Mark Peterson - Host:

I'm Mark Peterson, and this is "Before, During, and After: A Podcast from FEMA." April is Emergency Communications Month, and our friends at CISA are honoring the nation's emergency responders and communicators, emphasizing the importance of emergency communications and the need to work together in building resilient critical infrastructure. In keeping with the month's theme of resilient together, on today's episode, we are talking about the CISA and FEMA partnership, and the steps partners can take towards resilience through highlighting key resources like GETS and WPS and other tools to help prepare for and respond to emergencies.

Mark Peterson - Host:

So, April is Emergency Communications Month, and as part of that, the theme this year is Resilient Together, so we're excited to talk about all things emergency communications with CISA and other federal partners. And then also we, we know that communications is one of just the key pillars in a coordinated and successful response. And so, we know that emergency communications is always front of mind for our emergency management partners around the country. And so, I'm thrilled to speak with a couple of great experts here as we talk about how we're, we're trying to be more resilient together and advance the cause of, of emergency communications to all of those partners. So, Pam Montanari, tell me about yourself.

Pam Montanari:

So, I've been in the communications field for about 35 years, and I started in Pinellas County, Florida, where I was the radio systems manager there for 24 years when they first installed their 800-megahertz radio system. So, if you're familiar with Pinellas County, it's the St. Petersburg Clearwater area. And then I got involved in a lot of the regional communications after September 11th and after the Office of Emergency Communications was stood up. I've been working in this a long time. I'm very passionate about what I do, but you know, I've been involved with agencies across the country for many years now.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Oh, that's great. And then Michael Varney from the Department of Commerce. Thanks for joining me.

Michael Varney:

Yeah, thanks for, for having me along. It's an important topic, of course, that you're covering this month. But my background, I came up basically two paths at the same time. Right now, I work as the Stakeholder Collaboration Director within the First Responder Network Authority, which is a independent agency within the Department of Commerce within, inside of NTIA. And my role there is, I work with our field team to provide outreach and education across the country at each level of government, whether that's tribal, local, state, federal and I'm also responsible for our components that do our response operations where we assist in the planning, response, and after-action type activities in the field. And I've been there for about eight years. Prior to that, I worked for the state of Connecticut for about 29 years, and I worked in the IT organizations along with our statewide public safety organization where I had a variety of, of different tasks all of which had to do with data communications or regular communications, as we talk about LMR radios. And at the same time, I've also got over 30 years of fire service experience from the volunteer fire side of the house. I was involved in Fire EMS from high school to present, and 14 of those was as the fire chief. So, a variety of different roles in public safety and communications and, and IT work that brought me together in this current position that I have now with the authority.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Pam, what are we talking about when we are specifically looking at emergency communications?

Pam Montanari:

Well, emergency communications is a lot of things. When we at CISA look at it, it, it is primarily public safety, but it also includes our commercial providers. So, when, when the Office of Emergency Communications was stood up in 2007, it was stood up as a stakeholder driven organization. So, what that means is we rely on our public safety stakeholders to help us drive the documents that we produce. So, we have one point of contact in each state called the Statewide Interoperability Coordinator, or also known as the SWIC. And we work with them to provide them technical assistance. We use a lot of documents developed through those SWICs and through our SAFECOM organization. And it could be planning, preparedness, technology, funding, all of those types of things. We provide communications unit training that the people that work in the field, the, the Comm Ts, the Comm Ls, those are your first responders that are out there helping bring communications back to life after an incident.

Pam Montanari:

But we've been doing this since 2007, and what our goal is to work with the states is to become independent. But as we found after we stood up OEC and it's now the emergency communications division under CISA, we found that it wasn't just the public safety providers that we really needed to work with. We needed to work with our commercial carriers because they're the ones that can bring the commercial services back to life. You know, we have to work with our power people because we need power to support that. So, it's an all-inclusive, so to be, to become resilient, we really need to include all of those in our response operations. But we've, you know, we work primarily with the states, but then during a disaster, we work hand in hand with FEMA because it takes, it takes a team on response and, and First Nets, you know, they're also involved because they can provide different services. You know, they're like a private provider for public safety. So, we have a lot of services available and, and we work with them to try and plan out. We do training and exercises, you know, to help the states and local agencies prepare.

Mark Peterson - Host:

So, but specifically, what means are we talking about with emergency communication? You've talked a little bit about how our needing to be sorted. Are we talking radios? Are we talking cell service? Data? What are we talking about?

