

Help could be slow to arrive for cops in need

Washington's new system complicates radio communications

By NATALIE ST. JOHN
EO Media Group

LONG BEACH, Wash. — In rural Pacific and Wahkiakum counties, there are frequent occasions when a very small group of cops from a mix of city, county and state agencies are on duty. When a call goes sideways, a major crime occurs, or a calamity happens, their differing jurisdictions and specialties take a back seat — they depend on each other.

Recently, in response to a mandate from the Federal Communications Commission, the Washington State Patrol changed the radio communications equipment that state police and dispatchers use, switching from an analog "wideband" system to a digital "narrowband" system. The narrowband system, known commonly as "P25," has the potential to be more reliable, and make it easier for dispatchers to locate officers.

However, local agencies are still using the older analog system. When the new technology went live in late April, officers at state agencies like Department of Fish and Wildlife, State Patrol and State Parks could still hear what was going on with local cops, but the local cops could no longer hear them.

Some cops, including Pacific County Sheriff Scott Johnson, are concerned that this communication gap could place officers at greater risk. In a post on the Sheriff's Office Facebook page, Johnson said a traffic stop last week that turned ugly highlights the flaws of the new system.

"Those of you that liked listening to them on your scanners may have noticed you can no longer hear WSP. Worse yet, neither can law enforcement officers from other agencies, including ours. This creates serious safety issues for the officers on the street," Johnson wrote.



Photo by Bluedisk at English Wikipedia

Washington state agencies including the State Patrol recently switched to a new "narrowband" communication system that is incompatible with local law enforcement dispatch services in Pacific County.

Smaller slices of pie

Radio communications are the heart of any emergency response system. Dispatchers use dedicated radio channels to relay information between callers and agencies, and monitor the status of responders. On-duty cops are also constantly monitoring the chatter on their radios, listening for any indication that another officer is in need of backup.

There is a finite amount of radio space available, however, and the country's airwaves have gotten very crowded. About a decade ago, the FCC decided to free up more space.

Picture a large group of hungry people, each clamoring for a piece of pie that has been cut into just six portions. Recognizing that there wasn't enough pie to feed everyone — and that even smaller slices of pie would sell for a handsome price — the FCC decided to cut each of those slices in half. The FCC ordered most public safety agencies to switch from broad, 25 kHz-wide channels, to 12.5 kHz "narrowband" channels by 2013. According to a publication from the National Institute of Justice, a second phase could eventually cut each of those frequencies in half again, to 6.25 kHz.

Costly upgrade

Purchasing and installing narrowband-compatible systems has proven hugely complicated and expensive. Deadlines for many large agencies

have been repeatedly moved back, and smaller agencies have avoided making the switch.

Converting the Pacific County Sheriff's Office to narrowband would cost about \$3,000 per radio, Sheriff Johnson said in an interview. Further complicating matters, police cars generally need two radios to hear all the activity in their region, because some agencies use "Very High Frequency" systems, while others use "Ultra-High Frequency" systems.

"We would be investing thousands of dollars per car in our secondary radio. We don't have anywhere near close to enough money to do that," Johnson said, adding that the county would also have to upgrade dispatchers' equipment, at a cost of about \$4,500 per location.

Starting around 2011, Washington State Patrol signed a contract with Motorola, purchasing about 5,000 new personal and car radios from the company, according to a 2013 FCC document. State Patrol also had to install new radio towers in some areas, including Pacific County, as well as new equipment at dispatch stations. In all, the project cost about \$41 million, according to a 2013 Vancouver Columbian article. It took several more years to get every patrol district in the state ready to use P25.

"There was a study for the area to see what coverage was here," Sgt. Bradford Moon, supervisor of State Patrol's Naselle Detachment,

explained. "It showed that there were some pretty big gaps in our coverage. As part of that, our captain didn't sign over until we could improve some things."

