

Newsletter

October 2021

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Volume 5, Edition 10



Your Agency, Your Needs, Your Network

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Tribal first responders and mental well-being: An invisible minority

By Makai Zuniga

Intern, FirstNet Program at AT&T

First responders are critical for the well-being of those in their community. But too often, their mental health needs go unattended. This is especially true within the Native American community. Tribal first responders don't often get to take part in the conversation when it comes to mental health resources. This includes counseling, crisis intervention, and hotlines.

More than 200 police departments operate in "Indian Country" – a term used to encompass all federally recognized tribes in the United States¹. These departments range in size from 2-3 officers to more than 200 officers². Differences in tribal territory and population size account for this range. For example, the Havasupai Tribe near the Grand Canyon in Arizona has a



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U.S. Air Force chooses FirstNet for public safety communications across 15 bases

By AT&T

The U.S. Air Force has selected [FirstNet®](#), [Built with AT&T](#) to deliver reliable, *always-on* priority communications to its public safety personnel and, for first responders, preemption, on 15 bases across the country. FirstNet is the *only* nationwide high-speed broadband communications platform built with and for first responders and those who support them.

The agreement struck with the Air Force Civil Engineer Center (AFCEC) provides for the delivery of FirstNet connectivity for 21 years: the remaining life of the public-private partnership between the U.S. government and AT&T.

Modernizing communications is a top priority for the U.S. Air Force and the Department of Defense. The Air Force is delivering on this strategy by investing to improve network coverage and adopting FirstNet initially across 15 bases while it considers expanding FirstNet accessibility to others.

"We aim to be the network provider of choice as the Air Force moves more deliberately toward consuming

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RESPONDER HEALTH AND WELLNESS

Tribal first responders and mental well-being: An invisible minority

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population of about 600 tribal members. The Navajo Nation, which spans across Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah, has a population of about 173,000 tribal members.

The large differences in population also play a role in staffing. This can create immense stress for police officers who have a heavy workload compared with tribes with a smaller land boundary. However, even if a tribe has a smaller population, it does not guarantee police officers won't have their hands full.

Violent crime rates

Native Americans – and Native women in particular – face the highest violent crime rates out of any other ethnicity in America³. On average, police officers witness 188 critical incidents during their careers. And this exposure can lead to Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and depression, which officers are five times more likely to have⁴.

So, what does this mean for tribal officers? The chance of mental illness among Tribal first responders is higher than non-tribal officers.

Many of the tribal officers are Native members of the communities they serve. They respond to calls with people they may have close ties with, which can cause unique mental stressors. Joel Zuniga, Tribal Police Sergeant for the Reno-Sparks Indian Colony, has first-hand experience.

Responding to family

Sergeant Zuniga has been a police officer for 17 years, all of them spent with his own tribe. He was born and raised on the reservation. There is hardly a call he responds to that does not involve someone he knows. The most trying of these calls, are the ones that involve his own relatives.

"One of the hardest calls I've had to respond to, was one that involved a family member," said Sergeant Zuniga. "As I approached the street where the caller had seen an inebriated male, I found my father. Immediately I radioed



There is an app for almost anything imaginable in the ever-growing mobile application ecosystem, including apps focused on health and wellness.

in to alert my supervisor of the situation who told me to head back to the department once another officer could take the scene over. The shame and embarrassment I felt definitely took a toll on my mental well-being. And even today I am stricken with bouts of fear that my next shift might be the one where I respond to a shooting or stabbing, and the victim, or perpetrator, is a loved one."

Sergeant Zuniga's experience is indicative of the unique nature of policing in Indian Country, and it is a harrowing example of the mental health toll tribal officers experience.

Mental health resources need

These personal accounts demonstrate the need for mental health resources tailored to tribal first responders. Leadership and personnel need to come together to set up a work environment that provides training to help improve the mental health, resiliency and wellbeing of Tribal first responders.

This solution seems straightforward. But there is a culture of 'stoicism' when first responders witness a traumatic event. One way to combat this culture is to have clear written protocols and strategic plans that

allow first responders to feel more in control of their environment. This could include debrief sessions with team members and superiors, peer to peer support, and integrating Native American traditions into the way officers deal with traumatic events.

