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Philadelphia Police: Radio Failure 'Unacceptable'

PHILADELPHIA (CBS 3) — Police and public safety officials held a news conference to discuss Tuesday evening's tense moments when a majority of the Philadelphia police force lost radio communications for nearly an hour.

The system and three back-up systems failed at about 9:36 p.m. Tuesday when Philadelphia Police Commissioner Charles Ramsey happened upon a large street fight and called for an assist.

Deputy Mayor for Public Safety Everett Gillison said when the system went down, 911 deployed several back up systems that failed. The fourth back-up system worked.

While police were at a level four of the back-up system, the public was still able to call 911 and police utilized three bands that remained in use as their primary means of communication, along with cell phones.

"Three bands remained so the entire system did not fail; a majority of it failed," Gillison said. "Officers used those bands to communicate and remain in contact with headquarters and the 911 systems."

Officers were also paired to work with partners.

At 10:30 p.m. normal radio broadcast was back up and working, but officers were ordered to remain two to a car. Gillison said that order will remain in effect until Motorola, the company that operates the systems, tests and understands the exact cause of the failures and determines the system is working as it should.

Gillison said they believe the radio failure was the direct result of a lightning strike to their Domino Lane controller site on Monday which Motorola crews had performed maintenance to at 10 a.m. Tuesday. Regardless, authorities say, the failure should not have happened.

"We need 100 percent reliability, nothing short of that is acceptable," said Police Commissioner Ramsey.

Motorola spokesperson Paula Thornton Greear released the following statement:

Motorola is dedicated is to helping protect first responders and the communities they serve. Upon learning of this incident, Motorola took immediate steps to resolve the matter. The radio system was down for approximately 45 minutes and was restored Tuesday night. Motorola has conducted a root cause analysis and has a firm understanding of what caused the incident. We have contacted city officials and Commissioner Ramsey to discuss this matter and the solution that is now in place to ensure that the system continues to function without interruption.

This was not the first time there have been problems with the radios. According to published records, the system has failed more than a dozen times since 2005. In some of those cases, city officials blamed the failures on human error.

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