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 and preemption 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."