

Customer Stories

Vail Police Department

Vail police chief relies on FirstNet priority and preemption to share data, communicate with officers

- **Agency/Organization Needs:** Vail Police Department sits at the top of Vail Pass in Colorado; the remote terrain made communication difficult
- **Networking Solution:** The Vail Police Department uses FirstNet on all its phones and in-car modems, and AT&T Enhanced Push-to-Talk, which is FirstNet Certified™
- **Agency value:** Vail police officers can stay connected to each other and other agencies around the county, in addition to the 9-1-1 Center, despite challenges
- **Industry Focus:** Law enforcement
- **Size:** 30 officers and six uniform code enforcement officers. The police department also runs the 9-1-1 center for Eagle County.

What keeps Vail Police Chief Dwight Henninger up at night is **not** communications.

“It’s that big event or natural disaster,” he said. “It’s the road closed with a traffic collision or crash. It’s the crime that has a significant impact on our community. Those things are what keep chiefs and sheriffs and fire chiefs awake at night.”

But if you can’t rely on the communication systems you have, on the land mobile radio system, on your cellular communications, on the data, then that would probably keep people up at night, he said.

That’s why the Vail Police Department is on FirstNet.

“I don’t stay up at night worrying about those communications capabilities and partly that’s due to the FirstNet priority and preemption,” he said, “and the ability to share data with our officers in a rapid manner.”

Keeping visitors safe

The Vail Mountain Resort community in Eagle County, Colorado, sees some 2 million visitors per year. It’s a tourist destination where people go to ski and enjoy summer activities.

“Plus, we have all the issues of an area with an interstate

Agency had an opportunity to test Band 14 before FirstNet launched

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Dwight Henninger,
Vail Police Chief



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running through the community,” Chief Henninger added. “We have 30 officers to deal with those problems with another six uniform code enforcement officers. And we also run the 9-1-1 center for Eagle County.”

In addition, the agency struggles with coverage in the heavily mountainous areas and rural terrain. Some passes go over 10,000 feet in the Vail Valley and Rocky Mountains of Colorado. And the mountains have an impact in the way the agency communicates.

“We could never really rely on our commercial cellular phones in many parts of the community that are off the interstate,” Chief Henninger said. “So, we were looking for a solution to fix that problem.”

That opportunity came when the county hosted the Alpine World Ski Championships in Vail and Beaver Creek in 2015. And agencies had the chance to test Band 14 – the spectrum set aside by the federal government for the first responder network – even before FirstNet launched.

Testing Band 14

The ski championships brought athletes and visitors from all over the world to Eagle County.

“We knew that with the limited staff we have here for fire, police and paramedics, we needed to be very well-organized,” Chief Henninger said. “For three years, we met, planning how we would deal with the potential public safety issues. This event happened after the bombings in Europe. And that made us really consider how we'd done our work, because we would have grandstands with thousands of people in those stands.”

Chief Henninger said he'd heard about Band Class 14 through his work with the International Association of Chiefs of Police. And he asked the question: “Would that work in our mountain community?”

The answer was yes.

Biggest benefit for Vail PD has been ability to communicate with each other

The data shared between officers is critically important, Chief Henninger said, especially when trying to give a description of an offender or a suspicious or missing person... Having the photo quickly to you with good resolution is so much easier.

“So, we worked very hard with the folks who were bringing that technology to bear and told them we wanted to try it out here,” he said. “Because if it worked here, it would work anywhere. For the 21 days of the event here, we were able to use the Band Class 14 equipment to effectively police the event and provide good public safety.

“The officers really liked the ability to have the Sonim phones in their hands and to be able to get pictures and flyers on wanted persons and missing people,” he added. “When the event was over, I had a hard time getting those devices back from them.”

Chief Henninger said he was proud to be able to test the technology and show the value that it brought to his department.

So, when FirstNet launched, he signed on.

“Having that FirstNet capability, with priority and preemption, has been very helpful for our officers,” he said. “That’s especially true when we have a pass closure and there are thousands of people stopped on the interstate trying to figure out what to do... It’s super helpful to have that capability for us to be able to do that mission-critical type of emergency communication.”



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The biggest benefit

The biggest benefit for the Vail Police Department – and for the entire county – has been the ability to communicate with each other, he said.

“Reliable communication is critically important to us,” he said. “The data we share between officers is critically important. If we try to give a description of an offender or somebody that’s suspicious or a missing person, it’s very difficult to see that in your mind’s eye.”

“But having the photo quickly to you with good resolution is so much easier,” he said. “That wouldn’t have happened using the commercial networks. Because there’s so many other things going on at the same time that are using up the data.”

Chief excited about opportunities FirstNet presents for agencies across the country

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Chief Henninger said his vision for FirstNet is to have one phone that does everything. One phone that gives his officers access to their data systems and allows them to share data between folks in the field and maybe near real-time video.

“Officers already have so many things on their tool belt,” he said. “We need to make that one device that can do everything.”

Customer service

“In Eagle County, we respond to all sorts of different things with people recreating and getting in problems,” he said. “Hunters having problems, ski patrol having people go out of bounds and get involved in avalanches, crashes, crimes. Plus, all of the things that happen in a regular community.”

“So, when people ask me about FirstNet and how we use it, I routinely tell them that I have been so impressed with the customer service I have received,” he said. “And that's really the key point.”

“We don't do a good job at technology because that's not our area of expertise,” he said. “FirstNet has been with me each step of the way to resolve issues or problems that I have identified. So, my advice is to make sure the product you select is one you know will be supported.”

Chief Henninger said he's also excited about the opportunities FirstNet presents for agencies across the country to be more successful in the way they work to prevent crime and keep communities safe.

“I hear regularly from our elected officials and from community members that they feel like they don't have good commercial cell service,” he said. “I don't hear that from the officers.”