

FIRSTNET
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Customer Stories

Town of Duck
Police Department

The Duck Police Department relies on FirstNet to help keep residents and vacationers safe

Agency/organization needs
Reliable communications to help safety forces keep this coastal community safe.

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

Agency value
Support the community, especially during storms.

Industry focus
Law enforcement

Size
15 officers

Duck Police Department embraces change

Duck, North Carolina, is a thriving coastal community, nationally recognized as one of America's top family-friendly beaches. This beautiful town is on a peninsula bordered to the west by the Currituck Sound and to the east by the Atlantic Ocean. It's home to fewer than 1,000 year-round residents, but the population swells to 35,000 during the summer.

The Town of Duck Police Department strives to keep Duck safe and enjoyable by providing the highest possible level of service to the town's residents, property owners, and visitors. The department is committed to enhancing the professionalism of law enforcement and changing the policing culture in North Carolina. They work hard to preserve life while promoting values, beliefs, and behaviors that inspire excellence.

Duck Police Chief Jeffrey Ackerman has served as the town's chief for five years and heads a department of 15 officers. He's seen many changes during his 27 years of law enforcement and Jeffrey's pride in his officers is apparent. "All our people are service-minded. They understand how unique our environment is and all strive to balance tourism with having to be the police, and they do a great job of it."

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Summer population spikes bring unique challenges

Early adoption of FirstNet technology enables rapid response

Maintaining peace in a town with thousands of vacationers is not without its challenges. “Whatever we did the previous seven days is unknown to the new people coming in. It’s a totally new population every week, so you can’t use traditional tactics and techniques,” he said. “And when a crime does occur, you’ve got at most seven days to solve it before that person’s no longer in the community. So it presents some real challenges.”

Staying abreast of law enforcement technology presents another challenge. “When I started 27 years ago, everything was done by pen and paper. We didn’t have computers in our cars, and the only cell phone we had was an old bag phone that we passed around from one shift to the next. We had beepers so they could get ahold of us on our days off.”

Ackerman’s predecessor, Chief John Cueto, was an early adopter of technology, including FirstNet, the nationwide broadband network designed and built for first responders. FirstNet provides law enforcement, fire service, and emergency medical services (EMS) personnel with the latest technology for faster response-time and keeping their communities safe.

Some were skeptical when FirstNet was introduced, Ackerman said. “But Chief Cueto saw it as a benefit to our town and our department and went all in on it. And the relationship with FirstNet has just been stellar throughout Chief Cueto’s administration and mine.”

The Duck Police Department continues to rely on FirstNet. “We’ve embraced FirstNet and found more uses for it and more ways to support what we do, especially in a place vulnerable to natural disasters and just being rural in general,” he said.



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Jeffrey Ackerman
Chief, Town of Duck Police Department

Secure, high-performance emergency communication

Deputy Police Chief Melissa Clark said integrating FirstNet technology was a breeze. “It was so seamless, and it certainly proved its worth last fall when Hurricane Helene hit the western part of the state,” she said. “If somebody wasn’t a believer before, I think that experience was our ultimate buy-in.”

Ackerman sent officers to assist communities that were hit hard by the hurricane. People in devastated communities had almost no way to communicate, which worried the chief. “It is a little unnerving to send people away to a place with no cell service and no landlines,” he said. “But our vehicles have FirstNet Cradlepoint routers in them, so I was able to know where our officers were at all times.”

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Reliable emergency communication is vital in areas prone to natural disasters

The routers act as a hub for secure, high-performance communication during emergencies. They are designed to provide reliable and secure internet connectivity for first responders with priority access for the FirstNet network, particularly in emergencies.

The routers were a blessing because the cruisers' two-way radios did not work. "As law enforcement, we had invested so much money in our two-way radio network, but it was obsolete up there. There was no tower standing, no generators, no nothing," Ackerman said. "So all our investment in something that was supposed to be there for natural disasters was completely useless. But FirstNet worked."

