



Report in Brief

December 5, 2024

Background

The Nationwide Public Safety Broadband Network (NPSBN) was developed to give first responders dedicated, reliable wireless communications during emergencies. The First Responder Network Authority, an independent authority within the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA), manages and oversees the NPSBN, including oversight of a contract with AT&T to deploy the network.

The NPSBN's fundamental purpose is to be available to first responders in an emergency, when every second counts. After wildfires broke out on the Hawaiian island of Maui in August 2023, the network was damaged and went out of service. In response, AT&T deployed equipment and personnel to help facilitate NPSBN restoration. A FirstNet Authority team also provided onsite support.

Why We Did This Review

Our audit objective was to assess FirstNet Authority's NPSBN services in response to the Maui wildfires. We focused on AT&T's operational response, FirstNet Authority's oversight of AT&T from a program and contract perspective, and the extent to which the network was a reliable means of communication for public safety agencies during the wildfire response.

FIRST RESPONDER NETWORK AUTHORITY

Nationwide Public Safety Broadband Network Was Not Always Available to First Responders During the Catastrophic 2023 Maui Wildfires

OIG-25-004-A

WHAT WE FOUND

We found that FirstNet Authority's NPSBN services were not effective in supporting public safety's response to the Maui wildfires.

Specifically, FirstNet Authority did not ensure that timely, adequate NPSBN services were provided to support public safety's response to the wildfires. We found it took up to 11 days to temporarily restore service at affected cell sites. In addition, AT&T's response to the need for mobile cell sites was inadequate. When network service was restored, issues with connectivity and communication hampered first responders' ability to provide their services.

FirstNet Authority also did not ensure that a sufficient plan for business continuity and disaster recovery was developed before the wildfires. In fact, FirstNet Authority accepted an inadequate plan from AT&T about 2 months before the wildfires began.

Finally, FirstNet Authority did not ensure that NPSBN service response efforts were accurately reported after the wildfires. We found that AT&T altered data in a report it submitted to FirstNet Authority on its wildfire response, and that other AT&T reports and briefings on the response were inaccurate and insufficiently documented.

When disaster strikes, reliable communications are crucial to first responders' lifesaving efforts as well as their own safety. FirstNet Authority must improve its oversight of AT&T to ensure that the NPSBN meets its intended purpose as a reliable communication network for first responders during emergencies, and that this \$6.5 billion investment provides communication services first responders can trust.

WHAT WE RECOMMEND

We made 11 recommendations to NTIA. If implemented, our recommendations will help improve FirstNet Authority's management of the NPSBN contract, its disaster recovery oversight, and its ability to hold AT&T accountable for effective restoration of NPSBN service during emergencies.

After reviewing our draft report, NTIA provided a response concurring with our recommendations and describing actions it plans to take to implement them.