New equipment, mixed results

Moon said going to P25 boosted reception in some places where it was very spotty before, and that communications among state cops and dispatchers have stayed the same or even improved.

With P25, State Patrol can encrypt transmissions, although patrol leaders have told other media outlets they would do so only rarely. Moon said he does not think there has been any deliberate effort to keep citizens or other cops from listening — others just don't yet have the equipment required to scan State Patrol's frequency.

"I could be calling assistance on this stop, and a deputy on the corner would have to wait until my dispatch calls his dispatch and asks for assistance," Moon said. "That was the incident the other night — I had a trooper asking for backup, and (local agency officers) didn't know about it until it was relayed through the dispatch centers."

Traffic stop gone wrong

A surprising number of cops say that pulling people over is the most nerve-racking part of their job.

"Every time you contact a car, you don't know who you're contacting, or what they might have in their history," Moon explained. "Sometimes it's a grandma. Sometimes it's a guy wanted for multiple crimes. You never know."

Last week, Trooper Chris Stell was patrolling near Naselle, when he saw a truck with a burned-out headlight around 8 p.m. He pulled the driver over. According to Stell's probable cause statement, which the Chinook Observer obtained through a records request, the driver, Michael Sean Murphy, 54, allegedly got out of his pickup and charged toward Stell's patrol car.

"The driver appeared to be irate, with his hand clenched," Stell wrote. Stell said he repeatedly ordered Murphy to get back in the car, but Murphy

kept coming, stopping only when he was a couple feet away.

Murphy allegedly accused Stell of violating his civil rights, and announced that he was a federal marshal.

"Murphy then attempted to turn me around and said he was placing me in custody for harassment ..." Stell said. Stell pushed Murphy away. He was eventually able to coax Murphy to get back into his car and call for backup. When other officers arrived at the scene, Murphy was arrested on suspicion of criminal impersonation and obstruction of law enforcement.

Murphy was jailed and released, according to Pacific County Jail records.

'It is not to the officers' advantage'

Neither Stell nor Murphy was injured, but in his Facebook post, Johnson said it could have turned out differently, and it took longer than it should have for help to arrive.

"We work with them frequently and now we can't hear what they say," Johnson said in the interview. "It's basically third-hand info, because it goes from the trooper to their dispatch to our dispatch to our (radios)."

Johnson and Moon each acknowledged that local officers will have to depend more on cooperation between state and local dispatchers for the foreseeable future.

"We've all known this was coming," Moon said. "It just happens to be that some of these issues are coming to light because we've actually done the switchover now."

Asked whether he thought the disconnect with local dispatchers had placed state cops at risk, Moon thought for a long moment before answering. A career in law enforcement is always characterized by numerous and constantly evolving challenges, he said, and a cop's job is to figure out how to overcome them.

"It is not to the officer's advantage to have to go that way," Moon said. "However, this is one of the challenges that we're faced with until we can find a workaround, or other agencies are able to have the same capabilities."

Tora Sushi employee arrested for sexually abusing co-worker

The Daily Astorian

An employee at Tora Sushi in Astoria was arrested Tuesday for sex abuse and harassment after allegedly touching a co-worker inappropriately while training her.

Maximo Cruz Figueroa, 31, of Seaside, is being charged with third-degree sex abuse and harassment with a sexual component. Astoria Police detectives received a report Friday from the 26-year-old victim, who had been hired at Tora Sushi the day before the incident. She reported the inappropriate touching.

Management at Tora Sushi assisted with the investigation,

according to police, and placed Cruz on leave pending completion of the investigation.

"Circumstances like this often go unreported to police for various reasons. When we



Maximo Cruz Figueroa

learn of these situations we become concerned about whether there may be other victims." Astoria Police Deputy Chief Eric Halverson said.

Any former co-workers or victims that may have

information regarding Cruz are encouraged to contact Detective Thomas Litwin at 503-325-4411 or by email at tlitwin@astoria.or.us.

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