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BROOKHAVEN'S NEW TECHNOLOGY LETS OFFICERS HEAR LIVE 911 CALLS, RESPOND QUICKER

Department is 1st in Georgia to use new software: 'Our response time is crazy now'

By David Aaro

On Thanksgiving night, Officer Quentin Brown was training a rookie inside his Brookhaven police patrol car at a shopping plaza when the voice of a 911 call taker emerged from the speakers asking, "What's your emergency?"

Soon after, the officer said he heard another voice, but this time it was an out-of-breath man, yelling, "My car!"

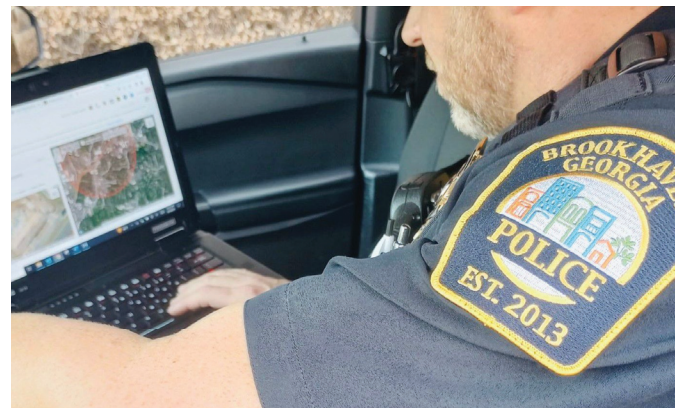
Brown, who was sitting in the passenger seat at Northeast Plaza, looked at his computer screen, which showed the caller was at a gas station less than 500 feet away. "I told the person I was training, 'Just go, go, go!'" Brown said, assuming the call was related to a vehicle theft.

The officers arrived at the QuikTrip about a minute after hearing the call.

They located the victim in the parking lot and saw him pushing against the driver's-side door of his vehicle to keep it shut. Inside, the suspected car thief, who didn't have the keys, was trying to get out. The officers pulled the man out, found a medium-sized hatchet stuck down his pants and took him into custody, Brown said.

Those voices the officers had heard were part of a new technology that allows them to listen to 911 emergency calls in real time. Police say the software, called Live911, has saved officers precious time when responding to emergencies or crime.

"People are just so surprised how fast we respond now," Brown said. "It's just the No. 1 thing you'll hear is our response time is crazy now. It's so good."



The Brookhaven Police Department became the first agency in Georgia to use the technology when they introduced it in October, according to police Lt. Abrem Ayana. While officers can't talk with the caller, they hear every detail of the incoming call. The technology, developed by California-based software company HigherGround, also pinpoints the caller's location on a map with the help of GPS technology. At least 78 law enforcement agencies across the U.S. have deployed Live911 since its launch in the summer of 2020, the company said.

Brown stressed the importance of hearing a caller's voice to understand their tone and gain a more complete picture of the situation. He called the software a "game changer" for the department.

"You almost feel naked without it because you lose all that," Brown said.

Cutting response times

When people call 911, Ayana said the information typically goes from a call taker to a dispatcher to an officer. Ayana

said that process could take between a minute and a half to six minutes depending on the situation. He likened it to a game of telephone.

During the QuikTrip incident, the call taker was heard asking the victim for his location several times. By the time that information was collected, Brown and the rookie officer were already at the scene. Brown noted there were two QuikTrip locations in the general area, but he knew which one to respond to because of the caller's location on the map.

"Without Live911, that individual may have gotten away," Ayana said. "The officers would not have been so prompt to the scene because they very well could have been driving the opposite direction. In this particular instance, the officers were in an adjacent business on a patrol when that call came in."

Brown said other benefits to the software include determining the jurisdiction of neighboring police departments and assisting the city's Spanish-speaking population.

In areas where jurisdiction questions arise, Brown said police can use the technology to pinpoint the incident location and determine which department is responsible, cutting down on response times.

With a large Hispanic population in the city, Brown said Spanish-speaking officers can listen into calls and save time that would previously be spent translating. He cited a recent incident in which a caller told police they were worried someone was trying to break into a house. An officer who could speak the language was listening and determined it wasn't a burglary in process, but a woman with mental health issues who was just complaining about a roommate she didn't recognize.

"Instead of going lights and sirens trying to get there as quickly as possible, we can slow it down and not risk anything happening on the way there," Brown said.

Embracing new policing

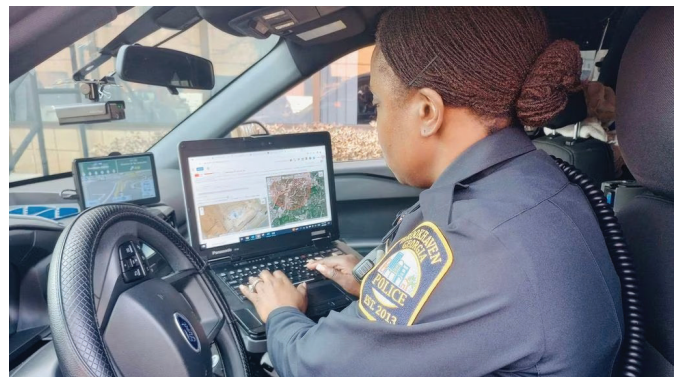
Ayana said the department purchased 15 software licenses, and each officer received their own log-in. The total cost for the department is about \$15,000 per year, with the funds coming from the police budget, he said.

In recent years, Brookhaven has been the first to implement a series of technologies, including a drone first

responder program and a license plate reader network in collaboration with Georgia Power. Critics have expressed privacy concerns over those technologies, while people in favor say they help make residents safer and deter crime.

City Manager Christian Sigman, who approved of Live911, talked about the importance of Brookhaven to be innovative. He said the technology could help with recruiting officers, and potentially attract new businesses to the area.

"The mindset to try new things, new procedures, new technologies, that gives us a competitive advantage




in retaining and attracting talent," Sigman said. "When people hear we do these types of things, they go, 'Wow, that's a pretty cool city.'"

Before approving Live911, Sigman said he investigated how the calls would be screened and how the system determined where the nearest officer was to the call. He said he didn't want officers to all hear the same call or get distracted by always looking at monitors in their cars.

He called Live911 the future "as it doesn't make their jobs any less safe."

Game-changing technology

When using the software, