



FDNY Chief Bill Feehan Remembered

Of the 343 FDNY members who lost their lives on 9/11, among the highest-ranking was First Deputy Fire Commissioner William Feehan. He was a larger-than-life figure whose spirit of servant leadership, passion for his profession and devotion to protecting the citizens of New York prompted a friend to say, quite simply, “He is the Fire Department.”

Recently, some of his children — Elizabeth, Bill and his wife Beth, as well as Tara and her husband Brian who currently serves as an FDNY firefighter with Battalion 19 in the Bronx — shared their reflections on Chief Feehan and his legacy. ▶

FDNY Chief Bill Feehan Remembered

What inspired your father to pursue a career in public safety?

Elizabeth “My grandfather was a firefighter and he and my father were very close, so my father always aspired to that. He held a degree and taught school, so he was totally suited for other areas of life. But he had a love for the department and the city as a whole ... a very deep and abiding love.”

What was it like growing up with a dad who was a first responder?

Elizabeth “He’d come home with the most colorful stories. He loved the job so much. He loved the other firefighters.”

Tara “You know, he came home smelling of smoke, but it was always obvious how much he loved it. Always.”

Elizabeth “But I think it should be mentioned, also, it takes a lot of studying to rise in the department, and you need a lot of support from your spouse to do that, you know? So, every time my father got promoted, he would always thank my mother for giving him the time to study.”

Your father was a remarkable leader.

Can you talk about his approach to leadership?

Bill “I think the combination of his character and his competence really defined his leadership. The character he had all the way through, and people saw that and really responded to that. The competence came from the fact that he was passionate about what he did, he really loved the New York City Fire Department and he worked very hard. He didn’t take any shortcuts. He earned his credibility at every step along the way, and he generated respect from people as he gained positions of authority. He kept his humanity and his compassion. And that’s why people really loved him.”

Elizabeth “That’s true. Even the elevator operator at headquarters said, “Your father treated me like I was his fellow chief.””

Tara “When you were speaking to him, he made you feel like you were the most important person in the room. Whatever you were saying to him or speaking to him about, he was very much focused on what you were saying. He listened very heartily and carefully to people, and he had that way about him that you just wanted to be in his presence a lot.”

How would you describe the legacy he left behind?

Tara “The amount of pride that we have I don’t think could be put into words. As a father, what he was to all of us was certainly one thing. But the way we lost him, as tragic as it was, I feel lucky almost. We’re so proud and so lucky that he was ours and that this is the way he died ... doing something he loved so much and trying to save people.”

Bill “He was a hero to us long before 9/11, and for very specific and wonderful reasons. I would say, too, that he was an extraordinary person for all the reasons we’ve talked about, but at the same time he was emblematic of a whole community of people who do this, you know? He stands out but he doesn’t stand alone.”

Elizabeth “My father’s career in the fire department is one thing. What he really gave to us as a family, as far as passing on our faith and taking care of each other through thick or thin, no matter what ... that is what really is timeless. I can’t tell you how much he loved the city. He knew every backstreet of every borough. But the most important thing for us is our faith and our love of family and knowing that you go 100% for that.”

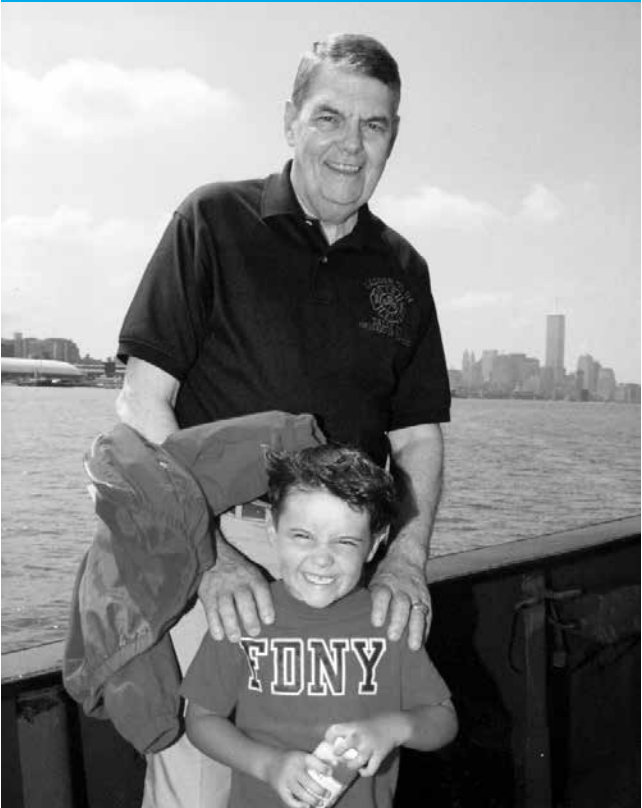
Brian “You know, this is the 20th anniversary of 9/11, but in our family it’s much more present all the time. For me — who’s still active and working in a firehouse with Battalion 19 in the Bronx — it’s all around us. I stay on the job because every day I get to help people. It’s still about answering the bell, jumping on the red rig, racing through the streets and helping. Many don’t realize, there’s a fireboat named after him. When [the FDNY] goes to respond to a capsized boat or people in the water, people in trouble, it’s the Feehan that’s responding. So here it is, 20 years later, and the Feehan is still out there helping residents of this city, and that’s a wonderful legacy.”

Beth “When I came up with the idea to do a film about my father-in-law, I had absolute carte blanche to do it because every single person he touched was willing to talk about him. There wasn’t a door that was shut. Everyone — and I had a bunch of people that he worked with — they would do anything for Bill Feehan. That’s the impact that he had. It was absolutely profound. He showed people such decency and respect and it touched everyone.”

If you could let the people who read this tribute know one thing about your dad, what would it be?

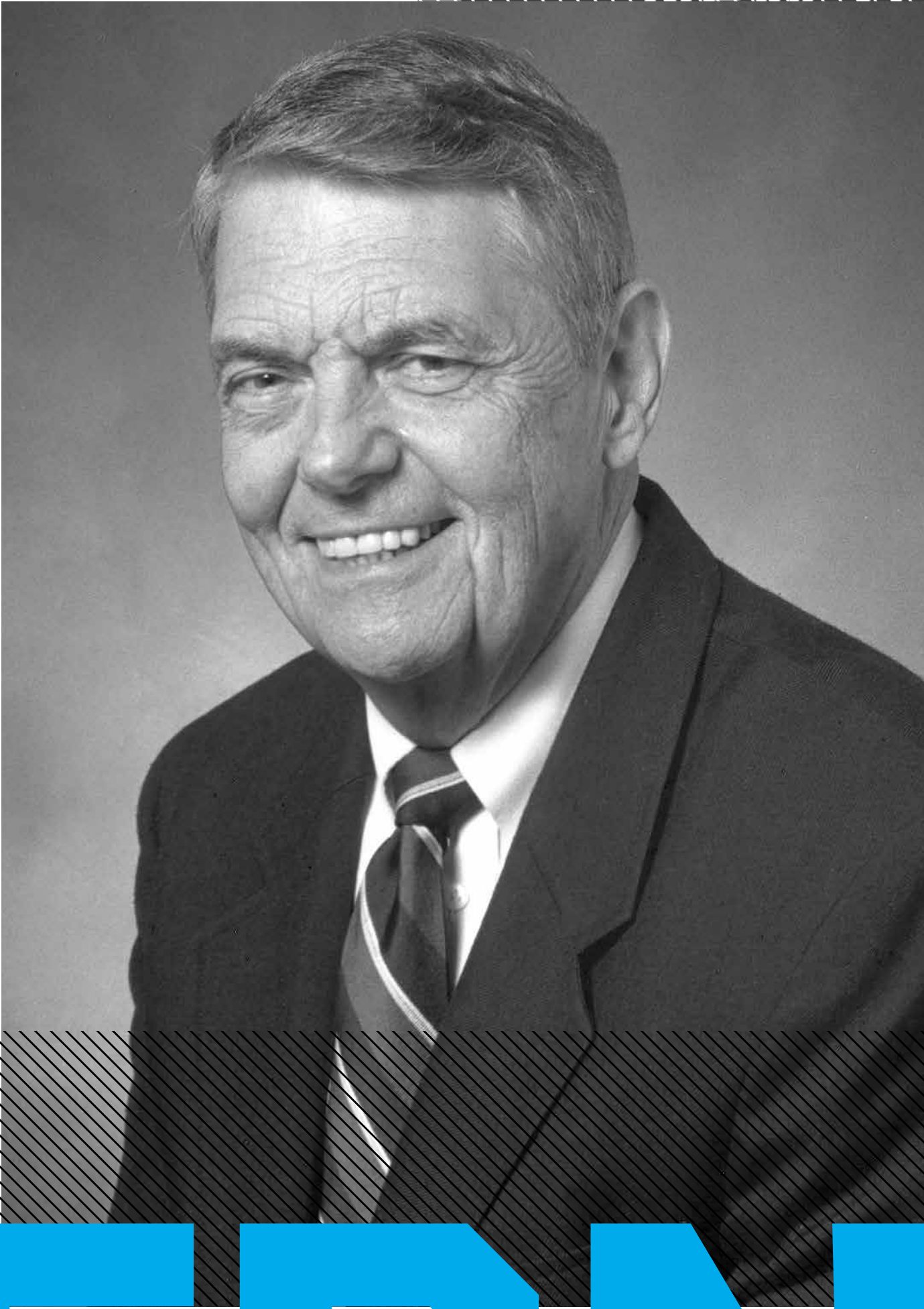
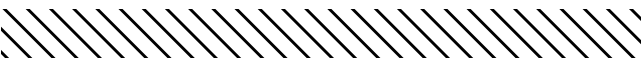
Bill “For me, it’s very simple, and I didn’t think of this until you asked that question. This is someone who, from the beginning to the end, in all dimensions, lived for others. He lived his life for others.”

With the Twin Towers as a backdrop, Chief Feehan took his four-year-old grandson, Connor Davan, for a ride in an FDNY fireboat in 1997. Today, Connor serves as a firefighter with Engine 231 in Brownsville, Brooklyn — the 4th generation in the Feehan family to be among New York’s Bravest.



Chief

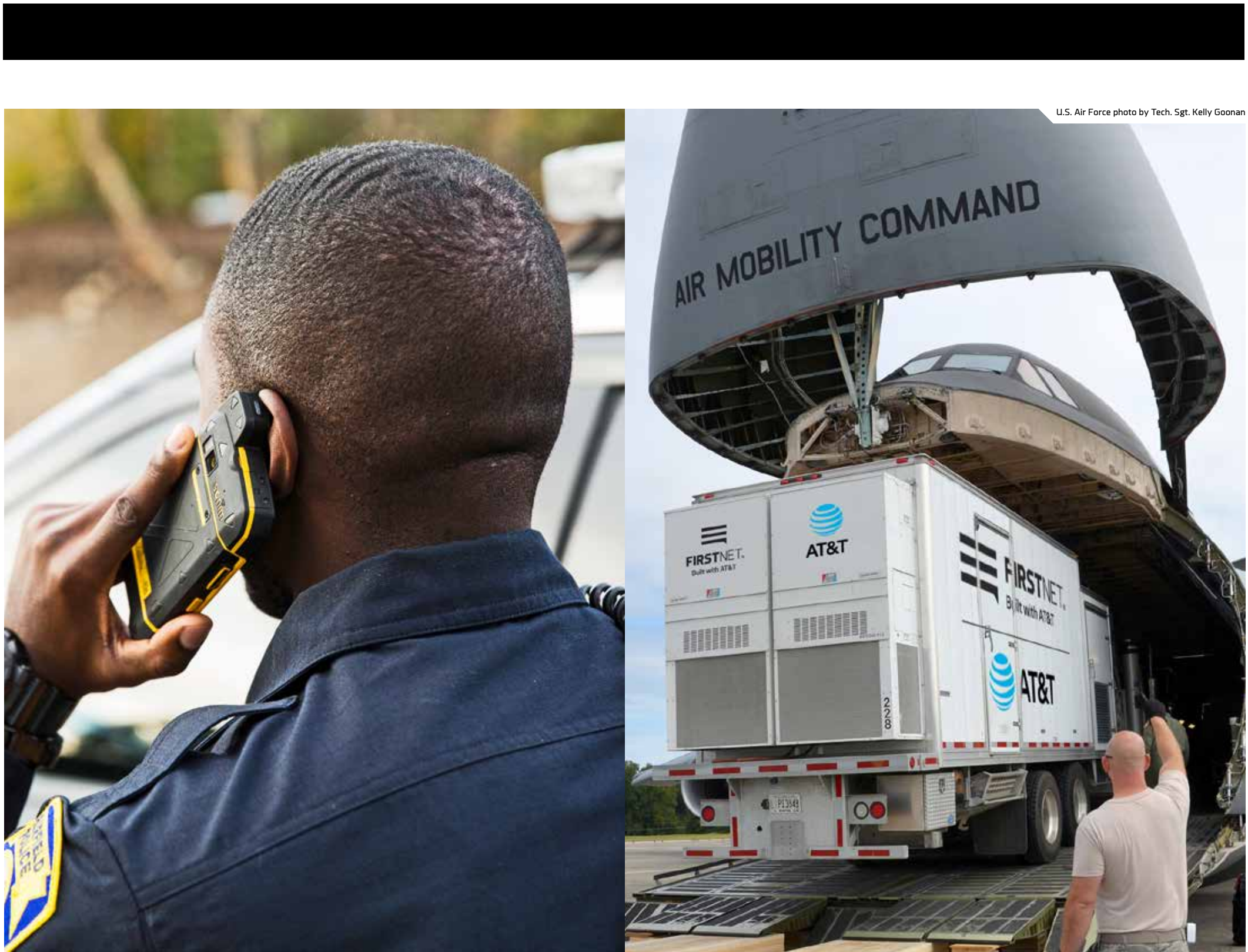
A documentary film about Chief Feehan will air in the New York area on WNET next Friday, Sept. 10, at 9:30 p.m. ET. Coming soon, *Chief* will also be available to viewers nationwide to livestream on FDNYpro.org. All donations from film viewers will help support the FDNY George F. Mand Library’s digitization and modernization initiatives.



Chief Feehan was an advocate for advancing technology within the fire department.

“He lived his life for others.”





U.S. Air Force photo by Tech. Sgt. Kelly Gosselin

ALWAYS ON

Responding to Disasters with 21st Century Tools

When disaster strikes, communications are critical to coordinating an effective response. Just ask Mike Amarosa, who formerly headed up the country's largest 9-1-1 center, police radio system and management information system for the New York City Police Department.

"The information is the key ingredient in the game," said Amarosa, who now consults on public safety issues. "If you get the information, you can act on it. If you don't have the information, naturally, you're not going to be able to do anything."

From pandemics and building collapses to hurricanes and wildfires, first responders never know exactly when and where disaster might strike. But they must always be prepared and able to connect across disciplines — from police and fire to emergency medical services (EMS) and other public safety organizations, both inside and outside of their jurisdiction.

The need to seamlessly share information between agencies and get priority over all other traffic on communications networks was among the key lessons public safety leaders learned from 9/11.

Charlie Guddemi spent 25 years with the United States Park Police and was part of the team responsible for the security and response efforts for the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island on Sept. 11.

2001. His team established a triage center on the front lawn of Ellis Island that treated more than 300 victims and survivors after the towers collapsed.

"As the towers collapsed, we saw smoke fill the skyline and Manhattan disappeared before our eyes," said Guddemi. "We feared the Statue of Liberty was the next target and tried to make contact with the NYPD and FDNY, but couldn't get through. Overall, there was a lot of uncertainty because communications went down with our partner agencies, but we tended to the injured, coordinated the medical response from Jersey City and secured the Statue."

Communications interoperability and network priority are now key components of FirstNet, the nation's first and only broadband network designed with and for first responders.

Now serving as the statewide interoperability coordinator for the District of Columbia Homeland Security and Emergency Management Agency, Guddemi said FirstNet's capabilities were most recently put to the test during the Jan. 6 insurgency at the U.S. Capitol.

"The network was able to serve the first responders who were trying to defend the Capitol that day — commercial networks didn't have the same success," Guddemi said. "Without FirstNet, public safety's ability to respond and coordinate would have been even more difficult and complicated than it already was."

"It was critically important to help the coordination that was going on," he explained, "because in addition to the boots on the ground, a lot of communications was needed to support the first responders and mutual-aid agencies going into and information sharing coming out of U.S. Capitol Complex."

Unfortunately, disasters know no boundaries. Sometimes, they occur in locations that test the

limits of existing communications infrastructure or they disrupt the network. That's when FirstNet's Response Operations Group — ROG, for short — kicks into action. When public safety calls for additional support, the ROG team works with the agency to assess the situation and either deploy needed resources from the 100+ dedicated assets in the nationwide FirstNet fleet of land-based and airborne portable cell sites, or identifies and provides alternate solutions.

"My entire team is on call 24/7, and their devices are never off. We're always here," said Fred Scalera, a former fire chief and law enforcements officer who now heads up FirstNet ROG. "It's just a mindset that you have to have that, 'I'm coming for the right reason, I've been in public safety and I know my responsibility is to public safety in this position.'"

To that end, Scalera said his team comprises people from a diverse range of public safety backgrounds — from former state troopers and firefighters to former National Guard members.

"I have to make sure when I'm deploying somebody out to a wildfire in Oregon with the state's search and rescue team, they know how to work with that team and stay there for weeks," Scalera said. "It's not just hiring people and putting names in positions. It's about building a concept and a program with the knowledge and skills necessary to carry out the mission."

With FirstNet, first responders can keep critical information they need flowing to protect the public and themselves.

"This is the type of thing that we needed in this country for a long time," said Amarosa. "And now it's here, and it's working, and it's helping first responders with the work that they do."

Responders Marvel at Evolution from Runners and Payphones to 3D Mapping and MegaRange

Looking back on his 40-year firefighting career, Al Gillespie recalled that when he started as a volunteer in 1977, his department allotted only one portable radio per vehicle.

"And if the radio system wasn't working," he said, "we used the same thing that they've used for the last century — runners. The Chief would say, 'You go over there and tell them what's going on and come back and give me their response.'"

At around the same time, Richard (Dick) Mirgon was working the streets as a rookie cop in Denver, Colorado. He always made sure he had a dime in his pocket because he never knew when he might need it to call dispatch from a payphone.

"It was pretty rudimentary back then," said Mirgon, who worked more than 30 years in law enforcement and emergency management, now consults on public safety technology issues. "We weren't using signal flags or anything that archaic, but we were pretty close to that."

During their long public safety careers, both Gillespie and Mirgon have witnessed huge leaps forward in the technology first responders use to gather and share information. And both men were instrumental in the creation of FirstNet, the nation's first and only broadband communications platform dedicated to first responders. Despite all the advances he's seen over the years, Gillespie said much more is on the horizon.

"Just look at how we went from steam engines to diesel-driven engines ... from runners and speaking trumpets to portable radios ... and from learning CPR to the paramedic programs we have today. Put all those together, and it won't add up to the technological change that we're seeing in public safety today and in the years to come, especially with 5G," he said.

As 5G networks become more ubiquitous, the speedy, secure and low-latency technology is poised to unlock a wide array of new tools for public safety teams centered around the instant transmission of video, data and voice. Gillespie, who serves as president of the Public Safety Broadband Technology Association, said that FirstNet and 5G technology are igniting innovation in the public safety space, as many startups use their knowhow to develop apps and other tech tools that take advantage of the network's capabilities. To date, some 200 apps have been certified for use on FirstNet.

One innovation that's creating particular excitement is called "Z-Axis." It allows public safety to not only pinpoint responders on a map like you would through any GPS-based method, but also provides the third dimension of a specific location — their elevation.

"For fire service," Gillespie said, "it's important for us to be able to locate where somebody is in a building — either which floor they're on or where they are on that floor."

Another new FirstNet-exclusive tool, called MegaRange™, involves equipping public-safety vehicles with special radio equipment that extends the range of network connectivity, especially in areas at the edge of signal coverage (think places where you have only one bar of service). And it's a direct result of Band 14, public safety spectrum.

"We can stretch communications into areas we had no idea we could get to," Gillespie said. "Where they were right on the edge of communications, now they're right in the middle of it."

Chris Moore, a former San Jose police chief who works as a public-safety consultant today, added that with wireless connectivity, first responders are now able to create a virtual corridor of care from an incident scene straight to the emergency room.

"You can not only run EKGs, you can run all sorts of telematics for vital signs back to the hospital," he said. "You have paramedics who can administer drugs. The save rate for these traumatic accidents is a whole lot better than it used to be because of our ability to communicate with the base hospital."

