

Customer Stories

Stephenson County Sheriff's Office and Emergency Management Agency

Service and reliability critical in Stephenson County switch to FirstNet

- **Agency/Organization Needs** – Stephenson County Sheriff's Office and the county Emergency Management Agency needed reliable communication – especially in rural areas of the county.
- **Networking Solution** – FirstNet equipped Stephenson County Sheriff's deputies with 15 Cradlepoints, FirstNet-enabled Galaxy S20s and Sonim XP3 rugged flip phones; and Fleet Complete for FirstNet, as well as Netgear Nighthawk mobile routers, which are FirstNet Ready®. The Emergency Management Agency uses FirstNet phones and FirstNet-enabled mobile hotspots.
- **Agency value** – Innovative tools, such as relevant applications and connected devices, give the agencies more actionable information for heightened situational awareness
- **Industry Focus** – Law enforcement and emergency management
- **Size** – 55 new connections for the EMA and Sheriff's office combined

Stephenson County Sheriff's Office and county Emergency Management Agency needed reliable communication – especially in rural areas

For the Stephenson County Sheriff's Office, the reliability of the FirstNet service and easy access to the FirstNet team was critical. And it made their decision to switch that much easier.

"The availability to the FirstNet team – you just can't do that with other companies," said Lieutenant Ken Nesemeier of the Stephenson County Sheriff's Office. "Now I just call my local guy and he takes off running with it."

Lieutenant Nesemeier is administrative lieutenant for the Stephenson County Sheriff's Office. He's in charge of the Patrol Division and the Public Safety Access Point (PSAP) where 9-1-1 calls come in. He's also in charge of the budget for the two entities, as well as their technology needs. And he's the fleet officer for the entire department.

Signing up for FirstNet

"We had signed up for FirstNet service to get our foot in the door," Lieutenant Nesemeier said. "But we had not moved beyond the device. With FirstNet enhancing the service and with the proper equipment, we went ahead and made the switch over."

Stephenson County Sheriff's Department needed reliable and secure communications.



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Lt. Ken Nesemeier
Stephenson County
Sheriff's Department

In November 2020, first responders in Illinois got a major boost in their wireless communications. AT&T added new, purpose-built FirstNet cell sites and other network enhancements at nearly 1,500 existing sites. This is a part of the FirstNet network expansion across the state to bring increased coverage, capacity and capabilities to public safety.

“FirstNet is totally tailored for emergency services,” said Lieutenant Nesemeier. “It’s not like when you call another commercial carrier and you’ve got 15 call centers and you don’t know where you’re going to land.”

Agency needs

With a population of about 47,000 and 25 towns, 17 subdivisions, 1,800 miles of roadway and 568 square miles to cover, the department needed reliable and secure communications.

“One of the biggest risks we face is the ability to push out information via data devices that we don’t want over the radio,” Lieutenant Nesemeier said. “We try to be as transparent as we can with the public. We haven’t encrypted our radio systems. But sometimes, there are things we just can’t put out. That’s where our devices and tablets and cell phones are critical.

“Not having good service makes it a stressful work environment,” he added.

“If the equipment is working and with the good FirstNet service, it really takes the stress off the working officer and dispatcher,” Lieutenant Nesemeier said. “We were with another large commercial carrier and the data – especially in the northern part of the county – were sketchy. That creates a more stressful work environment. So, anything we can do to take a load off, that’s what we’re going to do.”

“FirstNet has been very reliable. And we are looking at implementing FirstNet-enabled mobile hotspot routers into our mobile 9-1-1 Center.”

**Kevin Countryman, Director,
Stephenson County Emergency
Management Agency**

Emergency management

Kevin Countryman is the director of the Stephenson County Emergency Management Agency. And reliable communication is critical for his agency, he said. That’s especially true in rural and remote areas of the county.

“We need to account for our staff and any volunteers we may be using for damage assessments and weather reports,” Countryman said. “Without reliable communications, this can put our staff and volunteer staff at risk.”

The two-person EMA works with agencies and organizations across the county to coordinate planning efforts in the event of a disaster, training exercises, and more. It maintains an Emergency Operations Center in the county’s highway building.

“Our goal is to create a framework to help communities reduce vulnerabilities to threats and hazards and cope with disasters,” Countryman said. “We want to reduce loss of life, minimize property loss and damage to the environment. And we want to protect jurisdictions from all threats and hazards.”



Kevin Countryman said the two-person EMA works with agencies and organizations across the county to coordinate planning efforts in the event of a disaster. And they need reliable communication.

FirstNet has been key in helping the agency achieve its goals, Countryman said. The EMA director and assistant director both have FirstNet cell phones and use mobile hotspot routers. The agency has also equipped public works employees and animal control with FirstNet phones.

“Our EOC uses mobile hotspot routers on FirstNet as a backup in case internet service is unavailable,” he said. “FirstNet has been very reliable. And we are looking at implementing FirstNet-enabled mobile hotspot routers into our mobile 9-1-1 Center.”

Joining FirstNet

Lieutenant Nesemeier said he’s also been working to get other agencies in the surrounding area on FirstNet.

“I’m trying to convince one of my buddies in a neighboring town to join FirstNet,” Lieutenant Nesemeier said. “I have told him they should at least try this. I’ve even offered to let him borrow some of our equipment.”

The Stephenson County Sheriff’s Department uses 15 Cradlepoints, Galaxy S20s smartphones and Sonim XP3 rugged flip phones, both of which are FirstNet Ready®, and Fleet Complete for FirstNet. They also use Netgear Nighthawk mobile routers, which are FirstNet Ready®.



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Kevin Countryman
Stephenson County
Emergency Management
Agency

The biggest benefit the EMA has seen since joining FirstNet is increased coverage and reliability.

“The Nighthawks are assigned to investigators and administrators, where we didn’t want hard-mounted Cradlepoints,” Lieutenant Nesemeier said. “In our patrol fleet, we have 15 units.”

With its proximity to Wisconsin, the Stephenson County Sheriff’s Office also needed the ability to collaborate with other agencies.

“We also interoperate with Wisconsin,” Lieutenant Nesemeier said. “If they call for help, we can go up there and help them. And we have a joint drug unit with Wisconsin.

Biggest benefit

The biggest benefit the EMA has seen since joining FirstNet is increased coverage and reliability, Countryman said.

“Some areas where we had very minimal communications coverage are now accessible to us,” he said. “And it’s nice to know that there are mobile deployment units available to us if our community was to suffer a major disaster.”

Before FirstNet, communications were “hit-and-miss,” Countryman said.

“You would have to plan for the possibility that communications may not be reliable,” he said. “It was hit-and-miss, you would try two-way radios. If that did not work, cell phones. And if that didn’t work, sometimes text messaging.”

“We were a little skeptical to make the transition, but we are glad we did,” Countryman added. “The reliability is reassuring, and it has made economic sense for us also. The service has been outstanding, and we know that we can reach out to the FirstNet team, and they will be there to assist.”

Lieutenant Nesemeier echoed Countryman’s sentiments.

“The biggest success story for us would be our northern part of the county,” Lieutenant Nesemeier said. “FirstNet is really the only game up there. The state line had been the sore spot. Now there are no boundaries.”