Teamwork and a sense of community serve as a protective factor for first responders⁵. A high sense of team accomplishment and assurance of personal and team capabilities were associated with lower stress levels⁶. The Native American sense of community and tradition provide protective factors for public safety officers. They also provide an excellent vehicle for addressing mental health risk factors.

Using traditional healing

The National Institutes of Health/National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine identifies Native American traditional healing as a medical system that uses a range of holistic treatments by indigenous healers for a variety of acute and chronic conditions, and to promote health and wellbeing⁷.

Native American healers add a cultural perspective to aid the Tribal

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RESPONDER HEALTH AND WELLNESS

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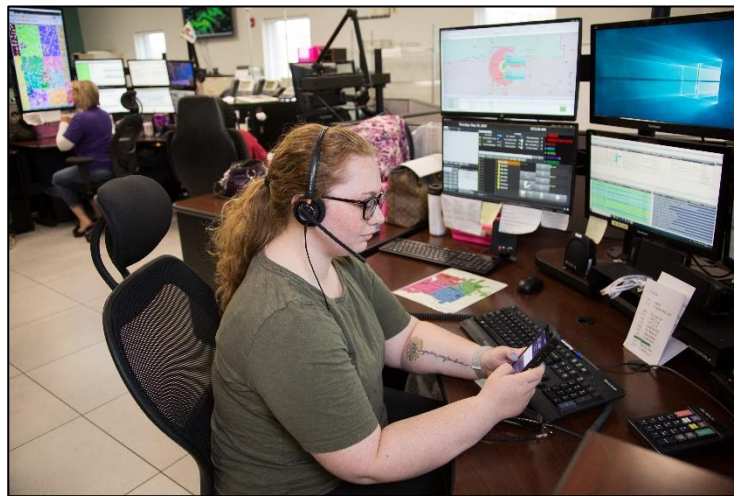
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first responders' mental wellbeing. While there are individual tribal differences, there are also shared health beliefs and interventional strategies – including a health promotion foundation that embraces bio-psycho-socio-spiritual approaches and traditions⁸.

Bio-psycho-socio-spiritual approaches include stories and legends. These help teach positive behaviors and the consequences of failing to observe the laws of nature. Many indigenous healers use oral traditions to discuss difficult topics. The use of stories and legends provide the recipient with ways to cope and help provide a renewed sense of self. It is well documented that storytelling is an effective means for coping with traumatic events and provides an opportunity of relationship building and community building for the tribe as a whole.

Bio-psycho-socio-spiritual approaches also include herbs, manipulative therapies, ceremonies, and prayer. These are used in various combinations to prevent and treat illness, both physical and mental⁹. These practices follow a synergetic approach that Native American cultures appreciate.

First responders everywhere sacrifice their mental well-being to ensure the safety of their communities. But tribal public safety see unique challenges. Tribal public safety can help close the gap in addressing mental health among tribal first responders by integrating traditional Native American strategies for coping, establishing departmental plans and policies, and identifying resources tailored for tribal populations.



Applications provide first responders with the tools they need to address their mental wellness without worrying about being stigmatized.

Makai Zuniga, a tribal member of the Reno-Sparks Indian Colony, recently graduated from the University of Nevada, Reno with his B.A. in Political Science.

He spent the summer of 2021 interning with FirstNet Program at AT&T, with a focus on tribal affairs.

¹Federal Bureau of Investigation. (n.d.). *Tribal Law Enforcement*. Tribal Law Enforcement Resources. <https://www.tribal-institute.org/lists/enforcement.html>

²Federal Bureau of Investigation. (n.d.). *Tribal Law Enforcement*. Tribal Law Enforcement Resources. Federal Bureau of Investigation. (n.d.). *Tribal Law Enforcement*. Tribal Law Enforcement Resources. <https://www.tribal-institute.org/lists/enforcement.html>

³Federal Bureau of Investigation. (2016, June 23). *Overview of Tribal Crime and Justice*. National Institute of Justice. <https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/overview-tribal-crime-and-justice#note2>

⁴Hilliard, J. (2020, November 20). *New Study Shows Police at Highest Risk for Suicide Than Any Profession*. Addiction Center. <https://www.addictioncenter.com/news/2019/09/police-at-highest-risk-for-suicide>

