



04/09/2008

Philly's police radio system fails at crucial times

By David Gambacorta
The Philadelphia Daily News

PHILADELPHIA - A young crack dealer unleashed a torrent of bullets from the dry-rotted window of his East Frankford flophouse, dropping two undercover narcotics cops in seconds.

On the bitterly cold night of Nov. 13, 2007, a veteran Highway Patrol officer was the first to reach one of the shot cops, who had a bullet lodged in his hip.

For 30 nerve-wracking minutes, he used his Motorola police radio to try to talk to other officers while he transported the wounded cop.

Silence.

For 15 minutes, another cop racing from North Philadelphia to the shooting scene used her radio to find out what was going on.

Silence.

Finally, she used her cell phone.

The Daily News found that the radio problems in East Frankford that night were among more than a dozen other malfunctions, mix-ups and crashes that have occurred with the Motorola system since 2005 — the same year that city officials declared that they had fixed most problems with the \$62 million radio system.

Critics say that the system is still more complicated than firefighters and cops need it to be, and remains a serious liability in times of crisis.

Two years ago, in one of the most serious malfunctions, the Police Department had to rely on a backup system for three days, and kept officers in two-car teams because of safety concerns.

Problems continued as recently as March 15, when screeching noises were heard on radios in North Philadelphia and cops in the Northeast couldn't communicate with police dispatchers, police officials said.

Other critics say that the city has failed to act on several key recommendations that were included in a 2005 audit of the Motorola system done by the City Controller's Office.

"We literally have several binders and folders full of information about reported radio problems," said John McGrody, a Fraternal Order of Police vice president who investigates cops' complaints about the system.

"The bottom line is that the rank-and-file still have no confidence in the system. It's their main lifeline out there if they get in trouble, but you know what? Help can't arrive if the radios don't work. Someone's going

to get hurt."

A rocky history

For more than three decades, police and firefighters in Philadelphia had relied on an analog radio system maintained by the city.

By the mid-1990s, city officials felt that the system was outdated, so they solicited proposals on a more modern radio system from Motorola, Ericsson-GE Corp. and E.F. Johnson. The city signed a contract with Motorola in 1999.

Three years later, cops and firefighters officially started using Motorola's 800-megahertz digital system, which came with a \$54.8 million price tag that later rose to \$62 million.

Motorola's system promised to be better in almost every way imaginable, offering, among other things:

- Citywide coverage for portable radios carried by cops and firefighters.
- Encryption technology that allowed cops and firefighters to talk on channels that criminals couldn't eavesdrop on.
- Better radio coverage inside buildings.
- Interoperability, a mechanism that would allow cops and firefighters to communicate directly with one another in event of a disaster.

But complaints arose immediately from cops and firefighters on the street.

The digital system, which used a computerized controller to assign talk space to users as it became available, had a major downside: If a bunch of cops or firefighters all tried to use their radios at the same time during an emergency, they heard busy signals, called "bonks."

The radios came with emergency buttons that were supposed to give cops or firefighters 10 seconds of clear air on all nearby radios, creating priority over all other transmissions.

But the emergency buttons were flawed, too. When firefighter Leon Phipps was trapped in a West Philadelphia house fire in April 2004, his emergency button didn't work when he screamed for help, he claimed afterward. Phipps, 53, suffered career-ending injuries in the blaze, and Motorola eventually settled a lawsuit with him.

In August 2004, Capt. John Taylor, 53, and firefighter Rey Rubio, 42, died in the basement of a Port Richmond rowhouse fire. Taylor's radio malfunctioned when he tried to call for help, according to a lawsuit that both men's families filed against Motorola in 2006.

The problems triggered City Council hearings, held in summer and fall of 2004. Officials found that cell-phone signals were blocking radio transmissions at 56 locations across the city because the cell signals were also operating on the 800-megahertz frequency.

City officials said that Nextel Communications Inc. was found to be the biggest commercial user of that frequency. Nextel was supposed to change frequencies beginning in 2005 — eliminating many busy signals — but the process has moved slowly.

"It's taking a lot of time. They're tough negotiators," said Frank Punzo, deputy commissioner of the Department of Public Property.

But Punzo noted that the city has successfully worked with Nextel to minimize cell-phone interference. "We're lucky if we hear of two dead spots a month, if that many," he said.

Motorola also altered a toggle knob on the portable radios that had caused police and firefighters to end up on the wrong channel when they pressed the emergency button.

