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 that 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.1

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.2

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.”3

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.”4

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.”5

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