Connecting Heroes
Empowering rural first responders through connectivity.
The T-Mobile Connecting Heroes program provides the coverage, capacity, and support needed to empower rural first responders.

By choosing T-Mobile for Government as a technology partner, rural first responders can effectively prepare for what’s next.

The Customers

• Rescue 101 Search and Rescue in South Salem, Ohio

• Hampton Valley Forge Volunteer Fire Department, Hampton Valley Forge, Tennessee

The Challenge

• Lack of connectivity and emergency response infrastructure in rural areas

• Employee attrition

The Opportunity

• Help rural first responders to better serve their communities by providing connectivity, devices, and infrastructure

• Empower rural first responders to work more quickly through tailored plans and devices from a wireless carrier

• Retain more first responders through wireless benefits like personal cost-savings
First responders are the first on the scene in any emergency—often putting their lives at risk for people they don’t even know. Like many of us, this community works in teams. Communication among workers is crucial. Lives, land, and assets are at risk of being lost if teams don’t relay the right information to the right individuals at the right times.

This presents challenges, especially for those serving rural areas like Rescue 101 Search and Rescue in South Salem, Ohio, and the Hampton Valley Forge Volunteer Fire Department in Hampton Valley Forge, Tennessee. Connectivity can often be sparse.

The T-Mobile Connecting Heroes program helps first responders stay connected using devices, a powerful network with robust coverage and high-capacity, and unlimited plans at little or no cost to accommodate the needs of rural first responders. It also creates a strategic relationship between first responder agencies and T-Mobile for Government that can generate suggestions based on each department’s needs. This positions first responders, from full-time staff to volunteers, for success and allows them to better serve their communities.
Challenges
Keep first responders connected.

2020 was marked by several disasters that would change the world.

The COVID-19 pandemic created an exponential increase in calls, which means increasing demand for first responder services.

Additionally, wildfires in the U.S. burned across 15 states at one point, burning eight million acres of natural wildland. There were also a record number of hurricanes.

The impacts of these unforeseen circumstances are compounded when it comes to rural communities. There is often a lack of coverage and emergency response infrastructure in rural areas, making it difficult for first responders to effectively serve these communities.
For instance, the Hampton Valley Forge Volunteer Fire Department serves a rural, mountainous area of Tennessee. It protects approximately 6,000 homes and businesses across 72 square miles. Everything they do requires constant connectivity. For example, Hampton Valley Forge’s school security project relies on a stream of data that can be exchanged almost instantaneously to keep students safe.

Hundreds of miles away, Rescue 101 Search and Rescue in South Salem, Ohio, suffers from the same issues, with a lack of coverage and capacity. The majority of the staff are volunteers, and they assist across the country at any municipality’s request, which is often in rural areas. Specializing in wilderness and urban search and rescue and emergency and disaster response, Rescue 101 command staff has logged more than 20,000 hours on deployments in 2020, and dedicates more than 5,000 hours to preparedness each year. The department recently sent a crew to the hurricane-ravaged areas of Louisiana to clear debris and help rebuild.
Before joining T-Mobile for Government, first responders at Rescue 101 Search and Rescue would follow a long-winded process to respond to calls. They would be out and about, receive a call if the coverage was adequate, then have to head to the nearest area with high-speed data transfer, such as a Wi-Fi hotspot, to continue the process. From there, they would access map and satellite data to get directions to emergencies.

This is highly inefficient, especially when lives are on the line, during missing person cases, disaster response, orders to salt roadways, and more. Many events are unpredictable, and response times are critical when lives are on the line and property is at risk.

It’s critical to provide these first responders, who often sacrifice precious time with their families to serve their communities, with the tools and infrastructure they need to do the job.
There is no place we won’t go to help people in an emergency—that’s always been true. Improved wireless service has allowed us to do so much more and go so much further.

— Andrew Surritt, Chief, Executive Director
Rescue 101 Search and Rescue
Solutions

02 Solutions
Enable constant connectivity.

Rural first responders can better serve their communities through America’s largest and fastest 5G network.

5G brings faster speeds, lower latency, and more device capacity.

For rural first responders, this means better coverage with our 600MHz signal, which can penetrate across the rugged, mountainous terrain. It’s the foundation of our 5G network and allows first responders to stay connected at home, on site, and on the go.

Rescue 101 needed reliable wireless connectivity at their dedicated training center located at a high elevation and at least 20 minutes away from the closest town. Connectivity was the key to effectively preparing team members and volunteers to serve their communities.
The cell signal amplifier T-Mobile recommended worked great. The internet speeds we’re seeing are five times faster than the cell service in the closest town.

