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Cops not ga-ga over radio

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Article Text:

Battle Creek police officers have filed a formal complaint about the department's ongoing problems with a new \$4 million radio system.

"It's pretty bad," Officer Joe Wilder, president of the Police Officers Labor Council, said Tuesday. "There are going to be some bodies we are going to lose."

Wilder said the latest incident was at noon Tuesday when Officer Mark Woolfolk was involved in a foot chase with a suspect, but the 911 dispatch operator did not hear Woolfolk call on the radio.

Wilder and Cmdr. Jackie Hampton said other officers did hear Woolfolk and relayed the information to the dispatcher.

Wilder said he listened to a recording of the incident.

"You hear him call out and then a pause and then you don't hear anything else," he said. "Dispatch doesn't know, and no one can hear him. Other officers picked up his signal that he was in a foot chase."

The 800-megahertz radio system was activated in March, replacing a VHF system for the city, Emmett Township, Springfield and the Calhoun County Sheriff Department. Officials in Springfield and the Sheriff Department said the system is an improvement, but officers in Battle Creek and Emmett

Township say they often don't hear transmissions.

Battle Creek Chief David Headings said portable VHF radios will be issued to officers as a backup system beginning with the midnight shift Tuesday.

"We can't go back fully to the old system, and we have to have the new radios to find out what the problem is," Headings said. "We can't just drop the new system and go back to the old. The 800 MHz is the ongoing thing."

In the grievance dated May 31, Wilder wrote: "Since the induction of the 800 MHz there have been problems with the system not working. Officers have missed radio transmissions from dispatch and vice versa. The current system has shown to be unreliable. This is a serious and dangerous situation for Battle Creek Police Officers not to be able to communicate with other officers and the dispatch center."

Wilder said the grievance must go to Headings and then to city officials, including City Manager Wayne Wiley. If the union is not satisfied, the complaint can be presented to a labor arbitrator, though the process could take six to 12 months.

Hampton, who supervises the patrol division, said he is not sure a grievance can be filed over the issue, under the terms of the contract.

"But we are not upset about their putting in the grievance," Hampton said. "They want to formally channel their frustration, and I certainly understand their frustration. The entire agency is frustrated."

Hampton said the department is returning to the VHF system "so we can sleep at night knowing officers are taking 911 calls."

Battle Creek Assistant City Manager Ken Tsuchiyama said technicians from Motorola have been working on problems locally and with state officials because the system is part of the Michigan Public Safety Communications System, a statewide network of local, state and federal agencies.

"With any system, there are problems. The previous VHF system had some coverage problems, too," he said. "There are some issues with the 800 system we didn't anticipate, and we are continuing to push Motorola, as the vendor, and the state to try to solve the problems."

Motorola technicians were performing several tests on Tuesday, Tsuchiyama said, and he expected at least some of the results today.

"You get more concerned when it's a public safety matter simply because you don't want some malfunction in the system to result in a serious problem," he said. "We have officers who are concerned about not only their safety, but the safety of the citizens they serve, and if they didn't care, I'd worry."

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