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MIAMI BEACH: Miami Beach police forgo new radio system for old
Miami Beach officers are using an analog radio communication system because their digital one
crashed, officials say.

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Article Text:

The Miami Beach Police Department has returned to an older radio system after its newer Motorola digital system crashed recently, leaving officers unable to communicate during an emergency burglary call.

And the police union says officers and citizens are in danger. Under the older analog system, the union says, certain zones in the city had "dead spots" in which officers received no radio signal.

"We're look at suing them. What do we have to do? Wait until someone gets killed?" asked Bobby Jenkins, president of Miami Beach's Fraternal Order of Police.

Implemented in 2003, the system was supposed to allow dispatchers, police and firefighters to communicate on a greater number of secure channels with no dead spots.

But the police union says the digital radio system has been plagued by intermittent failures. The city calls it an isolated problem.

"As a precaution, the police radios switched over to the analog system, which is completely functional," city spokeswoman Nannette Rodriguez said in a statement.

ADDED URGENCY

In light of this week's shootings of Broward sheriff's deputies, the radio issue has taken on added urgency, Jenkins ! said.

On Friday, the union asked the department to allow officers to ride two to a car whenever possible for added security.

On Aug. 5, the system failed for three hours. That's when emergency dispatchers received a call of a man breaking into his ex-girlfriend's home in the 8600 block of Harding Avenue.

"The units heard the call and responded, but could not communicate with the dispatcher," according to a police memo.

Officers instead talked via cellphone. Nevertheless, they arrested Samuel Nieves Vales and charged him with occupied burglary, possession of burglary tools and criminal mischief. He has pleaded not guilty.

Miami Beach says the problem lies with Motorola, which has dispatched technicians and outside experts to analyze the problem and brief the city daily. The city on Friday could not provide how much the system cost taxpayers.

"We're keeping on top of Motorola to make sure this gets fixed," Rodriguez said.

The problem? Motorola executive Marshall Wright says when Miami Beach went digital in 2003, city officials decided to route the new system through four existing microwave dishes originally designed for the old analog system.

Now those dishes are aging -- and the city's landscape has grown around those dishes -- making it difficult to keep uninterrupted radio communications flowing.

Nevertheless, Wright admitted Motorola needs to improve maintenance on Miami Beach's microwave dishes.

"This is a great account and it's part of our duty to keep the system working and in good order," said Wright, the Southeast U.S. sales and service vice president.

UPGRADE PLANNED

Within weeks, Motorola will float plans to Miami Beach to replace the dishes and improve the radio system, Wright said.

Motorola also installed part of the new 911 system for Miami-Dade first responders three years ago.

The system has been criticized for sometimes being unable to track cellphone calls.

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