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NEWS LOCAL

Police radios failing



By Grant LaFleche, The Standard
Thursday, June 14, 2012 8:47:14 EDT PM



ST. CATHARINES - If there is such a thing as a police officer's nightmare, it could be facing danger and attempting to call for backup, only to find that the radio is dead.

It's not a hypothetical situation right now for Niagara Regional Police officers. It's a potential reality as the service's communications system has been failing for weeks.

The periodic failure of NRP communications technology is so serious that Ontario's Ministry of Labour has ordered the service to identify the problem and put together an action plan to fix it by June 22. The department is feverishly looking for an interim solution it can implement in the next few days.

"If the radio system completely fails, it's a very, very serious safety issue for our officers and for the public," said Acting Chief Joe Matthews. "Now, we have redundant backup systems that have worked the majority of the time, but yes, if the system fails, it's very serious."

For police officers, having contact with each other and NRP dispatchers is critical. It's how they call for backup, request other emergency services attend a call and how dispatchers know where the officers are. Where once the system was just used for voice communications, now it also sends data from the laptop computer in an officer's car to police servers. Officers can get information about suspects, investigate licence plates and get other critical data at the touch of a button.

A few weeks ago, the system began to have serious problems, says Paul DiSimoni, president of the Niagara Region Police Association, the union that represents NRP officers and civilian staff.

"It started with the laptops," DiSimoni said. "But it reached the point over the last two or three weeks when the system just isn't

working at all. And we never know when it will fail.”

DiSimoni said when the system stops working, neither the officer on the road nor the dispatcher is immediately aware of the problem. The system appears to be working, but voice transmissions and data to laptops simply don't get through.

“It can be something like a dispatcher will say, ‘Car 54 where are you?’ and the officer will say, ‘This is Car 54,’ but the dispatcher will never hear that,” he said.

The problem is worse in the region's outlying areas than it is in the cities, DiSimoni said.

Matthews said the service isn't sure what is wrong with the system or why it seems to randomly fail.

“We are currently trying to figure out what is going on,” he said.

DiSimoni said given the potential danger a dead radio can put an officer in, the association had serious concerns with the amount of time it was taking to fix the system. So the union contacted the Ministry of Labour.

“We are just very disappointed it reached a point where we had to contact the ministry,” he said.

A ministry investigator visited the NRP on June 11 and issued a report that said the communications system appears to be unable to handle the demands being placed on it.

The Motorola digital communications system the NRP uses replaced an older, analog radio system. Over the last 10 years, it has been upgraded several times, most recently with the replacement of phone lines to send data with an Internet protocol system, the report says. That change required new hardware to be installed.

“The employer reports that this hardware solution called an FPS Box appears to be creating the communications outages. When the FPS Box experiences a failure it stops communicating with the network until it is physically rebooted,” the report says. “The FPS Box can create both a voice and data communications failure depending upon the type of communication tower it is mounted on.”

The report goes on to say the failures are unpredictable.

The Ministry of Labour issued two orders to the NRP. The first is that the NRP has to take every “precaution reasonable in the circumstances for the protection of workers from the hazards associated with failures of the voice and data communications systems.”

The ministry also ordered the NRP to complete a plan that identifies the problems and how they will be solved in the short, medium and long term. The service has until June 22 to comply.

Matthews said while the service tries to find out why the system is failing, an interim solution is being worked out, likely involving cellphones.

“There are costs we are trying to determine as well as logistical issues. We have to determine how the cellular phones can be integrated into our system, if at all,” he said.

DiSimoni said the NRPA suggested cellphones as a short-term solution, but balked at any idea that officers use their personal phones.

Whenever someone is hurt or killed in an incident involving police, the provincial Special Investigations Unit is brought in. Should that happen while the system is down and an officer is using his or her private cellphone, that phone could become evidence in an SIU investigation.

“That raises all kinds of privacy concerns,” DiSimoni said, adding the NRP is insisting officers use service- provided phones in the interim.

