



Executing search and recovery with man's best friend and FirstNet

**Agency/organization needs**

Search and rescue (SAR) group needs to connect with team members and public safety authorities in remote and difficult terrain

**Networking solution**

FirstNet high-speed broadband wireless connectivity via FirstNet devices for voice, messaging, and data; always-on connectivity to power SARTopo, a mission-critical mapping and location tracking application

**Agency value**

SAR members need to reliably communicate and share information with agencies and each other in remote and geographically challenging areas lacking cell coverage

**Industry focus**

Public safety, emergency services

**Size**

23 members, 15 canines

K-9 search and rescue responds wherever help is needed

A small child wanders from a family picnic. A senior citizen with dementia gets lost on a walk near their home. A disoriented hiker loses sight of the trail after dark.

The Northwest Pennsylvania K-9 Search and Rescue (SAR) has participated in these scenarios and hundreds like it over the years. While the group operates primarily in 6 Pennsylvania counties, they respond wherever they're needed. A member of the Pennsylvania Search and Rescue Council and the Appalachian Search and Rescue Conference, they assist similar teams in Pennsylvania and sometimes travel as far as Ohio, Maryland, Virginia, and West Virginia.

President LuAnn Gatti knows how far they've come after incorporating nearly two decades ago. "We started out building rapport with local fire and police departments to get our name out. Now we average about 15 to 20 calls a year," Gatti said. "We're there to assist any emergency agency when someone goes missing."

2.97 million miles of coverage

Forging strong bonds

The volunteer-based group has 23 members, including 13 search responders and 10 auxiliary members, to go with 15 trained canines. Both Gatti and her husband are active in the group. Their two dogs are too. English Shepherd Finnick is certified in scenting while German Shepard Ava is certified in trailing. “Finnick is trained to find any human scent, so he’s trained to search for a person. And if there’s anybody out there, he will aid them,” Gatti said. “Ava smells an item of clothing and follows that scent to wherever that person has gone.”

The long hours spent training and participating in search and rescue (SAR) requests have led to strong bonds between members. These tight-knit relationships are something Gatti values because she knows how much work everyone puts in.

“We really are a family. A lot of times, I spend more time with my SAR family than I do with my real family,” she said. Yet they’re always ready to serve. “If we get called in the middle of the night, we go out and look for somebody. We really do have a great group of people.”

Challenging circumstances

Rescues can only be activated by agencies handling a search incident, such as law enforcement, fire departments, and emergency management personnel. When authorities request assistance from Gatti and her team, they respond quickly.

The nature of search and rescue often means working in rural, mountainous, or heavily wooded areas. These settings create communication challenges. “We travel to places that don’t have great cell coverage. That was something that we were really interested in addressing,” Gatti said.

The team had heard good things about FirstNet, so they scheduled a meeting with a representative to discuss solutions. After a handful of conversations, the group signed up for a FirstNet agency account. It’s been that way ever since. “I think we’ve been with FirstNet for almost 10 years now,” Gatti said.

Streamlined searches

FirstNet continues to make a positive difference in Northwest Pennsylvania K-9 SAR operations to this day. It’s worked so well that the team has encouraged others to follow their lead. “A lot of times during a rescue operation, we were the only ones that had cell service, so we talked about FirstNet with different agencies as something they might want to consider,” said Gatti.

The enhanced connectivity enables them to use SARTopo, a web-based mapping application designed primarily for search and rescue operations. Features like live tracking, map sharing, clue and marker placement, and search area management improve search efficiency and execution. Searchers can see a map of their assigned area on their phones and track their progress.

“The system will show exactly where they are in real time. That’s a big feature because we can see where everybody is and the areas they covered. It really helps streamline our search process,” Gatti said. “And if we find something that we don’t want to share on our radios, we can use our phones to relay the information.”

In one search, Gatti recalled how FirstNet helped her team find a man with dementia after he walked away from his home. “We searched all night and were ready to hand over the search to another team, but we ended up finding the man,” she said. “We were able to use our SARTopo app on my FirstNet cellphone to let the dispatch center know. And that we needed an ambulance to take him to the hospital.”

“Before we got FirstNet, we had been spending more than twice what we spend now for limited cell service.”

LuAnn Gatti

President, Northwest Pennsylvania
K-9 Search and Rescue

v.101425 | 2 of 3

Built with and for public safety

Next-level solutions

In more extreme cases, the group knows they can always reach out to their FirstNet representative for extra backup. When a search involving hundreds of people and multiple agencies was scheduled in an area with limited cell service, Gatti wanted to make sure everyone could communicate and use SARTopo effectively.

She recalled a conversation she and the representative had once about mobile cell sites called SatCOLTs available exclusively to FirstNet subscribers. A SatCOLT is a Satellite Cell on Light Truck that provides mobile cellular connectivity using a satellite connection. She quickly called her representative, and he was more than happy to help, delivering it in time for search operations. “We had cell service for our team, the police, and firefighters,” said Gatti. The state troopers were also impressed. “They asked the detective in charge how he went about getting the mobile cell tower.” Naturally, he credited Gatti.

With new updates happening regularly, Gatti likes to stay informed on the latest FirstNet technology and solutions in case it’s something they can use. In addition to FirstNet communications and the occasional SatCOLT, her team also relies on FirstNet mobile routers and Wi-Fi® hotspots to support wireless data connectivity in the field.

A helping hand

Gatti appreciates the reliability of FirstNet, knowing her team wouldn’t be the same without it. She feels the same way about her FirstNet representative, someone who’s always ready to answer questions and help with their account. “He’s come to my place of employment to meet with me, he’s super flexible and responsible,” said Gatti. “He shares information about things that are available or coming out and potentially things we could use in the future.”

In the spring of 2024, the Lake Erie region of Pennsylvania was in the path of totality for the solar eclipse, which attracted many visitors. Gatti’s representative became an integral part of the planning to ensure they had adequate cell coverage in limited or no service areas. Once again, he brought FirstNet mobile cell towers to shore up service.



Gatti never hesitates to recommend FirstNet to others in the search and rescue community. “I always promote FirstNet. It’s a great service that works well and is reasonably priced,” she said.

Although the work is gratifying, the Northwest Pennsylvania K-9 SAR team wouldn’t be able to do what they do without careful planning and preparation. Part of that is because of FirstNet. They depend on it the same way others depend on them to locate their loved ones. “We are professionals, and we take our job seriously. We train to make sure we can do the best we can do in those moments,” said Gatti. “Hopefully, we can go out and find that person and bring them back.”

“Even when we’re in places with poor cell coverage, we can count on our phones to work even if other people’s phones don’t.”

LuAnn Gatti
President, Northwest Pennsylvania
K-9 Search and Rescue

v.101425 | 3 of 3