

# The PoliceChief

THE PROFESSIONAL VOICE OF LAW ENFORCEMENT

MAY 2017

## Officer Safety & Wellness

**Inside:**  
Resiliency  
Operation Thrive  
Civilians in Policing



# Communications Technologies: Interoperability, Security, and Accountability



By Rob Wilson, Founder, Chief Executive Officer, Secured Communications

Despite huge advances in communications technology since the 1990s, the efficient flow of information to and between officers remains one of the largest challenges facing law enforcement agencies. Radio channels get cluttered, large crowds can make it hard to hear dispatches, and unencrypted platforms are vulnerable to penetration. Many public safety organizations—even those from neighboring jurisdictions—still can't communicate with each other during a large-scale response scenario.

At the same time, it's never been easier to exchange rich, multimedia information, using the computers (smartphones) that almost everyone carries around in their pockets. Facing the limitations of their "official" technology, many

officers do use their personal devices to send each other critical investigative or public safety information—thus putting sensitive information on unsecured platforms and outside of public records retention systems. But it works, and it gets the job done, so it continues to take place.

Talk to any chief of police and they'll tell you what they need: a secure, reliable technology to share departmental alerts and information that protects the privacy of citizens and the integrity of investigations. One agency is ahead of the curve in providing its officers exactly that.

## A Party and Events Mecca

The Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department (LVMPD) is one of the largest police agencies in the United States, protecting a resident population of more than 1.5 million and annually ensuring the safety of more than 40 million tourists. The agency handles more than 1.3 million 9-1-1 calls annually.<sup>1</sup>

LVMPD is also responsible for securing some of the year's biggest parties, including the New Year's Eve celebrations on the Las Vegas Strip, which attract more than 300,000 partygoers in and around all the famous casinos. In fact, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security assigned a Level 2 Special Event Assessment Rating (SEAR) to the most recent Las Vegas New Year's Eve celebration—the only U.S. event to merit a higher classification is the Super Bowl.<sup>2</sup>

To aid communication, LVMPD contracted with a company that provides an encrypted messaging platform tailored to the needs of public safety organizations. Officers can communicate one-to-one or in groups using encrypted voice, text, video, and file sharing.

For the New Year's Eve celebration, LVMPD extended the platform to 52 hotels, including Stations Casinos, Caesars, MGM properties, and others. This enabled law enforcement and the highly capable security organizations on these properties to exchange information about potential mobile threats, hotspots, or persons of interest. More than 50,000 encrypted messages were shared during the event.

Sheriff Joe Lombardo, Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department, spoke to the interoperability benefits of a shared platform, "What's unique about this system is its ability to allow

any public safety agency or private company to quickly exchange critical information."<sup>3</sup>

In addition to connecting disparate organizations, visual messaging augments the police radio network, which can be especially difficult to hear during major events. Requests to repeat dispatches clutter the airwaves and crowd out other critical communications.

"Officers have a hard time hearing police radios in large crowds," explains LVMPD Captain Christopher Tomaino. "But they can quickly just reread the text and see exactly what the person meant."<sup>4</sup>

## Potential Concerns of Parallel Systems

As law enforcement agencies have moved to radio systems that encrypt communications, they have faced criticism from some citizen watchdogs who can no longer listen in on what the department is doing. Protecting these communications is a critical public safety issue for officers, who, in some cases, have been compromised by criminals listening in on their coordination and movements. But it's also an issue for both suspects and victims, whose privacy is diminished once their names are transmitted over open radio channels.

However, the public also has a right to know what its law enforcement agencies are doing. That's why LVMPD provides encrypted radios to the local media and is open about its other communications.

As mentioned above, it's already the case that officers in many agencies are already using their personal devices to communicate with each other and using the open texting platforms included with their phones.

"Either you have a formal BYOD (Bring Your Own Device) policy or it just ends up happening anyway," says Chris Perry, Secured Communications' chief operations officer and former director of the Nevada Department of Public Safety. "However, if you run all official communications through a single, encrypted messaging platform, you can firewall the personal and work communications of that officer and ensure all work messaging is in compliance with local, state and federal requirements."<sup>5</sup>

The compartmentalization can be important for maintaining investigational integrity. If an

officer's phone is subpoenaed in a case, there's a strong argument that only the information contained in the official account is relevant. The physical phone then won't even be necessary because the agency can access all those records on the secured servers.