Matthews said what a long-term solution will look like is not clear yet. The service wasn't planning to replace the existing system until 2015. He said there are funds for that in the NRP capital budget, but whether the system needs to be replaced completely sooner rather than later won't be known until engineers are finished their examination of the system.

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Princeton3ca

How is it that some municipalities (e.g. Durham and York regions) can get cool toys like helicopters for their police departments (so they can catch weekend bar-goers peeing in parking lots--no kidding!) and these poor saps in Niagara can't even get a working radio system? I've got some string and old soup cans.....free to needy cops. Also, it's Yard Sale season, you can pick up a lot of vintage 70's CB Radios. Perhaps if NRP put out a distress call (well, an ad in the paper) they could get enough CB's for the squad.



Hamilton Tigers

I think the problem with the NRP is that they have a huge area to cover vs. the population of other areas (Peel, York, Durham, Toronto) and can't get the toys due to the low tax base here. As well, our area has a lot of policing for tourists that needs to be covered - not much leftover for toys!



Princeton3ca

You're probably right (re: the low tax base thing). Sad though. It's like Mayberry. ("Sarah, get me Deputy Fyfe"!) Couldn't their MPP's (Crater and Hudat) get the Province to kick in a few \$\$\$? I hope the Niagara Parks Police have good radios. They'll need 'em if Wallenda chickens out tonight (or falls off, EESHK)! That crowd will go wild.



Hamilton Tigers

Hopefully the NY State Police have better radios and he falls on their side!



Sa Ti

Niagara police union president Paul DiSimoni saying; "We are looking for (a wage increase) that is in line with other services our size. ... We are not looking to be the highest paid service in Ontario, but we want to keep what we have," Timms said a first-class police constable making about \$83,000 in Niagara is not making all that much less (about \$600 in total) than his or her counterpart in Toronto under the current contract.

Another St. Catharines regional councillor, Andy Petrowski, read from an editorial in the March 22 edition of The Globe and Mail on policing costs.

Given the financial pressures on Canadian cities caused by rising police budgets, municipalities and police leaders need to adapt law-enforcement delivery to a new era. Otherwise, the price of law and order will become unsustainable," reads the Globe editorial.

In Niagara, Ontario, the operating budget for the police department has increased significantly over the past decade and a half, and usually well above the average increases for other regional government departments. More than 90 per cent of Niagara Regional Police's operating budgets goes to wages and benefits, leaving little left for everything else.

The projected 2012 net operating budget for the Niagara Regional Police is \$126.9 million the department needs.

In a report sent to regional council's corporate services committee, the harmonized sales tax was singled out as a hurdle for the project, which has a cost ceiling of \$83 million for new police building Niagara Falls. But that was set before the HST came into existence, ultimately leading to a \$1.4-million fiscal hit nicked out of that figure.

Last summer NRPS were caught cheating on promotion exams. To get ahead in the NRPS, one must write More tickets and make more arrests. to justify his/her job by getting a statistic and fines. Futhermore, the officer gets a promotion exam opportunity which equals salary increase paid from by tax hearty residences of Niagara. For Example: Thorold funeral director worries drivers in area funeral processions might now be targeted by police after a mourner was charged with running a red light and handed a \$350 ticket while on the way to a burial.

Niagara Region Police Association was responding to was issued to the last car in a funeral procession was ticketed for running a red light:

"Officers have advised (NRPA president Paul) DiSimoni that they do not feel that any other options, including warnings, are available to them," the release said. "Officers, who have found themselves subject to the threat of discipline, transfers and loss of job enhancement opportunities, feel pressured to always issue tickets."

NRP response to the ticket:"The way we have worded it to our officers is to say that in the course of a 12-hour shift, it is hard to believe you wouldn't see an infraction, and when they do, they are expected to issue a ticket," NRP Deputy Chief Joe Matthews said.

The national crime rate has been falling steadily for the past 20 years and is now at its lowest level since 1973.

Canadian police services reported nearly 2.1 million Criminal Code incidents (excluding traffic) last year, about 77,000 fewer than in 2009.

Average age in Canada 44 plus.

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