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Calling all cars? Not in the city

\$17.5 million police radio system has glitches despite years of work

By [Ryan Haggerty](#) of the Journal Sentinel

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A digital radio system that has cost the Milwaukee Police Department about \$17.5 million since 2003 still is not fully operational, and the system's dispatch consoles - which cost a total of \$1.9 million and were installed in 2004 - are becoming obsolete and must be replaced by 2012, according to department and city officials.

This week, the system's manufacturer requested an extension until March to try to modify the consoles so they will continue to be compatible with the radios until 2012, when the vendor that services the consoles will no longer provide support for them, according to officials with the Police Department and the radio system's manufacturer.

The radio system initially was expected to cost \$14.9 million and be operational by May 2005, said Rhonda U. Kelsey, Milwaukee's purchasing director.

The glitch with the consoles was discovered this fall and is the latest in a series of problems that have plagued the radio system. Dead spots and other technical issues have required extensive troubleshooting, and police and city officials have expressed frustration with the project's cost and timetable.

Florida-based Harris Corp., which bought the radio system's manufacturer this year, said in an e-mailed statement that it is committed to making the system work. The company is "working closely with MPD to develop the best path forward for replacing the consoles over time," according to the statement.

All the department's vehicles have been equipped with the radios, and almost all officers are using the system's hand-held radios, according to the company's statement. Data has been transmitted through the system since 2005, according to city documents.

But the conversion to a completely digital system is not yet complete, and officers interviewed for this story said the radios presented serious problems when they were distributed.

Some officers, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they are not authorized to speak with the media, said they occasionally could not hear other officers' transmissions, including calls for backup.

An officer's radio is just as important as a gun or bulletproof vest, said John Balcerzak, president of the Milwaukee Police Association.

"When you're depending upon that radio as your lifeline to the dispatcher and your fellow officers and emergency services for citizens, it's that important," Balcerzak said.

City not the first

Milwaukee's Police Department is not the first client to have major problems with this system, known as OpenSky.

In January, New York state [terminated](#) its \$2 billion contract with OpenSky's manufacturer, formerly known as M/A-COM and then Tyco Electronics Wireless Systems. The company had been hired to build a statewide wireless emergency communications network.

The state claimed the company failed to fix 15 of 19 deficiencies the state had identified, including dead spots and failures of the radios' emergency buttons, according to a summary of the situation prepared by Milwaukee officials.

The system's manufacturer then sued New York, claiming the state had canceled the contract because of political and financial pressure, the summary says.

Harris Corp. did not purchase the New York contract when it bought OpenSky's manufacturer.

During an October hearing before the Common Council's Finance and Personnel Committee, Milwaukee Police Chief Edward A. Flynn said the department had contacted a consulting company about reviewing the purchase and implementation of the radio system, especially the need to replace the dispatch consoles, which were one of the first major purchases the department made when beginning to install OpenSky.

"One of the reasons we reached out to this consultant is to take a good hard look at our contracts and just see what our options are with these people, because I just have to feel there's something wrong with this, that we would get that big front-end investment and then not have a radio system for seven years and then have to start over again," Flynn said.

Problems from the get-go

Officers had trouble with voice transmissions on the radios from the start, city documents show.

Digital portable radios were first given to District 3 officers in October 2008 as part of a pilot program, but the radios were pulled off the streets temporarily after a few weeks because of "severe technical problems and apparent inadequate officer training," according to a summary of the Police Department's 2010 budget.

Some of the problems officers have experienced can be attributed to officers not being familiar with the new equipment, or even intentionally cutting off other officers' transmissions, said Balcerzak, president of the officers' union.

The department provided extensive training to 30 officers so those officers could help train others in the department, according to the budget summary.

The problems with the portable radios during the pilot program were addressed, and now the city's seven police districts have the digital portable radios, which should have allowed the department to begin full-scale testing of the digital system this month, according to city documents.

A Harris employee has been working with the department full-time since February, and progress was being made, Flynn told the Finance and Personnel Committee last month.

The problem with the dispatch consoles, however, was discovered this fall when the department began to shift from its old analog radio system to the digital system, Flynn told the committee.

Referring to the original purchase, Flynn said: "My anger right now, as I look at how this contract has been managed, is that we could somehow get bamboozled into buying consoles before we had an operational system.

"This latest glitch is a real heartbreaker, and it's also infuriating."

"My No. 1 priority is the safety of our officers, and getting this system working is vital to public safety and officer safety," Flynn said in a statement. "Additionally, \$17.5 million in taxpayer money has been spent on this system; that means questioning every further expense and demanding strict accountability for performance."

Ald. Bob Donovan, chairman of the Common Council's Public Safety Committee, said he is hoping to meet soon with representatives from Harris.

"We were promised the moon, and I think we all fell for it," Donovan said.



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