

ASSIGNMENT 7

Police say digital radio system is flawed

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By Vic Lee

REDWOOD CITY, CA (KGO) -- San Mateo became the first county in the Bay Area to go digital with its communications system. The cost -- tens of millions of dollars. The idea was to help first responders communicate better during emergencies. But officers of one police department tell ABC7 News that the radio system is so flawed it jeopardized their safety.

Eight people were killed and six wounded when a gunman shot office workers as he moved from floor to floor at 101 California St. in San Francisco on July 1, 1993. Officers had trouble talking to each other on their radios inside the high-rise building.

"Most of the calls for service that officers respond to wind up somehow being inside homes or offices or shopping malls, and you need that lifeline," says Hillsborough Police Chief Matt O'Connor.

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The importance of that lifeline was very much on the minds of San Mateo County officials five years ago when they converted their old analog communications network to a state of the art digital radio system. The total cost was \$20 million.

The county communications center handles all emergency calls. It's also the radio system for sheriff's deputies. In fact, all 23 police departments on the Peninsula were asked to convert their analog radios and join the new digital system.

O'Connor heads the Police Chiefs Association's technology committee.

"They look like they're a good system on paper, but when you actually deploy them in the field, they fall grossly short. So with that, there wasn't really a lot of interest to band with the sheriff's department," says Chief O'Connor.

In fact, all but one of the police departments refused to go digital. Only Redwood City was interested.

Carlos Bolanos was police chief at the time. He says his department's radio equipment was getting old.

"It was also an opportunity to hook up with the sheriff's office and get what we considered to be the newest state of the art technology in radio communications," says Carlos Bolanos, Redwood City's former police chief.

So in 2004, Redwood City joined the county's new digital communications system. But after nearly four years, Redwood City Police told the county last August it was bailing out and returning to its old analog radio system.

The police department declined our request for an interview. But officers we spoke with privately say they had serious concerns about the reliability of the system -- so serious that they felt their safety was being jeopardized.

Police sources tell us it's an embarrassing and politically sensitive issue. Former Police Chief Bolanos, who pushed for the conversion, is now undersheriff of San Mateo County. He's still a supporter of the new

radio system.

Redwood City also spent a tidy sum, nearly a million dollars, to go digital.

City Manager Peter Ingram refused our request for an interview, saying "its not in our interest." But at our request, Ingram did send us a fax explaining why the city bailed out. He says, "issues include an unacceptable level of audio distortion, the inability for officers to interrupt ongoing radio traffic with more urgent radio traffic and a lag time from depressing the mic button to when a user can begin transmitting."

These were the same kinds of problems voiced by officers who spoke with us off the record. Among other shortfalls, spotty signal coverage.

Chief O'Connor has heard the same complaints, including that same problem police had at 101 California.

"There's problems when officers go into buildings or into office settings. The reception of the transmission is not as good as analog," says Chief O'Connor.

George Hughes is a communications consultant for several companies in the Bay Area.

"They're still having major coverage area gaps in the coastal area of the county, in the valleys and stuff like that," says Hughes. "They're better off using a cell phone or a Nextel at that point which is what I understand a lot of the officers have reverted to."

"There's always going to be some coverage holes," says Chris Flatmoe who heads San Mateo County's I.T. Department. "But it's very, very rare. By and large, those spots are very small and they're very well known."

Flatmoe admits the new system had problems at the outset -- not enough repeater sites for hard to reach areas of the county and a defective software upgrade two years ago. But Flatmoe says those problems have now been fixed.

"Subsequent to stabilizing the system and making a few changes to the system, I stopped hearing about such problems and I have not heard about any problems in the past two years," says Flatmoe.

As for Redwood City Police, Flatmoe believes they had a harder time adjusting to a new system which had flaws at the beginning.

"We got past those issues, but it could be the case that some of the folks in the Redwood City Police Department couldn't get past those early confidence concerns," says Flatmoe.

We asked Undersheriff Bolanos if he feels confident about this digital system. He replied, "absolutely."

The sheriff's office is the only law enforcement agency on the county's digital system. So we wanted to find out about how deputies felt about the system when they're out on the streets, but the San Mateo County Sheriff's Deputies Association did not return our numerous calls.

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