Testimony of Mel Maier

Chief Executive Officer and Executive Director, APCO International

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Subcommittee on Telecommunications and Media

"On the Front Lines of Connectivity: Examining FirstNet's Role in Public Safety"

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Chair Fischer, Ranking Member Luján, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the invitation to testify before you today. I am grateful for the opportunity to provide a public safety perspective and represent the Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials, International (APCO). As the world's oldest and largest organization of public safety communications professionals, APCO represents over 45,000 members who are responsible for building, managing, and operating public safety communications systems for law enforcement, fire, emergency medical and other public safety agencies.

With more than three decades of dedicated public service, I have built a career focused on leadership in law enforcement and public safety communications. I was appointed CEO and Executive Director of APCO in July 2023, serving as APCO's Chief Technology Officer since 2022. Prior to joining APCO, I served as a law enforcement officer for 32 years and was the captain and chief of public safety communications for the Oakland County Michigan's Sheriff's Office. In addition to my operational leadership, I have played an active role in national public safety initiatives, serving on the FirstNet Public Safety Advisory Committee during its early implementation and later as the Law Enforcement Chair, helping guide the network's development and implementation for first responders nationwide.

APCO is uniquely situated to offer an informed perspective on FirstNet's performance. In 2009, APCO was part of the leadership that joined forces with other major public safety groups to urge Congress to establish a dedicated, interoperable network that could reliably serve the critical demands of

public safety. In 2012, Congress passed legislation resulting in FirstNet, the nation's first and only nationwide broadband network built exclusively for first responders. APCO was an active participant in shaping FirstNet's technical requirements and standards. APCO continues to serve a central role in the FirstNet governance structure through its representation on the Public Safety Advisory Committee, ensuring that the network remains accountable to the public safety users who rely upon it.

APCO urges the swift reauthorization of FirstNet because, quite simply, lives depend on it. Millions of public safety professionals – including many of APCO's members – depend upon FirstNet service and equipment in support of their lifesaving missions. FirstNet supports 7.5 million connections for public safety, covering nearly 3 million square miles, and approximately 30,000 public safety agencies. And FirstNet's users continue to grow year over year. Because FirstNet works. FirstNet provides public safety professionals with priority access to its high-speed broadband network 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, without exception. FirstNet also provides preemption for public safety traffic, ensuring that public safety calls are always first in line when networks are congested.

While FirstNet has been a tremendous success, we must continually look to the future and consider how we can make FirstNet even stronger. At the forefront of this examination is the central question: what would serve public safety?

Guided by this question, APCO urges continued reinvestment in the FirstNet network. Continued expansion of FirstNet is essential to ensure coverage reaches rural, remote, and underserved communities across America. FirstNet should provide network coverage to even the smallest of the small Emergency Communications Centers and law enforcement, fire, and EMS agencies – so that no first responder is left without reliable connectivity. Maintaining and improving network performance and reliability must also remain a top priority. This includes ensuring consistent coverage, minimizing downtime, and continuing to provide predictable, high-quality service during both routine operations and large-scale emergencies. FirstNet must remain resilient, secure, and consistently available so that public safety professionals can rely on it without interruption. APCO also encourages investment in growth and innovation, including the continued expansion of mission critical applications, devices, and connections that enhance situational

awareness and operational efficiency. FirstNet has played a key role in bringing innovative technologies to first responders, enabling new tools that improve incident response. Looking ahead, the network must continue to evolve to support advanced communications tools, including 5G and 6G devices, and accommodate increasing data demands. Sustained investment ensures that FirstNet reaches every community across America and that first responders benefit from cutting-edge capabilities that can save lives.

Congress might also consider adoption of performance metrics and operational benchmarks that address real-world public safety needs. These metrics could include network availability and latency during routine day-to-day operations, and network resiliency and performance during disasters and other large-scale emergencies.

Finally, I want to emphasize one aspect of FirstNet that must not change: we must be careful not to chip away at the foundation that has made FirstNet successful – the way in which it is structured. FirstNet's Board of dedicated public safety professionals, guided by the Public Safety Advisory Committee, exemplifies an independent governance model that is responsive, mission-focused, and grounded in the needs of first responders. Regular engagement with public safety users ensures that public safety operational realities inform FirstNet's network management, investment decisions, and performance improvements. This ongoing communication helps FirstNet remain accountable to the public safety professionals who rely on the network every day and ensures that upgrades, expansions, and operational adjustments directly address the needs of first responders in the field.

Thank you for advancing this important conversation about FirstNet reauthorization. Our nation's first responders deserve certainty that they will retain uninterrupted access to the dedicated, high-speed broadband communications network they depend upon every day. We therefore urge the swift reauthorization of FirstNet under the continued oversight of the independent FirstNet Authority Board.