



# Helping the Helpers

Lessons Learned and Outcomes to Date from  
the FirstNet® Health and Wellness Coalition

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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**FIRSTNET**  
Health & Wellness  
Coalition™

“When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’”

**Fred Rogers**

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## **Quis adiuvat adiutores?**

Who helps the helpers?

### **Abstract:**

Historians in America and around the world may well label the early 21st century as the era of mass casualty events. From the events of September 11, 2001, to multiple mass school shootings in the U.S. to terrorist attacks in Boston, Moscow, Paris and elsewhere, first responders repeatedly face horrific incident scenes. Police, fire and medical personnel, emergency managers, and public safety telecommunicators, their peers, and their families bear the physical and emotional scars of these events. And they struggle daily to overcome those long-term injuries.

The FirstNet program was one of the two major communications projects<sup>1</sup> born from the September 11, 2001, attacks in New York City, Washington, and Shanksville, PA. In February 2012, Congress passed the Middle Class Tax Relief and Job Creation Act into law, allocating \$7 billion and 20 megahertz of broadband spectrum to establish a standalone broadband network for first responders and create the First Responder Network Authority (FirstNet Authority). In 2017, the FirstNet Authority awarded AT&T a historic 25-year contract to build and maintain this network. Public safety now has a reliable, interoperable, and effective network for response at a moment’s notice to natural and man-made disasters.

As AT&T began to deploy the FirstNet network, leadership realized they could do much more to help the nation’s police, fire, medical personnel, public safety telecommunicators, and other emergency responders. So, AT&T established the FirstNet Health and Wellness Coalition (FNHWC or “the Coalition”) to support the health, wellness, and readiness of America’s first responders and their families.

The Coalition brings together over two dozen national public safety organizations to assess, plan, prepare, integrate, and evaluate strategies and solutions to support emergency responder wellness. This group identified needs in the larger public safety/public health infrastructure and learned many lessons along the way. Most importantly, the group learned that we have much more to discover about the dynamic between emergency response, chronic stress injuries, individual mental wellness, and community health. This paper will discuss our collaboration within the Coalition, and the lessons learned from these efforts. We welcome feedback from readers on how the Coalition can improve going forward.

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<sup>1</sup>The other project is the Wireless Emergency Alert (WEA) system, which was authorized by Congress and signed into law by President George W. Bush in 2006 and became operational in 2012.

## Executive Summary

*FirstNet, Built with AT&T* is the only nationwide communications network built with and for public safety. Through its intimate working relationship with public safety, FirstNet leadership recognized the need for resources dedicated to first responder health and wellness.

The FirstNet Health and Wellness Program (FNHWP) officially launched in May 2020 following FirstNet's exclusive support of the International Association of Chiefs of Police Officer Safety and Wellness Symposium. In order to proliferate these early activities, FirstNet recognized the need to formalize efforts to support first responder health and wellness efforts through advocacy, identifying available resources, and building relationships. Guiding the FNHWP is the FirstNet Health and Wellness Coalition (the Coalition), which is made up of more than two dozen organizations from public safety, academia, and industry to assess, integrate, and evaluate strategies and solutions to support emergency responder wellness.

It was determined that to better understand the current state of responder wellness and identify priorities, a formal needs assessment was an appropriate kickoff for the Coalition.

Through data analysis, literature review, a survey of first responders, and reports from various Coalition members, the FNHWC compiled a responder needs assessment report of its findings to date. This report highlights the challenges first responders face; opportunities to engage at the individual and agency level; and critical recommendations for the larger public safety/public health infrastructure. The Coalition found that first responders are aware of these concerns and are open to changing the status quo. For the purposes of this paper, we have defined "first responders" as law enforcement, fire, EMS, corrections, public safety telecommunicators, emergency management, frontline healthcare workers, and those who support them.

Compared with the general population, first responders experience higher rates of depression, post-traumatic stress, burnout, anxiety, and other issues. This leads to secondary and tertiary health risks, such as cardiovascular disease and disordered sleep. In addition, public safety departments across the country are experiencing widespread morale, recruitment, and retention challenges. Additionally, family members of emergency responders silently bear the burden of these impacts.



The Coalition found that first responders are aware of these concerns and are open to changing the status quo. The FirstNet Needs Assessment Survey (FNNAS), conducted from January to March 2021 with 475 first responders, bears out this analysis. Survey respondents identified areas they believe would improve their health and wellness, including stress management and physical fitness. They highlighted barriers to personal and agency improvement. And they made recommendations for how best to engage the public safety community.

**From its analysis, the Coalition makes five key recommendations:**

1. Engage public safety leadership
2. Integrate wellness into training throughout careers and beyond
3. Allocate funding for evidence-based solutions locally and nationally
4. Establish standards and technical assistance centers
5. Increase communication at all levels of public safety

Ultimately, the Coalition encourages continued examination and communication across all disciplines and levels of public safety, to continue learning more about the complex dynamic between emergency response, chronic stress injuries, individual mental wellness, and overall community health. Additional resources, data, funding, and collaboration can drive change and provide holistic support to those who serve.