Pam Montanari:

If we look at it as a PACE plan, primary alternate contingency emergency. So, the primary is what you use day-to-day. Those are the radios we use day-to-day. So, you know, if you take that first and then if those fail during an emergency, what's your alternate? So, maybe you have to revert back. Maybe you still have cell service, so you revert back to that. But then, what if your radio system and your cell service fails? What do you move to then? Do we still have first and available? Can they deploy resource sources? And then what's your emergency? Is it running, still running a paper from one agency to the other or driving to the next thing? So, when we talk about emergency communications, it's working with those public safety agencies to, to try and get them to think outside the box and what they can use during different situations.

Mark Peterson - Host:

I'm just curious about like, parsing out the roles here when it comes to emergency communications. CISA certainly has a, a key role here, but Pam, I wonder if you could just kind of describe to me how CISA has you know, sort of taken on this role in the Office of Emergency Communications and kind of led with it.

Pam Montanari:

So, what we've done is we, we've developed that trusted relationship with our states. There's 20 emergency communications coordinators across the country, including our supervisors. And so, we each have specific states that we work with. Obviously here in the southeast, we stay pretty busy with hurricanes. We work with those states. They develop a governance structure called their Statewide Interoperability Executive Committee. And through that governance structure, we develop what we call a SKIP plan. And that's a strategic plan that the states use to look at technology, to look at funding, to look at SOPs and governance where they need that help. And then we also have the training and exercises. Each state is a little bit different. Each state has different resource availability. So, depending on what the needs of are, the state is a training or the exercises or the technical assistance that we provide to that state.

Pam Montanari:

It's changed over the years, but it's still very valuable to the states. And now we're starting to see states working regionally. So, within Region 4, if they need support during an incident, or even if they're just doing an exercise, other states will come and participate. We never had that back 2008, 2009, 2010. This has only been in the past few years that we've seen such an increase in such an interest in, in working together to, you know, restore communications or help with an incident, things like that. It's really, relationships is probably one of the biggest pieces to what we do. It's developing those relationship and understanding the needs of the state.

Mark Peterson - Host:

So, Michael, from a FirstNet perspective, how does FirstNet fit into this?

Michael Varney:

Sure. So, very similar to what Pam had described, right. So, we have field staff of about 20 or so distributed across the country similar to what Pam had described from systems perspective. We also have field staff that are focused specifically on different disciplines. So, we have subject matter experts that engage and work directly with fire service and law enforcement and communication centers, EMS, emergency management, et cetera. And our focus is, again, with emergency communication because we were stood up based on a gap that was identified by public safety across the country that lobbied Congress that had them pass the Middle Class Tax Relief and Job Creation Act of 2012, which created the FirstNet authority to, to basically build, operate, and maintain a public safety data network across the country that provides secure communications for public safety to use. And that's at every level of government, whether that's tribal, local, state, and even support our federal partners with their mission.

Michael Varney:

Right? When I first started in, in emergency services, our primary mode of communication was a a two-way radio, right. Push the talk release to listen. And that was, that was basically it. Unless we used a runner in between people to share information at an incident scene. But as we've progressed over the years, there's been a much stronger demand and use for data, right? The consumption of data, whether that's using it to have a voice call, to send a text that was already mentioned, to share videos, data, incident action plans, whatever have you, there's a large need for this consumption of data. And many people in the field rely on access to that data to do their jobs, to share information, to do dashboard surveys, to share things back so that the right decisions and resources can be allocated. And we are there to help make sure that that data can move back and forth regardless of the application and which level of government or discipline are using it back and forth.

Michael Varney:

That's our main role is to do that and to continue to improve how public safety leverages and uses that, those data pathways to improve their operations and move on. And we know our, our network is built not to fail, but we know that all networks are not a hundred percent up all the time. And we don't have ubiquitous coverage like LMR systems do, right. There's no 100% coverage across the country everywhere. But we do, based on all feedback from public safety, provide a significant number of deployable assets just like it's done with FEMA when they bring in their MERS attachments, et cetera, so that we can bring the network with us when we need it as public safety needs to operate. So that, that's kind of how we fit into that picture. We work hand in glove with both CISA and FEMA as large scale incidents, disasters, and to plan for those events and how we recover from those events. So, as the needs are identified from them, they share that with us and as quickly as we can, we either reconstitute or bring the network to a place it wasn't before. So, it can be leveraged by those users so they can continue to do their job efficiently.

Mark Peterson - Host:

You know, Michael, you refer to it as we're bringing the network to assist responders or in a particular situation. What do you mean by that? What is different about FirstNet than any of the other providers that are out there, you know, providing data and cell service? How does it work that's different?

