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Police Back Online After Radio System Outage

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It happened again. The digital radio system Philadelphia police officers rely on to communicate with dispatchers and each other crashed Tuesday night. Not only that, back-up after back-up failed as well. This isn't the first time the multi-million-dollar Motorola system has gone on the fritz. It wasn't even the fifth time. By police union estimates, the Motorola system, which the city paid \$52 million for, has broken down at least 14 times. City officials say that's not acceptable, because it puts cops in potential danger, as well as the public.



The system went down Tuesday night for about an hour, forcing officers to communicate by cell phone only.

A police radio is an essential piece of equipment for any cop, arguably just as important as a gun and a badge. Police radios are lifelines for officers in trouble. So when the system crashed Tuesday night, it could have been disastrous. John McNesby, the president of the Fraternal Order of Police, told Fox 29, "It only takes five seconds for an officer to lose their life out there." But the radio breakdown lasted far longer than that. For more than 45 minutes, the primary communications system for hundreds of police officers across the city did not work.

"Two minutes down time is not acceptable to me," Philadelphia Police Commissioner Charles Ramsey told reporters at police headquarters Wednesday morning. "It's totally unacceptable and Motorola's got to fix it, period. We need 100 percent reliability."

City officials say the problems began Monday, when a lightning bolt apparently hit a transmission tower in Roxborough. Motorola staffers made repairs Tuesday morning. But hours later, a controller at the site that enables the communications system to operate failed, and then the backup failed. At 9:37 Tuesday night, dispatchers lost communication with police officers, just as the commissioner himself was calling in for help at a street fight. And then another backup failed. Dispatchers and officers finally resorted to plan "D"-- mobile data terminals, or MDT's, in patrol cars. "Usually you would like to say if you had two or three backups that would be enough," Everett Gillison, the deputy mayor for public safety explained. "Right now we have four, and maybe have to design a fifth. That's unacceptable."

Motorola technicians worked through the night to make repairs. But this isn't the first time their technology has failed Philadelphia. Cops have been complaining about the radio system for years. Wednesday, city officials made clear: Motorola is now on a short leash. "Motorola has a very short period of time to make it right, period," Gillison insisted.

Motorola insists it made the necessary repairs, and the system will now function without interruption. But the company has promised that before. The city has few options. It can terminate its contract with Motorola. But finding and implementing a new system will take a lot of time. So for now, Philadelphia is stuck with its very problematic radio system.

By Claudia Gomez

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