A Dedicated Network Helping Fire Operations in Washington State

Spokane Fire Department Expands Response Capabilities with FirstNet®

Spokane Fire Department—located approximately 200 miles east of Seattle, Washington—serves 70 square miles of urban, suburban and wildland areas. With over 400 personnel covering a large, diverse response area, the department depends on connectivity that can keep up with its growing needs.

That's why Spokane Fire adopted FirstNet, a network designed for first responders, as soon as Washington State opted into its service in 2017. FirstNet quickly replaced all of the disparate providers and technologies they were using, serving as one mission-critical solution to modernize their response and mend connectivity gaps.

"FirstNet addressed all of the vulnerabilities identified in our risk management plans," said Spokane Fire Chief Brian Schaeffer. "It's a robust network that delivers the dedicated data, equipment and security we require with the commitment for continuous improvement."

Brian Schaeffer, Fire Chief
Spokane Fire Department

Putting Data in Responders' Hands

FirstNet's always-on priority access, and preemption for first responders, allow Spokane Fire personnel to communicate seamlessly with each other and partners. For example, an emergency operations center could be up to 50 miles away and the reliable coverage of FirstNet allows Spokane emergency responders to connect securely with other emergency personnel no matter the distance.

All of Spokane Fire's staff are equipped with FirstNet-enabled mobile devices that allow them to communicate from the field, anywhere and anytime. Additionally, all of the department's mobile units equipped with mobile data computers and electronic healthcare record devices run on FirstNet as well. The technology is deployed on individuals, in all apparatus, deployable command modules, in the special ops environment for video, remote intelligence gathering devices, and portable communication gateways.

"We've had mobile data in our apparatus for over 20 years, but the full capability and reliability of the connectivity wasn't accessible to us until FirstNet became available," said Chief Schaeffer. "This has allowed us to take critical information via reliable technology and truly place it into the responders' hands where it really needs to be."

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Digitizing Incident Action Plans

While developing Incident Action Plans for planned events or large incidents, Spokane Fire Planning Chief(s) continuously prepare personnel for each shift with electronic incident action plans that are critical to safe and effective response.

"Every 12-hour shift, our planning section will produce about 20-plus pages of data that explains to every responder what the plan is for this shift including maps, risks and procedures," explained Chief Schaeffer.

With FirstNet, the department leverages software such as Intterra and QR-codes to deliver the plans to staff electronically, significantly reducing drive time back to the command post to pick up the printed copies. In turn, personnel are able to use that valuable time to continue serving and protecting the community. During the pandemic, electronic distribution of plans and organizational direction was critical for the mission's success and community survival.

Supporting Modernized Response

As a progressive department, Spokane Fire has been relying on FirstNet's network to establish more modernized capabilities in the field such as drones.

"Drone use is becoming more prevalent in fire service agencies," shared Chief Schaeffer. "We have staffed a three-person staff drone team with a licensed pilot in our deployment system for several years and used the FirstNet technology to enable video with our unmanned aerial vehicles." This improved incident visibility and aerial thermal imaging gives an important boost to real-time decision-making.

As an early adopter of the FirstNet network, Spokane Fire Department is putting the network to use for their needs now and also continue to look for novel ways to use its connectivity and technology to enhance how they serve the community.

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