Duck officers quickly deployed FirstNet Satellite Cells on Light Trucks (SatCOLTs), which are vehicles with mobile cell sites that connect via satellite and do not rely on a commercial power supply. "They were able to call in, so we knew they were okay and arrived safely. Knowing they're okay was huge for me. And then, more importantly, for them to be able to get in touch with their families and let them know they were okay."

A game changer after the hurricane

Deputy Chief Clark noted that FirstNet connectivity helped many residents in western North Carolina in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Helene. "Our officers were able to help Miss Helen, who was in her eighties and all alone. Her husband had been taken to the hospital the morning of the hurricane, and she had no way to communicate. She lived just above one of the campgrounds that was annihilated, and her family didn't know if she was dead or alive," she said.

Duck officers were able to let her talk to her son and daughter, as well as her husband in the hospital. "She was on the phone for probably an hour and never lost service. So it was a game-changer. The weight of the world lifted for that family," she said. "FirstNet worked. The signal was steady."



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> Chief, Town of Duck Police Department

Ackerman pointed to a photo in his office. "Here are our officers with Miss Helen, who is making the very first phone call to tell her son that she was alive. For several days, he thought she had perished in the storm. This picture will hang on my wall long after my retirement. It's very meaningful."

The officers from Duck also shared their FirstNet phones with other first responders. "FirstNet wasn't as widely used out that way, and a lot of the responding officers (coming from all over the state and country) didn't have FirstNet," he said. "I think we were at a huge advantage because we had it. And the FirstNet deployables filled a gap for a lot of folks."

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Affordable solutions for rural communities

Since the hurricane, Ackerman has seen an increase in agency adoption of FirstNet technology. “After their experience, it has kind of snowballed,” he said.

Overcoming communication challenges

FirstNet connectivity helps the town of Duck in other ways, Ackerman said, including with traffic management. “We have a huge traffic problem. Sixty percent of cars travel a two-lane road that was designed for half of the volume it carries now,” he said. Widening the road or adding bridges would be cost-prohibitive and would destroy the small-town atmosphere of the community.

“The best solution we could come up with is to have live traffic cameras throughout town, so people can see where the hot spots are and whether it’s a good time to venture out,” he said. “All of that is run through FirstNet because we’re still a pretty rural community. We don’t have robust broadband or cable internet.”



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Duck installed traffic cameras and routers throughout the town. “Everything had to be done from scratch, and we didn’t have a lot of money to do it,” the chief said. A city council member, who was also an electrician, installed the necessary electrical lines, and officers built a control cabinet. “We integrated a FirstNet router into that and ran Ethernet cable. So every time we’ve come up with a communication challenge, FirstNet has had something that fits in that box to make it work, and it does so in an affordable way.”

“There are other companies that offer Wi-Fi or cellular-based solutions, but they’re pricier than FirstNet. And it’s been great to be able to reach out and say, ‘Here’s what I’ve got, what do you have that’ll work? And here’s my budget for it.’ And every time it’s worked. So, our surveillance system is a hundred percent FirstNet-backed,” he said.

Much more than a cell phone

Ackerman is pleased with the responsiveness of the FirstNet team. “There has never been a time when I didn’t get an answer when I called or texted,” he said. “That’s what we take away from FirstNet. I receive calls frequently from other carriers attempting to sell their version of FirstNet. And it’s fun for me now because I start quizzing them on all the things that they provide, and they don’t provide any of what FirstNet provides.”

He likes the relationship his department has with FirstNet reps. “There have been times in the infancy when we ran into some technology issues with FirstNet, and our team was able to elevate things to high-level people. You don’t see that from many companies anymore.”

In a small town, Ackerman said, technology purchases have to be weighed carefully against budget limitations. “A lot of the things we want to do get shut down for funding reasons. It doesn’t mean we won’t keep trying. We’ve learned a lot about FirstNet, how much more it is than just a cell phone, and you want more and more of that. If we have a catastrophic hurricane, we’re going to need these things.”

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