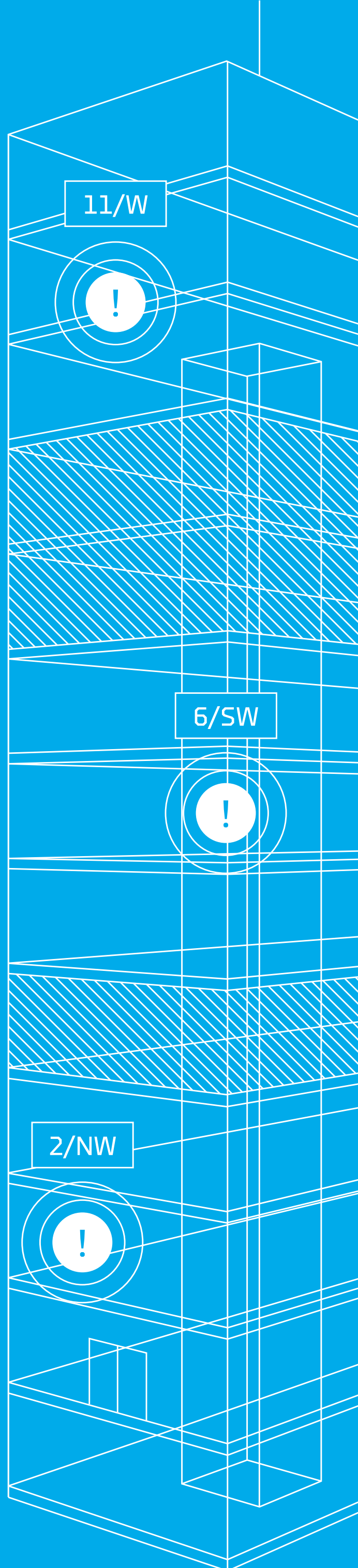
Moore also said wearable technology, such as body cameras, will continue to grow more sophisticated in the data they collect and the way they transmit and share it. And he added that other capabilities, such as rapid DNA testing, are already in play and continue to further develop. Rapid DNA testing would give law enforcement the ability to collect a DNA sample in the field, transmit the data and ID the perpetrator in a matter of minutes.

"With sexual assaults, for example, sometimes it takes a year to get the test kits identified through a lab," he said. "An average rape suspect strikes 12 victims before they get captured. With rapid DNA testing, we have the potential to stop the offender after their first crime."

Gillespie added that it's remarkable to see how quickly technology is evolving and delivering impacts he and other public-safety veterans never imagined.

"We hoped things like this would happen," Gillespie said. "But some of them, we didn't even know to think about at the time."

FirstNet, 5G Unlocking New Tools for Public Safety



FIRSTNET HELPS SAVE LIVES

How the Nation's Most Important Wireless Network was Born

On the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, Chief Chuck Dowd pulled up to the security gate at the New York City 9-1-1 Center where he was commanding officer of the New York Police Department's communications division. An officer told him that a small plane had just hit one of the World Trade Center buildings. While the news concerned him, he had no idea what he was about to walk into.

"I went into the 9-1-1 Center and the place was a madhouse," Dowd said. "As you can imagine, the calls were coming in from everywhere and they were horrific. Our folks were talking to people in the buildings who they knew were not going to get out alive. It was a terrible time."

Meanwhile, at the scene, first responders were racing into the buildings in an attempt to rescue those trapped inside. With police, fire and emergency medical services (EMS) all converging on the towers at once, coordinating communications quickly became challenging, if not impossible.

"The ability to share information via radio between the NYPD and the FDNY wasn't there because we were using two different radio systems," Dowd said. "It was a stark reminder of just how bad things were that day."

As the news spread and the rest of the country came to grips with what was happening, first responders from other states headed to New York and Washington, D.C. While their assistance was welcomed, their presence further complicated the communications conundrum.

"People were writing notes on pieces of paper and running them around Ground Zero and the Pentagon," said Chief Jeff Johnson, former president of the International Association of Fire Chiefs. "You had agencies trying to cross the river to come to Manhattan and they all worked on different land-mobile-radio systems, none of which were designed to interoperate with each other."

In the years to follow, Johnson joined Dowd and a host of others to play pivotal roles in solving the public safety communications issues that 9/11 exposed. In 2004, Ed Parkinson was working as an aide for U.S. Rep. Peter King (R-NY). In his role, he worked with constituents to champion causes in support of issues backed by the congressman. One such constituent group included Johnson and Dowd and came to be known as the Public Safety Alliance. The Alliance approached the legislator's office with the idea of securing a dedicated block of spectrum — the scarce airwaves that wireless communications travel over — for dedicated use by the public safety community.

