

Groundhog Day forecast calls for FirstNet solutions

**Agency/organization needs**

Dependable communication to support safety response and coordination during Groundhog Day and other large-scale events

**Networking solution**

The FirstNet network connects smartphones, tablets, and mobile data terminals in police and fire department vehicles; push-to-talk solutions enable one-touch access, supporting secondary and tertiary communication

**Agency value**

24/7 network priority and preemption across the Band 14 spectrum, reserved for public safety and those closest to them

**Industry focus**

Public safety

**Size**

6,000 borough residents, 40,000+ total visitors during special events

Furthering centuries-old tradition in a friendly, close-knit community

For most of us, shadows come and go without fanfare. However, that's far from the case in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, where tens of thousands arrive each year to take part in its world-famous Groundhog Day celebration.

Festivities spread over several days attract locals and visitors alike, culminating in a seasonal forecast like no other. Fans are here for one reason and one reason only. To learn whether famed groundhog Punxsutawney Phil will see his shadow, signaling six more weeks of winter instead of an early spring.

This long-time tradition has been going on since the late 1800s, further popularized by the 1993 movie Groundhog Day starring Bill Murray.

Today, the celebration attracts upwards of 40,000 people, making it a huge driver for the local economy and an opportunity to showcase all the borough has to offer. Popular amenities include a branch campus of Indiana University of Pennsylvania and a new culinary school, along with attractions like the Phantastic Phils—42 six-foot-tall fiberglass statues of the famous groundhog, each uniquely decorated by local artists.

Naturally, public wellbeing is top priority for officials and safety agencies during the multiday event. Managing the large swell of visitors over a few days is challenging. It's something that takes year-round planning and coordination, supported by reliable priority communication from FirstNet®, Built with AT&T.

Reliable communication for federal, state, and local agencies

Meeting public safety needs

As Punxsutawney Borough Manager, William T. Spencer, Ph.D. works with Borough Chief of Police Matt Conrad to create a safe and enjoyable atmosphere for all. To do that, they need to make sure public safety and borough officials can communicate with one another when needed. That wasn't always possible before FirstNet.

"With the influx of 40,000 people onto one cell phone tower here, we were dropping calls or had no service at all," said Conrad. Emergency communication proved equally difficult. "At times, you couldn't make a phone call. Our internet wouldn't work in our cars. Our contingency communication was to rely on radio, which isn't always the best."

The problem, said Conrad, was that his department shared their radio network with three other law enforcement agencies. This made it hard to get timely information during incidents and furthered the need for dedicated and reliable communication.

Seamless multi-agency communication

Prior to his role as borough manager, Spencer served as a Punxsutawney police officer, a position he still holds part time. He later worked in the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency, and held a similar role in Washington, D.C. That experience showed him the value of FirstNet, something he carried with him to Punxsutawney.

"We were obviously a big user and consumer of FirstNet services, and they were an integral part of our daily operations," he said. "We had a good understanding of how it would work in an environment like Groundhog Day where there is limited cellular coverage."

FirstNet enables officers from multiple jurisdictions to collaborate to speed incident response and resolution. "With FirstNet, communication is streamlined. When a child got separated from their family and law enforcement was handling an additional issue, everybody was able to communicate. It was smooth," Spencer said.



"FirstNet made it easy for the first responders to communicate, identify priorities, and clear lanes of traffic."

Matt Conrad,
Punxsutawney Chief of Police

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Your public safety VIP communications fast lane

Just this past Groundhog Day Conrad recalled how officers handled three medical emergencies within minutes as tens of thousands of people were arriving. “They were flooding the town with vehicles. Our infrastructure was not designed to sustain that. FirstNet made it easy for the first responders to communicate, identify priorities, and clear lanes of traffic at a traffic post. That was integral in this process.”

Priority access

Conrad noted how well FirstNet services have improved agency-wide communication across the board. “We had push-to-talk services, which gave us that secondary and tertiary communications plan,” the chief said. “That improved everything, even though we had a bigger turnout this year than we had in previous years. FirstNet definitely made a big impact on the communications and response throughout the event.”

In Conrad’s view, the biggest benefit of FirstNet is the virtually uninterrupted access it gives emergency responders. “When there are 40,000 people in the area, we would be able to coordinate responses to any medical emergency, or, God forbid, some type of mass casualty incident,” he said. “Having that open line of communication is key.”

Year-round safety

Although Groundhog Day is when Punxsutawney is most busy, the city is already planning to host other events in the future. This year they’ll host a two-day celebration in honor of Punxsutawney’s 175th birthday. With public safety communication supported by FirstNet, Spencer feels confident in their ability to respond should any issues arise.

“FirstNet is a good system from a first responder perspective,” he said. “From a city manager’s perspective, if your economy is tied to big events, the safety of your communities should be at the forefront.”

FirstNet has been so successful for Punxsutawney they’ve integrated it into fire department communications with equally positive results. “We converted all our fire apparatuses, and our line officers now have iPads set up. They’ve been very happy with the cost, the program, and how it’s been working,” said Conrad.

He’s also recommended FirstNet to other departments, including branches of the Pennsylvania State Police and the Jefferson County EMS. “Anybody in our local area knows the success we’ve had with FirstNet, and we’re trying to onboard them with it as well.”

Boundless support

Spencer is pleased with the attention and support Punxsutawney has received from the FirstNet team. It’s been comparable to what he received in D.C. “I commend the FirstNet team. I feel like we got the same level of service and care that I got in the district. It’s been great. We felt like we were well taken care of and well-educated throughout this process.”

Eventually, he would like to extend FirstNet capabilities to the borough’s volunteer responders. When incidents do occur, the combined effort of public safety professionals and volunteers helps mitigate risk. That careful attention to detail and shared community mindset benefits everyone.

“Because we have FirstNet, we respond better. If you’re concerned about your community’s image and your economy, you should have this resource,” Spencer said. “And if it is available to you, honestly, I would think you’d be foolish not to use it.”