⁵Quevillon, R. P., Gray, B. L., Erickson, S. E., Gonzalez, E. D., & Jacobs, G. A. (2016). Helping the helpers: Assisting staff and volunteer workers before, during, and after disaster relief operations. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 72(12), 1348–1363. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.22336>

⁶Brooks, S. K., Dunn, R., Amlot, R., Greenberg, N., & Rubin, G. J. (2016). Social and occupational factors associated with psychological distress and disorder among disaster responders: A systematic review. *BMC Psychology*, 4, 18. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-016-0120-9>

⁷NIH National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine. *CAM Basics*. Publication 347. [February 27, 2010]. Available at: <http://nccam.nih.gov/health/whatisacam/>

⁸Koithan, M., & Farrell, C. (2010). Indigenous Native American Healing Traditions. *The Journal for Nurse Practitioners*, 6(6), 477–478. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nurpra.2010.03.016>

⁹Cohen K. *Honoring the medicine: An essential guide to Native American healing*. New York, NY: Ballantine Books; 2006.

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U.S. Air Force chooses FirstNet for 15 bases

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advanced communications capabilities,” said Lance Spencer, Client Executive Vice President – Defense, AT&T Public Sector and FirstNet Program at AT&T. “It’s an honor to deliver FirstNet to support base personnel and first responders to help ensure the safety of each base and its surrounding community.”

FirstNet offers a wide range of mission-centric capabilities to support communications among base first responders and public safety personnel. It supports reliable, secure and interoperable communications among on- and off-base public safety personnel when collaborating to mitigate incidents that threaten the safety of airmen and the general public. Unlike commercial networks, FirstNet is built to public safety’s strict specifications and requirements. And the FirstNet network comes with unique features, functionality, and a dedicated lane of connectivity for the Air Force’s military and public safety community to help them connect to critical information they need when they need it.

In addition, with FirstNet, these U.S. Air Force bases will have access to a dedicated nationwide fleet of 100+ land-based and airborne portable cell sites stationed across the country to provide connectivity during significant events in support of public safety’s mission. These critical response assets are available 24/7 at no additional charge.

How Air Force would benefit

With a physically separate, dedicated core, FirstNet provides public safety personnel *always-on* priority and, for first responders, preemption, across LTE – Band 14 spectrum plus all of AT&T’s commercial LTE spectrum bands. Band 14 is nationwide, high-quality spectrum set aside by the government specifically for FirstNet that allows for capabilities that other spectrum bands don’t. Plus, the FirstNet core has been upgraded to enable reliable 5G connectivity.



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Client Executive Vice President,
Public Sector and FirstNet
Program at AT&T

These upgrades will allow these Air Force bases to have access to network connectivity with increased capacity and high throughput speeds on the FirstNet core, as well as 5G-powered network edge computing capabilities that will support increased bandwidth and the creation of innovative edge-based solutions.

FirstNet offers these Air Force bases interoperability with existing land mobile radio assets and with first responders off base. FirstNet supports voice, data, and streaming video communications with priority and preemption among base and local community first responders when needed.

FirstNet is the first-ever nationwide network to introduce comprehensive tower-to-core encryption based on open industry standards. FirstNet traffic can be automatically secured as it moves from the cell tower, through the backhaul, to the core and back again. FirstNet continues to grow because it offers distinct advantages from commercial offerings. And the more than 17,000 agencies and organizations – accounting for more than 2.5 million connections nationwide – would agree.¹

What is FirstNet?

FirstNet is the *only* nationwide, high-speed broadband communications platform purpose-built for America’s first responders and the extended public safety community. Shaped by the vision of the first responder community and Congress following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, FirstNet stands above commercial offerings. It is built with [AT&T](#) in public-private partnership with the First Responder Network Authority ([FirstNet Authority](#)) – an independent agency within the federal government. Visit [FirstNet.com](#) for more information.

¹As of Q2 2021.

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CASE STUDY: Stephenson County, Illinois

Service, reliability critical for county joining FirstNet



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 to FirstNet 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. [LEARN MORE](#)

Introducing FirstNet Innovator of the Month: Allerio Mobile Hub

Each month, we will feature an industry-leading and innovative FirstNet-embedded partner making waves in the first responder tech world. This month, we focus on Allerio Mobile Hub, which is now FirstNet Ready®. It's the first battery-powered, multi-carrier LTE router purpose built for first responders. [LEARN MORE](#)



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