### Drawing Clear Lines of Accountability

At the end of the day, the one thing a law enforcement agency can't outsource is its own accountability. The furor over a so-called backdoor that might allow the federal government to look in on encrypted communications over popular platforms like WhatsApp illustrates the danger of making exceptions to true end-to-end encryption.

"While understanding the public safety appeal of a backdoor, if you're going to include one in the encryption code, you might as well not bother encrypting at all," says Perry. "A backdoor for the good government users is also a backdoor for less savory regimes abroad, as well as hackers anywhere."<sup>6</sup>

What this means is that with a truly encrypted messaging platform only the agency can see its own communications. Therefore, the system used must be set up to meet the record storage and retrieval requirements with which agencies must comply.

"We will accede to competent courts of jurisdiction for any inquiry, but we don't have access to our client's encrypted communications," said Perry. "That's the biggest reason why we sell only to trusted organization vetted by the FBI InfraGard program, because I want to be able to sleep at night knowing who has access to this powerful technology."<sup>7</sup>

### Better Communications, Better Policing

As important as secured communications are, the biggest advantage to modern technology is that it allows for a better flow of information. Trying to communicate a lot of detailed information to someone in the field is hard to do by radio. A smartphone is the easiest way to take a photo of a suspicious person and immediately share it with command staff—but only if there's an official channel that safeguards that information.

In an emergency situation, LVMPD can use their encrypted file sharing communications platform to set up a temporary or permanent connection that allows near-instantaneous coordination across department lines. The Homeland Security Fusion Center used such a platform extensively during the October 2016 U.S. Presidential Debate, when more than 18,000 messages were shared with local, state, and federal agencies.<sup>8</sup>

Interoperability is another big key. Even now, more than 15 years after the 9/11 terrorist attacks that spotlighted the inability of public safety organizations to communicate with each other, interoperability isn't a reality.

"The requirements are out there, but the reality is they are expensive and haven't been built," says Perry. "These modern systems are functional today and cost effective."<sup>9</sup> ♦

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup>Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department, 2015 Annual Report: Decentralization and Community Engagement, [http://www.lvmpd.com/Portals/0/pdf/Annual\\_Report\\_2015.pdf](http://www.lvmpd.com/Portals/0/pdf/Annual_Report_2015.pdf).

<sup>2</sup>"Secured Communications Helps Police Protect 300,000 Revelers at Las Vegas New Year's Eve Celebration," news release, January 11, 2017.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>"Las Vegas Police Using New Smartphone App to Communicate Throughout New Year's Eve," KTNV Channel 13 Las Vegas, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0kw9lJyQK3E&feature=youtu.be>.

<sup>5</sup>Chris Perry (chief operations officer, Secured Communications), interview, November 3, 2016.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Homeland Security Fusion Center (SNCTC) used the platform extensively during the October 2016 Presidential Debate, when more than 18,000 messages were shared with local law enforcement.

<sup>9</sup>Chris Perry, interview, November 3, 2016.

# CALLING ALL HEROES

Applications Now Being Accepted

FOR THE IACP/TARGET  
POLICE OFFICER OF THE YEAR AWARD



Deadline for  
Application:

**FRIDAY  
JULY 14,  
2017**

The IACP/Target Police Officer of the Year Award is an opportunity to recognize individual heroes who work tirelessly every day to make communities around the world safer.

Nominations are now being accepted to honor exceptional achievements in any police endeavor.

Four finalists will be chosen and each will receive:

- Trip to the 2017 IACP Conference and Exposition in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania including airfare, hotel, stipend, and conference registration for nominee and a guest.
- Recognition at the 11<sup>th</sup> Annual IACP Foundation Gala, where one finalist will receive the Police Officer of the Year Award.
- Recognition of Police Officer of the Year at the General Assembly.
- Feature in *Police Chief* magazine.

The IACP is proud to partner with Target to continue this tradition of recognizing the exemplary performance by law enforcement from across the globe.

**Please join us in helping honor and recognize these every day heroes.**

For eligibility information and nomination form, please visit:

[www.theIACP.org/POY](http://www.theIACP.org/POY)

(800) 843-4227, x213 or [Beckmann@theIACP.org](mailto:Beckmann@theIACP.org)