— Andrew Surritt, Chief, Executive Director
Rescue 101 Search and Rescue

Connectivity was essential when Surritt and his team served the hurricane-ravaged areas of Louisiana earlier this year. The group, nicknamed by local residents as “The God Squad,” removed close to 800 cubic yards of debris within nine days. Using their smartphones, the team connected with residents via social media, which helped them determine where and when to send assistance.

The T-Mobile network leverages massive holdings across high, mid, and low-band spectrums. The 600MHz low-band provides signals for improved rural coverage, with a signal better able to penetrate both manmade and natural barriers, whether in town or in the mountains. For the firefighters at Hampton Valley Forge, this could be the variable that enables them to serve their communities more effectively.

Frustrated by his previous carrier’s inadequate coverage, Amos Halava, firefighter and former Chief of the Hampton Valley Forge Volunteer Fire Department, reached out to T-Mobile about trying out devices and services after hearing about the Connecting Heroes program. The coverage passed the test and he was able to stay in constant contact. The merger between T-Mobile and Sprint increased coverage and capacity, opening the possibility for his team of nearly 40 firefighters to stay connected to each other and their headquarters.
Public safety agencies need to share voice, text, instant messages, video, and data reliably while responding to emergencies. Agencies must invest in connected devices that can meet the needs of first responders. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, first responders were exploring tools like video streaming and IoT devices to optimize situational awareness workflows for efficiency.

On the T-Mobile network, Rescue 101 Search and Rescue uses five smartphones—two that use mobile hotspot capabilities—to provide internet access with map and satellite data. First responders can navigate to emergencies efficiently, without having to find coverage. The increased bandwidth and connectivity allow the department to scale capabilities so they can respond quickly. Surritt and his team have been so pleased with the service, he plans to move all 12 of the agency’s devices to T-Mobile in the near future.

Similarly, firefighters at Hampton Valley Forge utilize the T-Mobile network to power smartphones across vehicles on its ATAK (Android Team Awareness Kit) software. This provides asset visibility across the organization and allows first responders to communicate faster. With user data feeding into elevation tools, heat maps, computed contour maps, viewsheds, and routes, ATAK is a mission planning, geospatial, Full Motion Video (FMV), and system administrator tool that reduces the operational footprint from a tactical laptop to a commercial mobile device. Firefighters can work more quickly knowing that they have the most up-to-date maps and routes available.

Distribute devices that support next-generation first-responder infrastructure.

Constant connection lays the foundation for smart devices that can unlock efficiencies.
Keeping an open line of communication has allowed T-Mobile to make suggestions and cater to first responders’ needs. Public safety solutions by T-Mobile for Government are designed to enable rapid response with features like push-to-talk, priority calling on a reliable nationwide VoLTE network, and more. However, government agencies need help implementing these solutions. That’s why T-Mobile for Government customers get a dedicated team of highly trained experts assigned to their account and charged specifically with meeting their demands. This means real help from real people and exceptional customer care. For example, government agencies can team up with experts to brainstorm ways to work more efficiently, which may include introducing new devices or software. Together, they can create a strategy for providing smooth onboarding, troubleshooting, and change management.

This makes these first responders better able to prepare for unforeseen circumstances, like natural disasters. This is all backed by award-winning customer service. T-Mobile has been ranked the highest in Business Wireless Customer Satisfaction by J.D. Power for four years in a row.

“"It’s just a better network, and the customer service is incredible. We’re aiming to move more devices to the account soon because the service has been so great."

— Andrew Surritt, Chief, Executive Director, Rescue 101 Search and Rescue

Provide dynamic, award-winning support that’s ready for what’s next.

Through Connecting Heroes, first responders developed strong relationships with T-Mobile for Government representatives.
Benefits
Connecting first responders
to serve their communities.

For firefighters at Hampton Valley Forge, the connectivity is invaluable, especially for department-wide visibility.

Each firetruck is now equipped with a T-Mobile-powered smartphone that runs ATAK (Android Team Awareness Kit), a third-party app to provide real-time vehicle location. Powered by the robust T-Mobile 5G network, the connected firetrucks allow firefighters to locate each other easily, communicate faster, and be more efficient overall in serving their community.

Beyond boosting efficiency and providing visibility, connectivity helps lay the foundation for digital transformation through process modernization. T-Mobile recently expanded 5G and 4G LTE coverage in rural areas, which unlocks the ability for high-speed data transfer. This means that these volunteer organizations can bolster efficiency through things like cloud migration or the implementation of cloud-enabled tools, which speeds up workflows.

