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Sheriff's network taken offline

Software glitch forces return to analog

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Inside Bay Area

REDWOOD CITY — Sheriff's deputies have been unable to use San Mateo County's new \$10 million digital radio network for the past month because of a stubborn computer glitch.

County officials, who blame Motorola for the problem, say it will be at least another month until the network is repaired.

Deputies had been using the new system since March 2004. Although officers complained about spotty coverage, the network generally was running smoothly, said Chris Flatmoe, director of the county's Information Systems Department.

Then in May, Motorola installed a software upgrade intended to fix problems the company said were being experienced by other government agencies.

"I think that the wheels came off when the software patch was applied. I think Motorola let us down," he said.

Deputies began to notice that some of their radio conversations with dispatchers were being cut off, Undersheriff Greg Munks said.

In certain parts of the county, the computer network wasn't recognizing when officers released the button on their radio to indicate they were finished talking. As a result, the entire channel was left open and therefore blocked from use by anyone.

"That was very concerning to us, very concerning to our employees," he said.

Motorola sent a fleet of engineers to fix the problem, but when August rolled around and there was still no solution, the county took drastic action.

The Sheriff's Office switched back to the old analog network, which has been in place since 1979, Flatmoe said.

Last week, Motorola agreed to do what county officials had been asking them to do since July: revert back to the original software that was working fine.

Unfortunately, it will be five to six weeks before that can happen. At the same time, Motorola will continue working on fixing the problem, Flatmoe said.

Mission-critical

Motorola officials said they have been working aggressively with county employees to solve the problem.

"We take this very seriously," spokeswoman Adrienne Dimopoulos said. "These are mission-critical first-responders. We've made this a top priority."

Kathy Wilson, director of quality for Motorola, said the company exhaustively tested the software upgrade before installing it and are investigating what went wrong to make sure it doesn't happen again.

"The critical thing is there was absolutely no compromise of public safety at any time. We've purposely maintained a redundant system," said Richard Gordon, president of the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors.

But that backup is only a couple years away from becoming obsolete itself — one reason it was replaced with digital in the first place.

Because of that, Gordon said Motorola needs to develop a plan to immediately revert to the original software in case something goes wrong.

San Mateo County decided to switch to a digital network in 2000 because the parts were becoming so hard to find and because digital has the ability to send data as well as voice communications, he said.

Other county employees are still able to use the network, including ambulances, public works and parks and recreation, Flatmoe said.

Coverage gaps

In addition to the software glitch, the new digital system has experienced some coverage gaps that the county is working to fix, Flatmoe said.

Although the new digital system offers better overall coverage and quality than the analog, it had unexpected holes in crucial areas, such as inside the Women's Jail and parts of downtown Redwood City and East Palo Alto.

Coastal areas, which always have had reception problems because of the mountainous terrain, also had spotty service.

A \$480,000 signal-booster that will be installed by January on top of the Hall of Justice in Redwood City should fill in most of the gaps, he said. There also are plans to improve coverage on the Coastside.

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