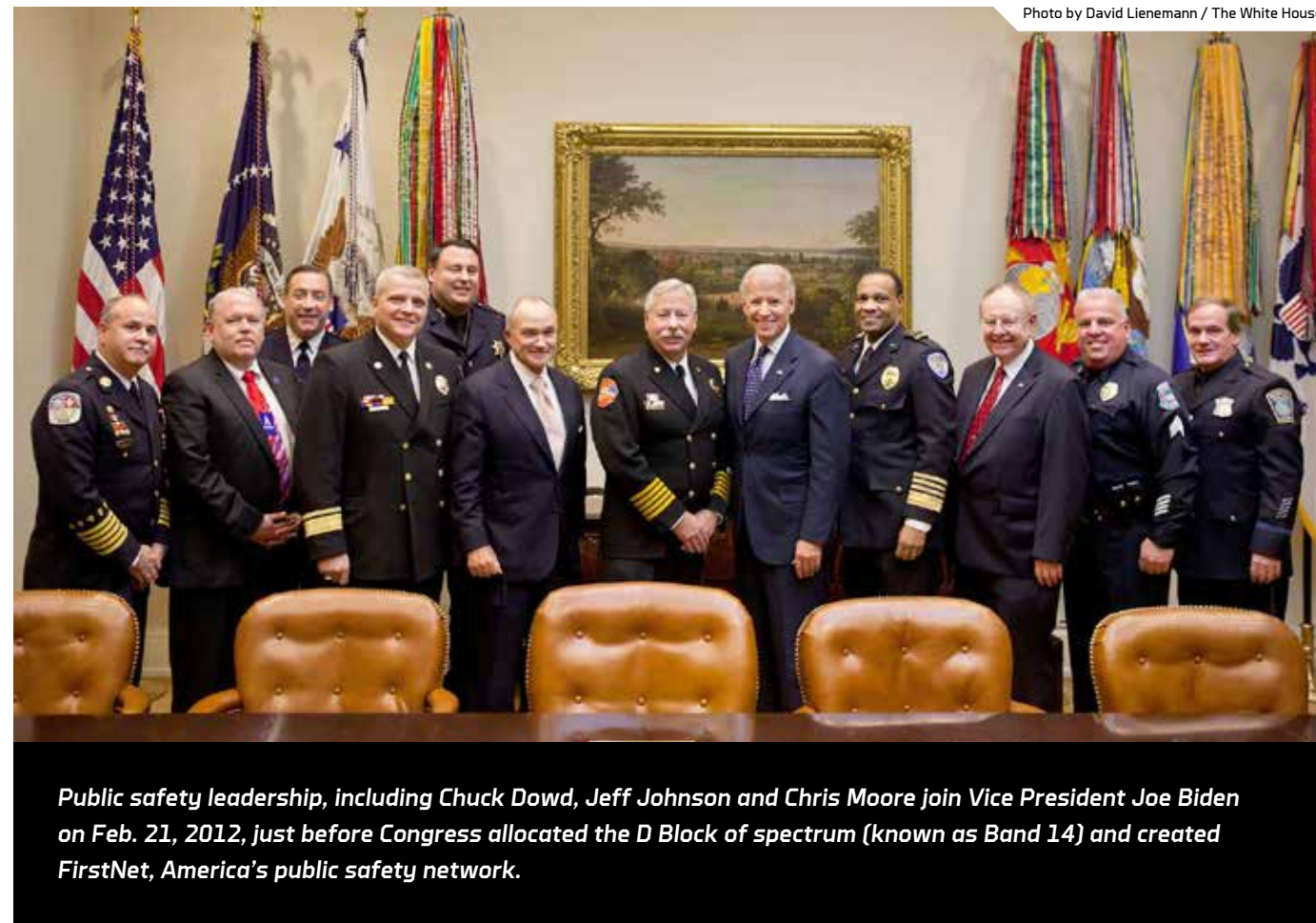
"It was the first time that we got everybody in public safety on the same page on one effort," Dowd said. "That had never happened before. We were laser-focused on acquiring that spectrum and advocating for that spectrum in Washington. And it was a tough road."

Rep. King stepped up as an early advocate and drafted the initial legislation to secure a prime block of spectrum, now known as Band 14, for public safety use. Specifically, the spectrum would give first responders the ability to not only communicate with each other and share data across departments and jurisdictions, but also to get priority and preemption over all other traffic using the airwaves. While 9/11 served as an impetus for the effort, with the need for an improved public safety communications system cited in the Congressional 9/11 Commission Report, communications failures had long been an issue for first responders across the country. From spotty cellular coverage in rural areas to saturated bandwidth in the midst of wildfires and emergencies in concentrated areas, the inability to communicate cost lives.

While Congress did not take action on the initial bill, it served as a critical catalyst for the initiative. The Alliance persisted and secured bipartisan support from Sens. Jay Rockefeller (D-WV) and John McCain (R-AZ), as well as other legislators. Still, the Alliance faced stiff opposition from those who felt the spectrum was too valuable an asset and could be sold to help pay down the federal deficit. But eventually, the Alliance earned support from then-Vice President Joe Biden, which was essential in getting the Obama administration on board.

"The Vice President listened to our arguments and said, 'I can think of nothing more important than getting public safety the communications tools they need. I will get this done.' And he kept his word," recalls Johnson.

Then, after years of sending letters, showing up to meetings and events in uniform and lobbying legislators, Mother Nature fatefully intervened to further help the Alliance prove its point.



Public safety leadership, including Chuck Dowd, Jeff Johnson and Chris Moore join Vice President Joe Biden on Feb. 21, 2012, just before Congress allocated the D Block of spectrum (known as Band 14) and created FirstNet, America's public safety network.

Photo by David Lerner / The White House

"We had been making this case up on the Hill and people just didn't get it," said Chris Moore, another key member of the Alliance who served as the San Jose police chief until his retirement in 2013. "Then, in 2011, we had a big earthquake on the East Coast, and the people in D.C. thought a bomb had gone off. Hill staffers tried to make calls and couldn't because the cellular networks were saturated. All of a sudden, the case we were making was demonstrated right in front of their own eyes, impacting them directly."

And in Feb. 2012, Congress created the First Responder Network Authority (FirstNet Authority) as part of the Middle Class Tax Relief and Job Creation Act.

The law allocated 20 MHz of spectrum and \$7 billion for the FirstNet Authority to build, operate and maintain a nationwide broadband network dedicated to first responders.

