

Integration & Convergence

A Cell Phone For Fighting Crime?

Why handheld wireless communication devices should be introduced to the NYPD.



A wanted felon is apprehended during a routine traffic stop. A child is found within hours of being reported missing. A commuter is informed of a possible terrorist attack on the subway. No, these scenarios are not fantasy but across the U.S.A. are very much a reality. As America's security landscape is modernizing, law enforcement agencies from Boston to Indiana are integrating wireless devices into their communication systems.

In August 2007, the Department of Homeland Security announced that New York and northern New Jersey would receive more than US\$50 million in federal anti-terror grants to protect mass transit systems and ports. It is in my opinion that a significant portion of these funds should be allocated to introducing wireless devices to New York City law enforcement.

By Gary Green

Living in a post 9/11 world, officers of the New York City Police Department (NYPD) have consistently been on the frontline of the domestic war on terrorism. In fact, nearly six years after the attacks the New York City (NYC) officers answer calls on countless threats of suspicious activity at transportation ports, airports and commercial office buildings.

In September 2006, New York City announced plans to implement a US\$500 million, high-speed wireless data network to provide police officers, firefighters and other first responders with critical information in an emergency. The Citywide Mobile Wireless Network (CMWN) for public safety personnel is viewed as the most aggressive commitment by any municipality to provide a next-generation public safety network. Specifically designed to inform first responders with high-speed data access to support large file transfers, including federal and state anti-crime and anti-terrorism databases, the CMWN is a big step in the right direction for the city. However, the NYC patrol officers are still out in the field protecting the great city without the most up-to-date handheld wireless technology.

WIRELESS CRIME-FIGHTING

So, as millions of American own cell phones and send more than 18 billion text messages a month, one has to ask themselves: why is the New York City Police Department, the largest police force in the U.S.A., not utilizing discreet and confidential wireless communication as an effective crime-fighting tool?

Instant Communication

The use of handheld technological devices provides the technology needed for officers to communicate in an instantaneous fashion. The use of wireless networking can actually help get these tools into the hands of police officers without having to take much-needed personnel out of the field. It enables officers to share essential data such as criminal background checks, drivers' licenses, vehicle

registrations and emergency situation updates. They can also access and transmit photos, geographical data such as aerial images and real-time video. Pictures are extremely beneficial to police officers responding to a call with a fleeing perpetrator because they are an image of a real person as opposed to descriptions provided by witnesses. Pictures and video taken at a crime scene can also be helpful in managing the appropriate response units and as a result can accelerate the entire investigation process.

Emergency? Just Text the Police



Policeman in vehicle (Photo by Alliance Building Services)

No longer just for teenagers, text messaging provides both the police and public with the ability to anonymously talk to each other in the event of an emergency or an unfolding crisis situation. To receive a text message, the person does not ever have to pick up the phone. While in the field, an officer can be nonchalant while receiving, transmitting or accessing vital crime-fighting information from police databases. Text messaging can also reduce errors caused by garbled or missed voice dispatch messages.

The public can use text messaging to contact police when they feel that they are in a serious situation such as a kidnapping, a robbery on the subway or threat of a terrorist attack. In fact, this form of two-way communication has proven itself to be reliable in past incidents. ABC news recently reported on the story of 2 teens abducted outside of a nightclub in Atlanta. While locked in a trunk of a car, one of the teens sent a text message to his brother, who then called 911. The kidnappers were then located and apprehended, all through the means of a text message.

Text a Tip

This form of crime fighting is rapidly growing in other parts of the nation. The Boston Police Department was the first in America to introduce a texting tip line. Launched in 2005 and entitled 'Text a Tip' the program is designed to enhance communication between police and frequent text message users by enabling subtle and anonymous communication via cell phone texting. In the six days following the program's launch the department received tips from at least 50 witnesses, on alleged crimes ranging from drug dealing to homicide.

E-911

In Indiana, the police department is one of the few in the state to have a working E-911 system. Using this technology, a person can call 911, and via the E-911 tracking system the police are able to track the precise location from where the call was placed. The central idea is to obtain accurate triangulation of cell phone signals in situations where a person is in trouble.

Keeping Campus Safe

Colleges and universities are also beginning to see the hidden value of sending a text message. Recently, when a masked gunman walked into the St. John's campus in Jamaica, Queens, the school's administration put a newly implemented text messaging alert system to the test. Students who had signed up for the pilot program were notified via a text on their individual cell phones of the situation and instructed to stay in their buildings until further notice. Compared to the chaos the college experienced on 9/11, the campus, filled with over 10,000 students, was informed of the gunman and was able to stay calm until the situation was under control. By the end of the day, the number of student subscribers had

propelled to 6,542. Similar systems are currently in use at 70 universities where students have signed up to receive messages via text, fax, email and pager.

NOT WITHOUT PRIVATE SECTOR HELP

Not only is cooperation from the public sector necessary for the smooth transition of wireless technology into the NYPD, but help from the private sector is needed as well. In order for advanced implementation of these devices and programs to take effect and be successful, wireless carriers need to supply their resources, provide research and commit to ensuring that the messaging devices are reliable and delivered in an instantaneous manner. Many city officials are skeptical of this happening. For example, Council Speaker, Christine Quinn has been quoted stating that although the wireless carriers are corporate entities, they have an obligation to the city, in this post 9/11 era, to do their part.

So, as local NYC law enforcement protect New Yorkers, they should be provided with modern handheld wireless technology such as cell phones, Blackberries and pagers. Properly implemented wireless communication systems will not only improve the operational efficiency necessary to guard the public against possible terrorists attacks on the subways, buildings and airports but will also provide an exemplary level of protection.

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