Michael Varney:

Sure. Great question. So, FirstNet is a standalone network, and we put out a competitive procurement and AT&T was selected as our expert to help us operate and maintain this network as we go forward. So that's where you hear about AT&T and FirstNet quite a bit. But FirstNet is a separate standalone network different than AT&T and the other carriers. And it's only for public safety. You have to be credentialed and go through a process to be able to become a user or put your device on FirstNet, and that includes primary users, right. In your fire, police, EMS, emergency management, those that you would typically think of. It also includes other disciplines like Pam had talked about before, where we talk about utilities, transportation companies, public works, that when you get to those large scale events, think of the, the rest of the ESFs that aren't covered by the primary users to come assist at an event, they can also leverage that network so that they can be brought up to that same level as a primary user.

Michael Varney:

So, what the primary users get, which is different than any of the other networks, is once the device is provisioned and it's on the first responder network, right, or FirstNet, you have priority, that's on all the time for all the data that's on the device. And you also have preemptive capabilities. So, if you're in an area that gets congested, and we've all been to those personally, where you're at a large sporting event, you're at a parade and you're using your regular commercial cell phone and you just can't get through, it's not working, right, it's so much congestion. The difference between FirstNet and that phone from a data perspective is you're gonna get through that because you have priority access to the network resources, and you also have preemptive capabilities that it becomes so congested, it actually will preempt other users off of that cellular network right off of AT&T's network, so you can access that bandwidth so that public safety can operate, and that's different than the other carriers from a data perspective. WPS is similar in the fact that it, it can work with regard to a voice call, but for FirstNet, it's for all applications that are provisioned on that particular device.

Mark Peterson - Host:

If I were a local responder, and I'm thinking about, you know, maybe large gatherings - parades, sporting events, things of that nature, I could see this as a very valuable tool. It's available to multiple levels of government, correct?

Michael Varney:

Yeah. Anyone that has a role within public safety, right, so if you have a, a law enforcement role, you have a fire service role, you can get an account beyond the first responder network, right. And, and today there's over 27,500 public safety organizations within the United States that have subscribers that are on the network, which encompasses over five and a half million different devices. So, there are a lot of public safety users on the network today. But anyone that fulfills a public safety response role can absolutely get on the network. And then those other extended users that I talked about, those other support ESFs, if they can document and again, show that they have a documented role where they support public safety, they can also get on the network just not at the same level of priority or preemption.

Mark Peterson - Host:

A preemptive communication devices seem like a, a necessity in responding, but FirstNet isn't the only one. Pam what are some of the other tools that first responders and public safety can utilize to gain that priority access?

Pam Montanari:

So, we have our priority services program. The GETS cards, that is primarily landline based. And it's been around for a long time. Those are free to all users. There is no cost to use that. We encourage everybody at all levels of government to, to have a GETS card. And then what we also have is the wireless priority service, also known as WPS or weps. And, and that service is actually primarily wireless and it gives you priority. So, say you're at a parade or some type of large-scale event, public safety users, they used to have to dial star 2-7-2, and then the, the, the full, you know, the area code and the number. Now we have a public safety dialer app where it ties your, GETS and your WPS together and you hit one button and it pulls from your contacts in your phone and it automatically dials.

Pam Montanari:

So, it gives public safety users or, or public officials priority over other users that are, are on the network, whether it be Verizon, T-Mobile, and any of the, the public carriers. It's available to them and it's really important. This is critical for emergency managers. If I would recommend one thing, it's a free service. It's have a GETS card, have a WPS card, but not just for your leadership, have a free or first responders in the field because they're the ones that are gonna use it. In, in conjunction with that, we also have our, our data service, which is, is a telecommunication service priority. Now, this can't be activated during an event like GETS or WPS can, we can quickly activate those, but this is basically a tariff type service where there's a small stipend that the agency would pay for, but it gives them priority restoration or leak relocation on their data circuits. So, for your 9 1 1 centers, your emergency operation centers, it's critical to protect those data circuits because they'll be the first to be restored. And this program's actually run through the FCC as part of an FCC program. So, those are things that there's no cost to GETS and WPS and a minimal cost to that TSP that emergency managers can really take advantage of to have that backup resilient communications that we're really looking to provide during any type of response.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Pam, emergency communications is certainly front of mind in, for many of our fire and police services in communities around the country. For emergency managers you know, as they build their programs and emergency communications, what are some of the initial steps that those agencies or even the private industry can make to make their communications more resilient?