The FirstNet Authority spent years consulting with federal, state, tribal and local public safety entities to determine specifically what they needed in their network. And in 2017, the federal government selected AT&T to bring the network to life through a unique 25-year public-private partnership.

Today, FirstNet covers 2.71 million square miles across 50 states, five territories and D.C. with more than 17,000 public safety agencies and organizations — representing over 2.5 million connections — on the network. Understanding the importance of public safety's communications needs, AT&T expanded FirstNet to further boost its network capacity and give first responders always-on priority and preemption capabilities across all of its LTE spectrum bands, as well as Band 14; the block of spectrum public safety spent years fighting for. In an emergency, Band 14 can be cleared and locked just for FirstNet subscribers. That means, in addition to being able to talk with each other no matter which department or jurisdiction they're based, first responder communications on FirstNet are always shielded from commercial network congestion and won't get bogged down by spikes in wireless traffic during large events and emergencies.

"FirstNet helps save lives," said Parkinson, who now serves as the FirstNet Authority's CEO. "I don't know of a more important reason to have an asset like FirstNet out there for public safety to use and for the public to benefit from."

Dowd, who has since retired from the NYPD, added that while events like 9/11 made the need for FirstNet crystal clear, first responders feel its impact every day.

"And whether it's in New York City or in a rural county in Iowa," he said, "it makes a difference."



PROTECTING OUR PROTECTORS

Supporting the Health & Wellness of First Responders

"People don't call 9-1-1 because they're having a good day. And those images, those things you see are going to take a toll on you. And you've got to talk about it."

That's an excerpt from a first responder's recent conversation with Kevin Lynch, founder of the Quell Foundation — a nonprofit that works to reduce suicides, overdoses and the incarceration among people who live with a mental condition — as part of the Foundation's upcoming documentary to further mental health awareness within America's first responder community.

First responders help and protect us every day. In the process, they go through horrific experiences that can leave deep scars. But all too often, it's difficult for them to seek help for themselves, which can lead to tragic consequences. Ironically, for a profession that would tell you not to hesitate to call when you need help, they are the last to call when they need it the most. Law enforcement officers and firefighters are more likely to die by suicide than in the line of duty,¹ and according to Lynch, first responders have the sixth-highest suicide rate by profession in the U.S.

The causes of suicide are complex, but for first responders, contributing factors range from the difficulty of working doctor's visits into unpredictable work schedules to a culture that too often views reaching out for help as a sign of weakness.

"Many first responders comment about a 'suck it up, buttercup' attitude that says you're supposed to internalize traumas and ignore them as a normal part of the profession," said Dr. Anna Courie, a former ICU nurse who is responsible for leading FirstNet initiatives to advance first responder health and wellness at AT&T. "We have to raise awareness and work hard to make that stigma go away, because it's really a sign of strength to seek help for the problems that face you. When first responders take a stand to get help, they are saying they refuse to be a statistic. They are saying, we are changing the culture of our profession to one that seeks help."

A big step in that direction was the establishment earlier this year of the FirstNet Health & Wellness Coalition. This effort brings together more than two dozen member organizations that represent more than 1.3 million first responders, and its

priorities were developed from the input of over 350 first responders.

John Flynn, a NYPD officer of nearly 35 years, is a Coalition executive board member as part of his work with the National Association of Police Organizations (NAPO), and for him the cause is an extremely personal one. His older brother, a former Las Vegas police officer, took his own life last November. Among other things, Flynn sees training, peer-group support and better communications tools as important parts of the solution.

"In my own department, we gave every police officer up to the police commissioner their own cell phone preloaded with apps to help you do your job. And one of them is a specific app for health and wellness," Flynn said. "You hit that button and all those resources are there. You can use it to anonymously reach out to people who can help. And it includes videos of people who were in their darkest moments and got help. It lets you know that, whatever the situation, someone's been down that road before. You're not alone."

And when emergencies strike, the mental, emotional and physical tolls on responders can significantly increase. That's why FirstNet launched its "ROG the Dog" animal-assisted therapy initiative. Studies have shown that interacting with animals can improve coping and recovery, enhance morale, decrease stress, and reduce the effects of PTSD and emotional distress.² Agencies on FirstNet can call upon ROG the Dog to further support the health and well-being of their responders on the frontlines.

"At the heart of the network is people, so if we don't take care of the people and respond to the most critical challenges facing them, the network and the mission won't be as effective," said Courie. "It's in AT&T's core values to Be There when people need us, and with FirstNet, that's exactly what we do."

Flynn also suggested a way that all of us can help our first responders deal with the stresses they face: "We all have to get back to looking at them as human beings. They're public servants. They protect us. They save our lives. Then they go home and they're just Dad to somebody, or they're just somebody's sweetheart. If we can get society to look at that side of them, then maybe we'll be more willing to reach out and embrace them."

Help is Available

If you or someone you know is experiencing thoughts of suicide, any mental health or substance abuse crisis, dial **9-8-8** on your AT&T or FirstNet cell phone to speak with a Lifeline crisis counselor. Americans can also use the Lifeline's toll-free number, 800-273-TALK (8255), or visit suicidepreventionlifeline.org for more information and resources.

Lift the Mask

The Quell Foundation's documentary *Lift the Mask — First Responders Sound the Alarm* will premiere next Friday, Sept. 10, in Arlington, Virginia. This event aims to educate, inspire and empower first responders to recognize mental health crisis warning signs amongst their own.



