

What Reliability Means to First Responders

Article by Ellis M. Stanley, Sr.

In my forty-five years in emergency management, I've learned a thing or two about communication. The technologies have changed over the years. Back then we had two-way radios and walkie-talkies. Now we have cellphones and laptops. The tools we use will keep evolving. But the basic requirements will stay the same. Any communication equipment and network used by first responders has to be reliable. It has to be able to connect the whole team of first responders even during the largest, most complicated events. And it has to take advantage of the latest innovations, so we have the best capabilities at our fingertips.

Reliability is mandatory

For me, reliability means communication capabilities are there when you need them. No matter what. No excuses. On good days and especially on the bad ones. It means you can depend on your wireless network, the same way that you depend on your team. A team member who fails to show up at an incident would quickly be looking for another job. We have to hold our technologies – and our technology partners – to the same standards as our people. Does your wireless carrier have a network that's there for you when you need it? It should.

Here's a very personal story about the importance of reliability. I served as an emergency manager at the Olympics and Centennial Games in Atlanta in 1996, when a bomb detonated in Centennial Olympic Park. My youngest son was in the park and my oldest son was nearby. We were deep into responding to the incident but I was really worried about my boys. My phone rang and I heard the words I needed to hear: Daddy, I'm okay. And then it rang again. It was my other son letting me know he was fine.

Anyone with children knows that right at that moment, fast, available communication meant the world to me – as a father and an emergency manager. We were communicating with dozens of first responders and every hospital within a hundred miles of Atlanta. All of our calls were going through. Even the calls from my sons. No delays. No dropped calls. That's the way wireless communication should work.



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To provide reliability, your wireless carrier needs to invest in resiliency

Like first responders, wireless providers have to anticipate the absolute worst possible situations – and then prepare and train for them. To be ready for anything, cell sites need to be up and running, even when the power goes out and stays out for days, as it did during Hurricane Katrina. Building resiliency means having permanent, disaster-ready generators on-site at as many locations as possible, and using portable generators to fill in any gaps and serve as another layer of support. Yes, providing a high level of resiliency across the entire country is a big investment. But that's what it takes to make sure that communication keeps flowing, even when the electricity isn't.

So do your research. Ask your wireless partner about disaster-recovery resources in your area. Find out about back-up generation. What's the generator penetration in your area? Are the generators permanent or portable? What do they do if one fails? Do they have a team that plans and practices for emergency situations? If they say they have the most reliable network, make them prove it with hard facts, not marketing fluff.

Finally, reliability isn't just about technology. It's about people—committed people who know the local first responder community and are ready to jump in to help in any way that they can. You need someone who's got your back. Your wireless carrier should be there to help make sure that your mission is carried out on an ongoing basis, not just sell you a plan and fade away. Do you know your local wireless contact? You need to. More importantly, they should know you and your organization, and help you improve it however they can.

True interoperability enables teamwork

Today, wireless communication is even more critically important. Voice, data, video—it all has to move quickly and reliably, pushing more quantifiable and actionable information to all first responders, whether they're Federal, state, or local. All of your communications providers, including your wireless provider, have to be able to deliver true interoperability. True interoperability means that all emergency personnel can communicate and coordinate, no matter what device they're using or what wireless network they're on. It means that all of the critical people, vehicles, devices, and more can stay connected.

If a partner can't deliver interoperability, then they're not meeting one of the critical needs of first responders—seamless collaboration during an emergency or a major event, when agencies and departments are using different systems. And they're not the kind of partner you need.

Innovation keeps you ready for what's next

Today's tech won't be able to meet tomorrow's challenges. It has to keep evolving to integrate new capabilities. Your wireless carrier needs to be investing heavily in innovation that strengthens its network, speeding communication and bringing you new capabilities. On the near horizon, there's 5G. Is your wireless partner talking to you about 5G, which delivers new capabilities that we never imagined were possible, and how to put it to work for your agency?

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Choose the right partner

Despite what some people might think, there isn't a single federally mandated wireless network for first responders. We're free to choose our critical communications providers, just like we choose any other important equipment. But it's important to choose your partners in preparedness carefully. We all need to make sure that our wireless carriers are focused on the areas that matter to us—reliability, interoperability and innovation. Because communication is a vital tool for first responders and the people we serve and protect. That'll never change.