

T-Mobile sees pandemic as opportunity to connect with first-responders with free service, phones

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T-Mobile really wants to connect with local and state police, fire and

emergency medical departments—by offering them free cellular service, including 5G connectivity.

Many first-responder agencies face funding crunches that result in other lifesaving equipment being purchased ahead of cellular service and devices. The coronavirus pandemic will likely add to budgetary stress.

First responders usually have [radio communications](#), but may need to make [phone calls](#), take photos or access department smartphone apps—and may be prohibited from using their personal phones for work.

An example: Police officers in Wichita, Kansas, previously provided their own phones, which was an additional personal cost to officers, says Mike Mayta, the city's chief information officer.

T-Mobile began offering the free service plan to the city of Wichita before making it available nationwide and the Wichita Police Department will save at least \$1.8 million in operating costs over five years, he says. The city's fire department is considering the program, too.

This new plan ensures officers are always able to be reached, especially in crucial moments when seconds count," Mayta said. "Cities across the nation are facing budget cuts, and this program allows our Police Department to provide vital technology in the field to helps them keep our community safe."

T-Mobile first announced a Connecting Heroes initiative in November 2019 and hundreds of agencies have pre-registered for the program. The wireless giant—its merger with Sprint completed in April—can now offer unlimited talk, text and smartphone data service to all public and non-profit first-responder agencies across the U.S. The merger expands T-Mobile's reach to 99% of the nation, the company says.

If all eligible U.S. agencies signed up for T-Mobile's offer, an estimated \$7.7 billion could be funneled back to those department budgets for other needs, the company estimates.

"It kind of blew our mind that in so many communities across the country your local fire, local police and local EMS service were not provided phones or wireless service by their departments," said Mike Katz, executive vice president of T-Mobile for Business.

T-Mobile CEO and president Mike Sievert announced the offer in a video posted on YouTube.

Connectivity for emergency personnel got attention two years ago after a San Francisco Bay area fire department had its data connectivity speeds throttled by Verizon amid wildfires that summer. Verizon said the action was a "customer support mistake."

Wireless communications for emergency personnel is a big business currently dominated by Verizon and AT&T, which three years ago won a government contract to create FirstNet, a communications network exclusively for [first responders](#).

T-Mobile's offer "basically puts a lot of pressure on both AT&T and Verizon, even if those fire and police chiefs and first responders don't take the offer, because you can bet (they) will go to AT&T and Verizon and say, 'Hey, I can get free smartphone data from the T-Mobile people. Why don't you lower the price or I'm leaving,'" said Roger Entner, founder and lead analyst of Recon Analytics.

T-Mobile might also generate revenue from departments who take the offer but would still want to pay for connectivity for computers and other connected devices, he says.

T-Mobile and Sprint agreed to make such offers to gain approval for their merger. "But it really attacks a profitable customer segment where they don't have any business right now. So it's all upside," Entner said.

Free and discounted phones for Memorial Day

In the wake of the pandemic, T-Mobile also is making an offer to help anyone who wants to upgrade or add personal and family smartphones. Beginning this Memorial Day weekend, you can get a free iPhone SE (with bill credits) or get \$500 off a Samsung Galaxy S20 smartphone

Sprint and T-Mobile postpaid customers get the value of the iPhone SE in bill credits or get \$500 off a Samsung GS20 series with a phone trade-in credit and rebate from T-Mobile or bill credits from Spring. Current and new or switching customers can get the deal; they simply must pay tax on the new device. Customers can visit T-Mobile or Sprint stores or order phones on t-mobile.com or sprint.com.

T-Mobile also has a Magenta First Responder connectivity plan for individuals and families, which has 50% savings compared to its standard plan.

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