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- Sheriff's Department switching to encrypted radios

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Paola Baker, Daily Press

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The San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department is officially switching to an encrypted digital communication system from the previous analog system it has been using. [Kevin Trudgeon, Daily Press]

The San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department is officially switching to an encrypted digital communication system.

Effective Feb. 1, all Sheriff's Department radios will be switched from the previous analog system to an encrypted digital system, officials said Wednesday.

"The improved communication platform is vital to the safety of our first responders," officials said. "It will enhance coverage throughout the county, improve the voice clarity and strengthen the signal to our police frequencies."

San Bernardino County invested more than \$160 million over the past few years to make the switch a reality, according to officials. Several neighboring agencies, such as the San Bernardino Police Department and Riverside Sheriff's Department, have already made the switch, according to Sheriff's Lt. Sarkis Ohannessian. "We are just moving with the time and the technology to catch up with what we need to do," Ohannessian told the Daily Press.

Safety concerns are a major factor behind the switch, Ohannessian said.

"We're basically putting out people's personal identifying information, which can be used for identity theft. There's birthdays being broadcast, there's driver's license numbers, and so much more," Ohannessian said. "That's a lot of information that we can't just shut off."

San Bernardino County Fire Department spokesman Eric Sherwin offered a similar perspective.

"During medical aid calls, there's often very sensitive medical information being broadcast," Sherwin said. "And there's exact addresses being put out — essentially, a listener could know the person that lives there and by listening in, could know that person's medical history."

County Fire also will be switching to a digitally encrypted system, but the program is still in development, Sherwin said. A launch date is yet to be determined.

Both Sherwin and Ohannessian lauded the new system for its clearer sound quality and better reception. But the biggest advantage is how the digital system will help streamline the myriad radio channels and dispatchers typically used in an analog system.

“The range of the digital system is so much larger. I can talk to someone out at the [Colorado] River from my base down here in San Bernardino,” Sherwin said.

Ohannessian explained that with a traditional analog system, officers are forced to switch to different dispatchers as they move from area to area — not uncommon in San Bernardino County, one of the largest counties in the country.

“If I work the Morongo Basin and had to cross over the mountain to the I-10, I would lose reception with the dispatcher watching me on the radio,” Ohannessian said. “With the digital radio, I could drive from Morongo to San Bernardino and still be speaking to the same dispatcher.”

Yet both men addressed potential transparency concerns that the switch will spark as members of the public and media will essentially be shut out. Sheriff’s officials again leaned on safety as a factor, citing incidents in which suspects used “free law enforcement scanner applications” to keep track of incidents in real time.

One such incident was a suspect arrested on two separate occasions for possession of a handgun. Sheriff’s officials said the suspect had a police scanner, which was possibly used during a pursuit with the suspect in August 2015.

“We do understand the public’s concern,” Ohannessian said. “They’re not going to hear what’s going on in their neighborhood, they won’t get that play-by-play, but we were getting some serious safety concerns. There were times people would show up on scene as an incident was ongoing and it could have potentially been dangerous for them.”

There were also concerns over the scanner traffic itself, in particular the preliminary information being broadcast.

“A lot of the information we receive is preliminary, it’s second-hand info or maybe even third-hand info. By the time we get there, a serious incident could turn out to be a cat on a tree situation,” Ohannessian said. “Scanner radio itself won’t get you all the accurate information.”

What the department will now do is strengthen its ties with local media and its social media presence, Ohannessian said.

“We will do our best to make sure everyone stays informed,” Ohannessian said. “If something dangerous is happening, we will be putting out alerts and pushing out info on social media.”

And even encrypted radio traffic can be released to the public upon request, Ohannessian said.

“Anything that the audio would provide more information and we need help with, absolutely (we’ll release it),” Ohannessian said.

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