“Our previous carrier worked about 50% of the time. We started a search for a reliable network that would work in 90% of where we go. That ended up being T-Mobile,” Surritt said. “Now, we can have all that information within a minute at our fingertips. It makes us more efficient.”
Commanders must efficiently relay critical data to every first responder while taking an audit of resources. By investing in cutting edge devices and a high-capacity network, Hampton Valley Forge firefighters use their ATAK platform to assist with resourcing. ATAK’s platform provides better visibility to individual vehicles and firefighters by offering the fastest route to an emergency at the press of a button.

This interconnectivity between vehicles and devices allows the department to assess needs, hone in on problem areas, and allocate resources more efficiently and effectively. It also allows them to plan for more emergencies. The visibility into department resources is invaluable.
Cost-savings help agencies get the most from their budgets.

Rural first responders experience long-term benefits by investing in devices and America’s largest and fastest 5G network.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced organizations to slash and reallocate budgets. For Rescue 101 Search and Rescue in South Salem, Ohio, this meant a funding reduction of $10,000, which was a significant percentage of the department’s overall budget.

The organization used the cost-savings from the free service through the Connecting Heroes program to offset the costs (estimated at $9,000) to serve Louisiana’s hurricane-ravaged areas. Thanks to Connecting Heroes, first responders could clear debris, assist residents getting back into their properties, and ensure citizen safety.

The cost savings directly benefit first responders. Before teaming up with T-Mobile for Government, Hampton Valley Forge Volunteer Fire Department covered a portion of personal phone bills for nearly 40 of its volunteers. This equated to about $125 per person.

Connecting Heroes enabled Hampton Valley Forge to save an additional $5,000 while providing volunteers with constant connectivity on-site and at home.
Our previous carrier worked about 50% of the time. We started a search for a reliable network that would work in 90% of where we go. That ended up being T-Mobile. Now, we can have all that information within a minute at our fingertips. It makes us more efficient.

— Andrew Surritt, Chief, Executive Director
Rescue 101 Search and Rescue
Retain first responders on the frontlines.

Retention has emerged as a significant concern for volunteer first responder departments.

A report by New Canaan Department of Fire Services says that the national retention average of volunteer firefighters is approximately four years per person, per department. This is even more concerning when you consider the state of firefighting in the U.S. According to a study by GovTech, there are 7,768 combination departments (professionals and volunteers), and 19,807 all-volunteer departments. In terms of individuals, nearly 70 percent of firefighters are volunteers whose efforts save our nation an estimated $139.8 billion per year.

With Connecting Heroes, first responders get free nationwide 5G that helps them communicate at the most critical times. This includes unlimited talk, text, that data volunteers can enjoy off the clock as well.

“These volunteer firefighters essentially have their cell phone bills paid every month as a result of getting free service through the Connecting Heroes program,” Halawa said. “That’s a direct benefit. It gives them a reason to train and helps keep them onboarding.”
Working Together
T-Mobile provides solutions tailored to the future of work.

By teaming up with T-Mobile for Government, first responders can audit existing systems and prepare for what's next.

Amos Halawa and Andrew Surritt formed close, collaborative relationships with their respective T-Mobile for Government Experts.

The teamwork and open communication lines allow T-Mobile to make suggestions based on each department's needs, setting up the departments and first responders for success and allowing them to serve their communities better. For Surritt at Rescue 101 Search and Rescue, his relationship with T-Mobile for Government Expert Chad South has helped him discover new ways to keep his first responders connected.
“As long as he’s not busy, I can call Chad and we can bounce ideas off each other,” Surrit said. “It’s how we ended up with our hotspot. That relationship has been extremely beneficial. As we continue to expand, I know that we’re going to continue to bounce ideas.”

At Hampton Valley Forge Volunteer Fire Department, Amos Halava frequently chats with T-Mobile Government Account Executive Roderick Carrasco about ways to further serve the community. This lays the framework for an ongoing relationship. “Roderick’s attitude has always been ‘If you need something, call me.’ He keeps an open line of communication, and he does a great job of keeping potential opportunities abreast,” said Halava.

Teaming up with a carrier who understands the technology and communication needs for first responders is imperative given the unpredictable nature of emergencies in rural areas. That goes both ways. Firefighters must keep tabs on technology developments that can potentially help them better serve their community. Both parties can benefit.

“Amos [Halava] intrigued me. He was so in tune with the technology, and he had his department’s best interest at heart. Our relationship allows us to look for more opportunities to partner organically.”

— Roderick Carrasco, Government Account Executive
T-Mobile
Why T-Mobile® for Government?
Connecting Heroes is the T-Mobile for Government commitment to provide free unlimited talk, text, and smartphone data to every public and non-profit state and local fire, law enforcement, EMS agency and 911 call center.

To sign up for Connecting Heroes, visit www.tmobile.com/connectingheroes or call our team of Government Experts at 1-877-386-4246.