

Episode 11 | Washington County (MD) Sheriff Mullendore discusses early adoption for FirstNet

Narrator: You're listening to Public Safety First, a podcast to help you learn about the First Responder Network Authority and how you can be part of the future of public safety technology.

And now your host, Dave Buchanan

Dave Buchanan: Welcome to the Public Safety First Podcast. I'm here today in Boonsboro, Maryland in Washington County with Sheriff Doug Mullendore. We're going to participate in an event later today where we're going to commemorate the one year anniversary since Maryland opted in to FirstNet. The sheriff was one of the first customers, the first customer of FirstNet in the state of Maryland. We're going to have an opportunity to discuss that and really celebrate the achievements that we've been able to accomplish here in this last 12 months in bringing FirstNet to first responders in the state of Maryland. Maryland plays an important role in the history of FirstNet. Maryland was the first state to initiate their Public Safety State Consultation meeting back in 2014, Maryland was the first state to get their state plan and have a meeting with the governor's staff regarding their state plan in 2017, and Maryland was one of the first states to opt in just a year ago, so I'm personally delighted to be back here in Maryland. I've always enjoyed working with Public Safety in Maryland and glad we can have this partnership to bring, again, bring the First Responder Network to first responders in Maryland. Welcome to the podcast, Sheriff.

Sheriff Doug Mullendore: Thank you guys, appreciate being here!

Dave Buchanan: Before we get started, can you tell us a little bit about your background? How did you get into law enforcement?

Sheriff Doug Mullendore: Well it's kind of unique actually. I've always wanted to be a physician when I was growing up, and even when I went to college, I went to college to get into med school and I ran out of money in my junior year of college and I tried to get into med school earlier by taking the exams and that didn't work so well. So I came home, decided I would work for a year and then go back. When I came home, there was a position open as a police officer for the town of Boonsboro and I accepted that position and I loved it because I love kids, I love to be able to work with kids, and that position allowed me to do that, and so that's what I've been doing ever since.

Dave Buchanan: That's terrific. Under your leadership as a sheriff, Washington County has been at the forefront of modernizing public safety communications. Your agency as I mentioned earlier was the first to subscribe to the network in the state of Maryland and among the first in the nation. Tell me a little bit



about your decision to bring FirstNet as another tool for your deputies and what you hoped FirstNet service would help you deal with.

Sheriff Doug Mullendore: Actually, I started working with the committee that was formed by the state government to start looking at FirstNet and to put together the plans for FirstNet. And so, I was very excited about what the opportunities were going to be for FirstNet and what it would make available to first responders in the country. And so, for us communication had always been a problem, we're in a rural county, we have a lot of mountains, and we have areas that are very difficult to penetrate with voice, and we had a little bit of data at that time, but it was not sufficient for what we were looking for.

Dave Buchanan: I know you had some significant flooding earlier this spring, required an entire community response – your office working with local Fire Department and other County offices. Can you tell me about this disaster, and your response efforts, and how FirstNet helped with that?

Sheriff Doug Mullendore: Yes the flooding was actually in the southern portion of Washington County. We received about nine inches of rain in less than a couple of hours. We had multiple bridges that were washed away, we had a number of roads that were completely washed away, and these were major thoroughfares for the southern portion of Washington County. So we activated and set up a command post at the Potomac Valley Fire Company, which is in a low valley between two mountains. So you can imagine the communications – just voice alone – was very difficult. There was practically no data at all. So I got on the phone to FirstNet partners, called them at about five o'clock in the evening. They got on the ball and started a satellite truck to us from Atlanta, Georgia. It was here the next day at 3 o'clock – took about 30 minutes to set up, and from that point forward we had wonderful communications. We had our Maryland incident management team here so we use a lot of computers and other things to support the efforts and so once the satellite truck was set up and FirstNet was operational, we had no difficulties from that point forward.

Dave Buchanan: I'm sure you were, had other events that you're responsible for before you had FirstNet. Describe what that was like, and how FirstNet has filled maybe some of those gaps or challenges.

