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# Police-radio failure prompts tough talk from Ramsey

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It was always a matter of when, not if.

The city's \$62 million Motorola radio system had the kind of spectacular crash on Tuesday night that critics have warned about for years.

The main system and three backup systems went down for almost an hour when dozens of cops tried to get on the air at the same time and respond to an assist call from Police Commissioner Charles H. Ramsey, who was at the scene of a wild North Philly brawl.

Yesterday, Ramsey and other city officials uttered the words opponents of the 800-megahertz digital system have longed to hear.

"Two minutes of down time is not acceptable. Motorola's got to fix it, period," Ramsey said at a news conference. "There's no point in having a backup if the backup doesn't work. We're just very fortunate we didn't have anything bad happen."

Everett Gillison, the city's deputy mayor for public safety, said the incident proved the need for a new emergency communications system.

"What is painfully obvious is that the system we have and what happened is unacceptable. It is something we intend not to happen again," Gillison said. "Motorola has a very short period of time to make it right."

The trouble started at 9:36 p.m. Tuesday, when Ramsey radioed for an assist after he and his driver came upon two drunks fighting outside a bar on Cumberland and Cleveland streets.

Dozens of cops tried to get on the air and respond to the call, causing a computerized controller and an electronic card to fritz out at a communications

tower on Domino Lane in Roxborough, said Chief Inspector Michael Feeney.

The same tower was struck by lightning on Monday, causing a brief crash.

"It just took the whole system down. That's the first time the backup systems have gone down, too," said Feeney, who heads the police department's Information Technology and Communication Services Bureau.

The 9-1-1 system was unaffected, so people were still able to call in with emergencies.

But cops on the streets had to pair up in patrol cars and rely on a fourth backup system that allowed them to communicate on just three of the 25 police frequencies that are normally available, Ramsey said.

Officers will continue to ride around two-to-a-car throughout their shifts until further notice, Ramsey said.

"The system is stable now," Feeney said. "But nobody from Motorola is leaving here until we get some straight answers."

The tough talk from Ramsey, Feeney and Gillison yesterday signified a remarkable shift in the city's attitude toward Motorola's system, which has been plagued with reliability problems since the city began using it in 2002.

The city stood by Motorola when firefighter Leon Phipps was trapped in a West Philly rowhouse blaze in April 2004 and couldn't get help because the emergency button on his radio didn't work.

Phipps, who suffered career-ending injuries in the fire, later received a settlement from Motorola.

The city continued to stick with Motorola even when Fire Capt. John Taylor and firefighter Rey Rubio died in a Port Richmond fire in August 2004, after Taylor's radio malfunctioned when he tried to get help. Taylor and Rubio's families have filed suit against Motorola.

In April, the *Daily News* detailed 14 malfunctions and crashes the radio system had experienced since 2005, the same year the city claimed to have worked out most of the system's bugs.

But Frank Punzo, the deputy commissioner of the Department of Public Property, told the *Daily News* at the time that the city didn't have enough money to buy a new radio system from a different company.

Instead, the city was looking at giving Motorola a \$13 million contract to upgrade the current system. Officials said yesterday the upgrade would now cost an estimated \$30 million.

"We would be better off going to a department store and buying our guys little

walkie-talkies," said FOP president John McNesby.

Councilman Frank Rizzo, who co-sponsored hearings on the system in 2004, said he will call for more hearings in September.

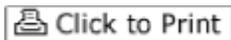
"The *Daily News* stories have been very helpful in detailing some of the issues we have with a radio system that can walk, but can't run," Rizzo said.

"What good is a public-safety system if it fails when you push it to the max?" \*

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