But the criticism didn't stop there.

'A higher failure rate'

Philadelphia police officers had nowhere near the amount of training on the new radio system that was needed, causing extra confusion, according to the 2005 audit.

The study, done by then-City Controller Jonathan Sidel, on the heels of the Council hearings, found that police officers only watched a 20-minute video about the new system, compared to the three hours of training recommended by Motorola.

"There was some validity to that," Police Communications Chief Inspector Michael Feeney said recently. "The problem is that it's logistically impossible to train 6,000 people who are never together at one time."

Police brass initially focused on training supervisors, who were supposed to then train their officers. But not all supervisors followed through.

In light of the controller's report, Feeney said, cops were offered individual training on the system.

"Believe me, I'm not trying to say that it was perfect, because it wasn't," he said. "If we had it to do over again, we would have done more training."

The audit also recommended that the city purchase portable repeater systems that could amplify radio signals for stronger reception in buildings and below ground - a critical issue to firefighters or cops who might become trapped or hurt in basements, like the late Capt. John Taylor and Rey Rubio.

Digital repeaters that would be compatible with Motorola's digital radio system were going to be available by 2006, the report said.

"Yet here we are, three years later. We still have problems with reliability, and the city hasn't implemented the recommendations the controller's office made," said Dave Kearney, a firefighter and recording secretary for firefighters' union Local 22.

Councilman Frank Rizzo, who co-sponsored the '04 hearings, said last week that he would "like to do legislation that would require repeaters to be put in all of the new high-rise construction projects in the city to support fire and police communications."

Punzo, though, said the digital repeaters that are on the market won't work on the city's 800- megahertz system.

The controller's report surprisingly found that there was no documentation to suggest that city officials — before shelling out \$54 million — had bothered to verify the effectiveness of Motorola's system by visiting other big cities that used it.

When Fire Department officials in Phoenix, Ariz., field-tested Motorola's system for eight weeks in 2004, they found that their old analog system held up better during emergencies.

The Motorola "digital ... radios had a higher failure rate" and did not meet fire service standards, the Arizona study said.

"Look, we're using a system that is not as reliable as the one we had in place," Kearney said. "Yeah, it has a lot more bells and whistles, but it's only good when it works."

'Sick and tired'

The most troubling incidents with the Motorola system over the past few years have involved the Philadelphia Police Department.

"Every cop in the street has a question in his or her mind about whether the radios will work or not when they really need it to," said the FOP's McGrody.

The two undercover narcotics cops were wounded on Orthodox Street near Josephine in East Frankford on Nov. 13, less than two weeks after Officer Chuck Cassidy was fatally shot interrupting a robbery in West Oak Lane.

"Then those two officers were shot, and we had a female officer who was trying to get out there from North Philadelphia," McGrody said.

"For 10 to 15 minutes, she couldn't broadcast on her radio. She had to use her cell phone twice to call other officers to find out what was going on out there."

At the shooting scene, the veteran Highway Patrol officer had already reached one of the wounded cops and planned to rush him to nearby Frankford Hospital-Torresdale.

"For 30 minutes, during an extremely critical time, he was unable to get through," McGrody said, the frustration growing in his voice.

"At that time, most of us were at Temple University Hospital, where the other officer had been taken. We knew we had another shot cop, but we had no idea where he was because that radio malfunctioned."

When the Daily News told Councilman Rizzo about the incident recently, he fumed.

"If we identify that there are more issues that are developing, we'll do a hearing again and get everybody back in the room," Rizzo said.

Punzo sent Rizzo an explanatory letter that included an analysis of the incident written by Motorola. Both notes said the problems had been caused by human error because nothing was wrong with the radio.

Punzo's note also stated that officers mistakenly change channels on their radios if they think it will enable them to be heard. "This just gets them lost in the system and contributes to their feelings of not being heard."

McGrody got angry when advised of Punzo's note to Rizzo.

"I am sick and tired of this pattern of trying to blame officers for radio malfunctions," McGrody said.

"It's actually insulting to continually blame the problems on firefighters and cops."

Deputy Police Commissioner Jack Gaittens insisted that the system functions well overall.

"People are still dissatisfied," Gaittens said, "but in terms of functionality, the system's OK. It's subject to mechanical breakdown, but we stay on top of Motorola.

"This is public safety, and people's lives depend on it."

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