

POLICE CHIEF

POLICING AND POLICY

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Giving Officers a “Head Start” in Emergencies

THE CHULA VISTA POLICE DEPARTMENT (CVPD) IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA FREQUENTLY EXPLORES NEW TECHNOLOGY TO ENHANCE OFFICER RESPONSE AND SERVICE TO THE COMMUNITY. THIS PROGRESSIVE MINDSET HAS LED THEM TO BE THE IDEAL PARTNER FOR MANY COMPANIES AND INNOVATORS LOOKING TO DEVELOP AND PILOT NEW SOLUTIONS IN POLICING.

A recent example of this process started in May 2019, when a retired CVPD captain and a technology provider conceived the idea of livestreaming 911 calls to officers in the field.

The captain, Fritz Reber, had been inspired by his time at the California POST Command College, but the technology was yet undeveloped and unexplored. Undaunted, he approached HigherGround as a potential partner for CVPD, foreseeing that such a capability could transform emergency response for first responders.

The idea was straightforward and compelling: the technology would provide

patrol officers with immediate access to incoming 911 calls. The typical practice for emergency dispatch centers was to have a call taker answer the 911 call, obtain pertinent information including the nature of the emergency and location, and enter the information into the computer-aided dispatch (CAD), at which point, a dispatcher would read the call on the computer screen and determine the closest officer to dispatch to the emergency. In the best-case scenario, there would be approximately two to three minutes of delay from the time the call taker answered the 911 emergency call to the officer being dispatched. Additionally, the officer would only receive the information that was entered into CAD and a general location (address) of the 911 caller or incident.

In July 2019, CVPD's two officers assigned to the Drone as First Responder (DFR) program began beta-testing the software and providing feedback to the developers. In May 2020, CVPD became the first agency in the United States to

livestream 911 emergency calls directly to officers in the field. The innovative technology gives officers all of the details provided by the caller without delay, including the information they need to plan the appropriate response and to successfully deescalate crises.

It only took one month of operation before the new solution had its first success story. A 911 call came into dispatch of a postal employee threatening to come to work with an “AK47.” The CVPD drone operator was monitoring the live-streamed calls and immediately launched the drone before the call was even entered into CAD. The drone arrived on scene within a couple of minutes and immediately located the subject. The drone operator safely guided responding officers to the potential suspect's location, and, fortunately, the employee was unarmed.

As CVPD Chief Roxana Kennedy points out, this initiative has been a game-changer: “Any tool that allows the community to talk directly to responding

officers during an ongoing emergency is critical in improving situational awareness and de-escalating dangerous situations.”

Implementing the live-stream solution was not without its challenges. CVPD receives approximately 100,000 911 calls annually, so it was important to filter the calls to only those relevant to each patrol officer; otherwise, officers would find themselves overwhelmed with calls coming in from the entire jurisdiction. To resolve this concern, the capability for each officer to set a preferred 911 call scan radius was added. This also makes the solution customizable—patrol supervisors or watch commanders may want to scan all the 911 calls that come in during their shifts, while patrol officers likely want to hear the 911 calls in their beats or within a certain distance. A mapping capability was also added so officers and dispatchers can immediately see the caller’s location.

Another challenge was concern among dispatchers that officers, supervisors, and command staff who were monitoring the

calls would second-guess the dispatchers’ actions. Fortunately, just the opposite occurred. Officers listening to the 911 calls gained a new respect and understanding of the difficult job dispatchers have in obtaining information from frantic callers. Questions from officers on the radio have been reduced during their responses because they can hear the dispatchers asking all the pertinent questions even if the caller is not responding. It has also reduced dispatcher anxiety—even if they unintentionally omit a comment from the caller in the CAD report, the officers heard the information.

CVPD officers now have a “head-start” on nearby emergencies. Each second that goes by during an emergency can mean the difference between life and death, and by livestreaming 911 calls, CVPD is trimming those vital seconds down. ☺



RECOMMENDATIONS

CVPD has a few recommendations for other agencies looking to leverage emerging technology to enhance their practices or services:

- Establish a culture that embraces new technology
- Seek ways to partner with companies to reduce costs while exploring new options
- Encourage officer creativity—CVPD’s live-stream 911 came about because a captain took initiative to seek a technology solution

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