More than 30 FirstNet "ROG the Dog" therapy animals are stationed across the country and have most recently been deployed to support responders following major disasters like the Bootleg Wildfire in Oregon.

“LIKE A WARZONE”



Recalling the 9/11 Response at the Pentagon

On Sept. 11, 2001, Jim Schwartz was beginning his day in the Arlington County (Va.) Fire Department’s office when his wife called with news that a plane had crashed into the World Trade Center. The events of 9/11 were starting to unfold and, as assistant chief of operations at the time, Schwartz was about to be thrust into the middle of it.

While watching the TV coverage from New York, he and his team started thinking through what it could mean for the D.C. area. They didn’t have long to think. Just a few miles away, at 9:37 a.m., Flight 77 slammed into the Pentagon. Eleven minutes later, Schwartz was on the scene, where he assumed command of the incident and started assessing the situation.

“It felt very much like a warzone,” he recalled. “Thousands of people streaming out of the building, smoke and fire hundreds of feet in the air, a gash. The building had not yet collapsed, but it was not hard to discern where the airplane had gone in. Obviously, it was a somewhat chaotic situation as we, the responders, were trying to gather information and gain control of the situation.”

Schwartz quickly connected with John Jester, then chief of the Defense Protective Service, the Pentagon’s security force at the time.

“John and I had worked on a number of projects in the region together, so we knew each other and he knew the kind of information that I was going to need to start forming a response, building an incident-management team, beginning to care for the wounded, searching the inside of the building, beginning to fight the fire and evolving our response from there,” he explained.

As fate would have it, Schwartz and many of the same first responders at the Pentagon that morning had, just three days earlier, taken part in a regional training exercise together. Among them was FBI special agent Christopher Combs from the Washington Field Office. Schwartz explained that Combs, who closely studied the Oklahoma City bombing, had spent the previous three years building relationships with local first responders knowing that their close collaboration would be vital in situations like the one before them.

“When Chris arrived, we already knew each other, we knew what to expect from each other, we knew

there wasn’t going to be any kind of a turf battle or an elbowing for position,” Schwartz said. “I had confidence that information the FBI had that I might need was going to be forthcoming.”

As the evacuations continued, Schwartz got word from his team that the damaged structure’s collapse was imminent. From the command post, they were able to inform everyone to pull back and avoided any deaths amongst responders. Soon after that, Combs informed Schwartz that the FBI believed another plane was headed their way.

“Chris giving me that information caused me to evacuate the incident scene,” he said. “Now, that airplane turned out to be Flight 93 that crashed in Shanksville (Pa.), but we know from evidence gathered later that its target was probably the United States Capitol.”

Schwartz continued working at the Pentagon the remainder of the day, through the night and past sundown the next day.

“I did not leave the grounds for the first time until 10 p.m. on Sept. 12,” he said. “I went home that night with probably the worst headache I’d ever had.”

Schwartz and his department continued to lead the response for 10 days before handing it over to the FBI. Meanwhile, first responders across the country were eager to help out the beleaguered crews in New York City, Pennsylvania and the Pentagon. Billy Freeman, now retired, was a firefighter at the time in Memphis, Tenn. He and 70 of his colleagues from Tennessee Task Force 1, part of the FEMA Urban Search and Rescue program, packed up 60,000 pounds of heavy-rescue equipment and boarded a 16-vehicle convoy for the 858-mile journey to the Pentagon. They arrived the morning of Sept. 19.

“As we came out from under the overpass, we could see the Pentagon,” Freeman said. “The hole was still smoking and it was like someone punched me right in the stomach. I served in the Army; I’ve been serving the last 40 years in some capacity. It felt just like somebody punched America in the stomach.

“When you have federal agencies [like mine] intermixing with local agencies, volunteers, nongovernmental agencies ... especially with the technology we had in 2001, there’s always a problem in trying to communicate, but we worked it out the best we

could. I called it ‘mud and wire’ — figuring out how to make something work with what you got. And that’s what we did.”

Freeman said the team instantly went into “mission mode,” shoring up the building, searching for survivors, recovering bodies and supporting the many other public safety agencies that had rushed in from across the country.

“That’s where we were for the next nine days,” he said. “It was very emotional because we knew that a lot of firefighters, police and EMS had been killed in the Trade Center, one of them my friend — Dennis Mojica, who was in one of the first fire trucks to arrive on the scene.”

As they dug through the rubble to recover human remains, Freeman described it as unimaginable to the average person and barely imaginable to him and his teammates, who all had experience working on difficult recovery missions.

“You take the worst traffic accident you’ve ever seen and multiply it by 100 or 200,” he said. “You just had to drive through it. You had the mission. You start thinking about the families ... getting their loved ones back to them for closure. We have one of the best jobs in the world. We get to help people, and we were helping people there.”

Freeman now works at the First Responder Network Authority (FirstNet Authority) — an independent federal agency established by Congress. The FirstNet Authority is charged with delivering first responders FirstNet, America’s interoperable wireless communications network built specifically for public safety.

“After returning from the Pentagon, I came home and hugged my kids and my wife, and realized that, yeah, this one’s going to be with me for the rest of my life,” said Freeman. “Today, my son is a firefighter/paramedic in the Memphis area. I joined the FirstNet Authority because I wanted to make sure that he wouldn’t have the communication challenges I experienced at the Pentagon. He’d have something that works. And now he has FirstNet.”