensor networks such as electric utility smartgrid using FirstNet spectrum.

FirstNet has a long way to go to become more engaging and transparent.

It's good to see the more detailed org chart, but who are all the full-time employees, with titles and contact information? Most government organizations have a detailed staff directory ([here's the City of Seattle's directory](#) of about 10,000 employees and departments and services).

The [new website](#) is a worthy effort and an MVP (no, not "most valuable player" but "minimum viable product"). Over time, hopefully, it will become timely and engaging, with one or more blogs, twitter feeds and even discussion boards as well as FAQs and a "mythbusters" section similar to what the [Texas Department of Public Safety has built](#).

If I was in FirstNet senior management, I'd blog or publicize every person FirstNet hired – full-timer or contractor. I'd publicize the unvarnished (or only slightly varnished) input received at every public meeting. Every such piece of news – including things which are not flattering - contributes to the desirable image of continuing progress: a juggernaut moving to fundamentally change and improve public safety in the United States.

And the staffing challenges remain enormous. FirstNet is hiring just a few contractors who are vitally needed to evaluate RFIs, write RFPs and build a design for each state. But it needs many more. The names of the existing hires – as well as the roadmap or even job descriptions to hire additional staff – are shrouded in secrecy.

Overall, however, FirstNet appears to be in first gear. Just first gear: we're not barreling down the public safety broadband highway yet by any means. You crawl before you walk and run. And it will take more staff and better plans to get into overdrive.

But at least we appear to be back on the highway.

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