Pam Montanari:

Well, first of all, they need to be all inclusive. You know, when they start their planning process, they, they really need to include all of those services. So, the emergency managers, the police, the fire, the EMS, anybody that's gonna be working on that response. And then, you know, your, your state EOCs, a lot of them if you go back 10 years, they didn't include their commercial partners, but now most of their commercial partners and the FirstNets are in the EOC with them. So, as those decisions are being made about 9-1-1 centers, about response, they're all there together. And a lot of the states have now developed teams. So, they will pre-position teams outside an affected area, or if it's a planned event, you know, they will stage teams through a, throughout the event. So, if there is a need for a communications response, they already know what they have to do and they're there to respond.

Pam Montanari:

But, you know, in the planning process, it's about understanding what you have, understanding your emergency resources, and then what, what is your fallback plan, So, it's really putting that plan together, it's testing that plan, and we've seen this time and time again. You know, the main priority of the governor of the state is to get communications back for not public safety, but for the citizens of that state. Same thing with the mayors, the, you know, the local emergency managers, their number one priority is to restore communications and power and, and get back to as normal operations as they can after any event or disaster. So, when they look at that, you have to include all those partners in your planning because public safety can't restore commercial communications, and commercial services can't restore public safety communications. So, it's a partnership with everybody working together to build that plan.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Yea. You know, Michael, any resources the Department of Commerce offers to support state, local, tribal and territorial partners in making their emergency comms more resilient?

Michael Varney:

Similar to what was been said already, right, the, the planning component of this can't be understated. That, as you look to put together your, your plans and your contingencies for a planned event or just planning for certain types of incidents and those high-risk things that may happen to the area that you're responsible for, we do a lot of planning with our local, state and federal partners with regard to FirstNet and FirstNet services, the applications that they use, coverage that, where they're gonna need it, how they're using the network. And a lot of that builds relationships, and that's important to know so you're not meeting somebody the first time at 2:00 in the morning when a disaster hits. But the other thing we also talk to as well is our deployable resources because many times when you're in a disaster situation that you need to bring network resources to you because the, your network is down for whatever reason, right, and that could be a backhaul, it could be a power, it could be something else that, we have a variety of deployable resources that we train people to understand what they are and how to call for them, right. And they're not just your typical SAT COLT, right, which is a large Kenworth truck with a satellite, temporary tower on the back of it. But we also have the ability now for public safety organizations to own their own compact, rapid deployable, or a mini compact rapid deployable asset that, literally, they can own their own cell tower, that they can attach to the back of a vehicle and take it where they want to and deploy it as needed so that they can extend that network while they're reconstituting or going to a place for disaster that the network didn't exist in the first place.

Michael Varney:

And we've seen a significant number of organizations purchase their own so that they can control and deploy that as fast as their personnel can get into the field to do that, knowing that, you know, speed is, is important and knowing where they need those assets is also important. That that's one of the things based on public safety feedback that we've gotten over the last five plus years of our network being in existence, that that was a requirement that public safety had so we reacted and created that opportunity for public safety to own their own mini-cell towers that they could take with them out on the road.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Pam, April, Emergency Communications Month. How are you getting the word out? How are you working with SLTT partners and agencies and how can communities around the country learn more?

Pam Montanari:

CISA did a town hall last week. Got several events coming up through the emergency communications division. All of our integrated operation division, so I'm part of Region 4 so we have our own external affairs department, and so we're pushing out different blog posts, things like that, about emergency communications. But really what it is, it's taking that message to our state point of contacts, which is our statewide interoperability coordinator and, and working with them to get the word out and pushing that out to their local emergency managers. You know, it's a great time in April to start planning for, here in the southeast, hurricane season, but not just hurricane season, there's tornadoes. We have FIFA World Cup coming up in 2026, so there's always communications to be planning for. But, I think April is the time to think about your plan, pull it off, dust it off review that plan and see if it's still valid.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Michael.

Michael Varney:

Certainly, agree with all of that, right. That anything else from the, the FirstNet perspective, we can certainly help with, again, we're active participants in the, the rec wigs, all of the statewide interoperability coordinators. We have partnerships with. And then, similar to what Pam had described, is certainly, we have a bunch of online resources. I would appreciate people to reach out online or reach out to us directly or through any of those other communication partners to learn more about how we may be able to assist.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Thanks for listening to this episode of "Before, During, and After: A Podcast from FEMA." If you'd like to learn more about this episode or other topics, or have ideas for future episodes, visit us at fema.gov/podcast.