

First Responders: Have You Heard These Myths?

Article by Chief Brian Dugan

I'm here to dispel some myths about wireless connectivity and first responders—and to inspire you to ask more questions before signing on to a wireless carrier. Because it's an important choice. You don't want to find out in the middle of an emergency that your wireless carrier can't deliver what it promised.

It's important to remember that police departments, fire departments, EMTs and other first responders make great customers for cellular companies. They're high-visibility customers that use a lot of cell phones. So sales reps go all out when courting these new customers—offering special deals and pricing, and occasionally crossing over the line between fact and marketing.

Overselling happens all the time, but in this case, you're not buying a television or a car. You're investing in a critical communication tool that helps you save lives. Watch out for these myths below, and ask questions to get to the truth.

1: There's a network just for public safety

It's simple. There is no cell network dedicated exclusively to first responders and other public safety personnel. It's just not true, despite what some ad campaigns might have you think. No matter which cellular carrier departments and agencies partner with, first responders will still be using a commercial network shared with other, non-emergency traffic. However, during emergencies, cellular carriers can give priority to first responders. The question to ask: How do you ensure priority and preemption for first responders? Your wireless carrier needs to be able to explain how they help to keep your calls and data going through during an emergency.

2: There's a federally mandated network and provider.

Another myth I hear regularly is that there's a federally mandated network that first responders have to use. Again, that's just not true. We have the freedom to choose whatever carrier we want—and should. After all, competition inspires innovation and better services.



Brian Dugan is former Chief of Police at the Tampa, Florida Police Department. He served as a police officer with the department for 34 years, spending the last four years as chief.

3: All wireless carriers are the same.

When you're choosing your wireless carrier, you're not just comparing the latest coverage maps and network speeds. You're choosing the people and technology that will be supporting your agency during good days and bad. It's important, since there could be long-term repercussions. Don't let promises guide your decision. Ask about the details—their plan for emergencies, their generator penetration in your area, and their 5G capabilities. Find out how long they've been collaborating with public-safety organizations.

4: The network is always on.

No cellular company can guarantee that their network is always going to be on and available. Not one. Given all that can happen during an emergency—severed cables, downed cell towers, failed backup generators—that would be impossible. But your provider has to do everything it can to ensure that you can communicate during emergency situations.

Keeping communication up and running requires careful preparation. It starts with ongoing investment in the network infrastructure, including security. During an emergency, it means having a solid plan, on-site permanent back-up generators, and plenty of personnel and the latest and greatest equipment ready to jump in and help you when you need it. Always on? That's simply a catchy phrase. What you want is a wireless carrier that's always there, ready to help.

5: We're the largest wireless provider to public safety organizations.

That designation needs to go to the carrier that the most actual first responders and other public safety organizations choose, year after year. This total shouldn't include commercial customers along with first responders. As with any claim, ask for the truth—and proof to back it up. Trust but verify.

6. First responders can connect with anyone during an emergency.

Maybe. Network interoperability lets public safety data travel across any band in any wireless spectrum. But some carriers define interoperability as connecting with any user on their own network. Real interoperability—cross-carrier interoperability in technical terms—means you can call anyone you need to, no matter what equipment they're using or what network they're on.

Be sure to ask your cellular provider how they define interoperability. Because during any emergency, you're going to need to be able to connect the entire team. For example, during Hurricane Irma in 2017, I sent a contingency group of about four different agencies to help clean up a hard-hit county and provide security. I can't stress enough how important team communication is during a major event. It requires interoperability because you can't anticipate what devices or wireless services first responders will be using.

Make sure your cellular partner keeps its promises

As public-safety professionals, we make a promise to the citizens we serve that we'll protect them and keep them safe under all circumstances. Your cellular carrier makes a lot of promises to your agency, particularly when it's selling you a plan. Find out what they promise to do during an emergency, how many assets (equipment and human) are located in your area, and all other key plans. Then hold them to their promises. If they don't come through, then shop around, ask questions—and find a more reliable and capable partner.

“One cellular company I worked with in Tampa actually met with us after each event, performed deep post-op research on each of our cell lines, and troubleshooted to make sure they were constantly improving.”

That's the kind of service that we all need. Not just promises—ongoing commitment.