Sheriff Doug Mullendore: I think the most memorable for me is, prior to the president being elected as the president, he had a rally at our local airport and there were about 5,500 people there, all of which were texting, taking photographs, using Instagram, etc. We were having a lot of difficulty with people parking in areas they weren't supposed to be parking in. So I went up into, with our helicopter and took photographs that I wanted to send to the people on the ground so that I could give them instructions on where they needed to remove the people from parking, so we could keep the flow of traffic. And I couldn't download the pictures. The event was over probably several hours before the pictures even arrived to them. So, you know, data and just wasn't even available at that time. Since that time with FirstNet, you know with having a priority and preemption, we're able to do those things even if we were



to have that rally today. We would be able to communicate without any difficulty because we would have the priority over everyone else.

Dave Buchanan: So we've talked about how FirstNet has helped you at the disaster, we've talked about how could have helped you at the special event, tell me a little bit about how your deputies are able to use FirstNet on a daily basis.

Sheriff Doug Mullendore: Sure, we have mobile data terminals in our vehicles and having the ability to communicate with data and our records management system, for example, we have a tunnel through AT&T back to the county, and so I can even log in to my desktop from anywhere that I have coverage and I can get documents, I can do pretty much anything. Our deputies are the same way. We just purchased some portable radios and even the radios that we've purchased have LTE FirstNet capability, and so down the road we will actually be implementing that as well because we still have areas of the county where land mobile radio is not effective but data is, so we would be able to communicate in those areas as well.

Dave Buchanan: So tell me a little bit more about Washington County. I know we're in a rural part of the state. What are some of the unique challenges you all face because of the environmental, geographical remoteness of some of the places you're required to serve. What's that like?

Sheriff Doug Mullendore: Washington County is shaped very similar to the state of Maryland – it's in an L-shape with the city of Hagerstown being kind of the hub in the center. And, to respond from one area to the county to the next, even in an emergency situation, will be well over an hour. It's 458 square miles. We have a population of about 150,000 people. And, unfortunately, particularly in the southern portion of Washington County, we have a river where we have a lot of tubers, we have a lot of kayakers, and things of that nature, and it's very, very difficult to communicate in in those areas by land mobile radio because the mountainous terrain and the valleys tend to block the signal. So, we are able to communicate with FirstNet via our phones and so forth, so when we're in areas that we can't communicate by land mobile radio, we are able to communicate back with our dispatch center and to our on duty officers and so forth.

Dave Buchanan: So you mentioned LMR, and we're here to talk about obviously FirstNet and data and LTE, tell me about your – from your vantage point – how public safety communications has evolved over the your career in law enforcement? What are the challenges you've seen, and what's your perspective on that evolution?

Sheriff Doug Mullendore: Well, when I first started out, we didn't even have portable radios at that point. The ones that were available were huge because they were all tube radios and particularly in the summertime because you didn't have air conditioning, you've got very hot in the car. Over a period of time and we started getting a transistor digital type, or I should say analog radios, but they were digital in format, but it was still very, very difficult to communicate. The signals didn't always penetrate in a lot

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of areas. In 2006, we did get a digital communication system with portable radios, so that portable, on-the-hip coverage was available at that point, but we still have areas of the county and buildings within the county that we still can't communicate in. As an example, our local hospital was built after the communication system was built and there are areas within the hospital that we cannot communicate with as far as land mobile radio. But again, with FirstNet through data, we are still able to communicate. We have some large warehouses built in the county that are nothing but steel and being able to communicate out of those is also very difficult. So it's been very, very challenging over the years, but certainly has gotten a lot better and I'm really looking forward to it. One of the things that we do also is for all of our schools, our hospitals, and some of our larger businesses, we actually have created virtual tours, so we can have that available to us if we have an incident in one of the schools. For example, we know exactly what's around the corner, we know where all the light switches are, we know where the air-conditioning units are, any intercoms, etc. and we use that capability to do planning, and react to any kind of incidents that occur.

Dave Buchanan: Well I really appreciate hearing your story about FirstNet and how FirstNet's working in Washington County. I appreciate your time today. We want to thank you for joining the podcast and looking forward to our further discussions later on today.

Sheriff Doug Mullendore: Absolutely, I am as well. Thank you for having me.

Dave Buchanan: Thanks.

Narrator: Thanks for listening today. We're excited to have you join our podcast community. Make sure to subscribe on iTunes, SoundCloud, and YouTube. You can learn more about the First Responder Network Authority at FirstNet.gov and learn about FirstNet products and services at FirstNet.com

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