

Tennessee sheriff's office battles crime with technology



Agency/organization needs

Peace officers need reliable communication and digital tools to fight crime and care for their community.



Networking solution

FirstNet delivers priority access to voice, data, video, location, and interoperability services on the nationwide network for first responders.



Agency value

Rock-solid reliability supports community safety, first responder efficiency, and partnering agency support.



Industry focus

Law enforcement



Size

292 employees

Law enforcement goes digital to ensure public safety

Washington County, Tennessee, is known for its beautiful blend of rustic scenery, rich history, and thriving communities. As the area has grown in popularity thanks to tourism and festivals, the local sheriff's office was challenged to evolve law enforcement tactics as the type of crime they fought changed.

Officers saw crime growing more sophisticated and problems like human trafficking emerge. These changes make it more important than ever to communicate better with their own officers, those in other agencies, and the public as well. And this is why new officers are equipped with not just a gun and a badge when they are sworn in, but also a FirstNet phone. FirstNet is the only nationwide communications platform developed in partnership with public safety officials and why the Washington County Sheriff's Office relies on their FirstNet devices.

"Our reporting system is electronic, and it's all done through that phone. Our electronic reporting system requires good service, a decent signal, and good bandwidth, and we have that with FirstNet," said Sheriff Keith Sexton, leader of the Washington County Sheriff's Office.

Tech goes on patrol

Peace officers' tools have changed dramatically over Sexton's career, and technology has been the greatest influence. The need for seamless communication is why Washington County relies on FirstNet phones.

"Back when I started, everything was on paper, but when I moved to Johnson City, they were doing reports on their Personal Digital Assistant (PDAs) and everything was electronic," he said. It wasn't long before the sheriff's office upgraded to electronic systems. "If you don't have a good technology support system, you're running behind, and you don't have all the weapons that you need to fight this battle."

A shining star amidst devastation

Law enforcement officers often do more than just fight crime. They help out in natural disasters.

Sexton's department relied heavily on FirstNet in 2024 when Hurricane Helene ravaged six southeastern states, including nearby North Carolina. Eastern Tennessee suffered damage, and phone and electrical services were disrupted.

FirstNet equipped the department's command post with Compact Rapid Deployables, portable cell towers that deliver FirstNet cellular coverage and internet connectivity in areas where regular cellular networks are unavailable. "We would've been severely crippled down there if we hadn't had that available," the sheriff said.

Thanks to these Compact Rapid Deployables, word spread that Sexton's department had reliable connections for those needing to connect with family members.

"The word got out that if you need to make a phone call, go to the sheriff's office command post because they have FirstNet and they can help you make the call," Sexton said. "I know a lot of the important phone calls were made from our command post area using the tower that FirstNet brought. Had that not been there, there would've been absolutely nothing. And so, it was kind of like the shining star in the middle of the night."

Making mission-critical service possible everywhere

Other county departments outside of Sexton's office also used FirstNet phones. After the storm, FirstNet representatives supplied them to other county departments as well.

"Our highway department needed to be able to communicate because there were roads that were washed out in the southern end of our county," said Sexton. "The area became an island because there was no way to get across any of the bridges. They borrowed phones so that they could communicate and get people and material out there."

Workers at the county's flooded water treatment plant also needed working phones. "They were borrowing our phones, so we became the communication hub on top of everything else during the disaster," Sexton said.

Having phone connectivity from FirstNet made it possible for teams to communicate sensitive information.

"There are things that you can't put out on the radio. We started out with a list of 50 or so missing persons, and you don't want to be discussing that across the radio."

Overall connectivity was a significant change for the entire county.

"We were able to connect in places where other phones didn't work. If I wanted to talk, I had to use the FirstNet phone. It was mission-critical that we have that cell service."

"When every officer here is sworn in, they get a gun, a badge, and a FirstNet phone. That's critical for us."

Keith Sexton
Sheriff, Washington County, Tennessee

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Answering a servant's call

The FirstNet relationship makes it possible for the Washington County Sheriff's Office to work in their community beyond their day-to-day law enforcement operations.

"As a sheriff's office, we're a public service," Sexton said. "If you don't have a servant's heart, so to speak, you don't last long in law enforcement. And one of the worst things, especially as a sheriff, is not being able to answer when someone tries to reach you."

Sexton credits FirstNet with helping to minimize missed calls and connections.

"Because of FirstNet, a lot of calls came in. We had sheriffs from all over the state calling to offer all kinds of resources—manpower, food, water. They'd just say, 'Where do we need to come, sheriff?' So that became very critical, and because of that, it made a lot of people's lives a lot easier. It gave hope in a hopeless situation. So it was of utmost importance," he said.

More tech on the horizon

Focusing on the future with FirstNet, Sexton believes that the sheriff's department will find other FirstNet tech options valuable.

The department is considering the addition of powerful Cradlepoint routers to individual deputy cruisers. The routers offer several advantages for law enforcement, including secure in-vehicle networks and enhanced connectivity to support video streaming and evidence sharing.

"We are not at that stage yet, but at some point, we feel like that may be needed based on the sheer amount of data that's being used by our officers," Sexton said.



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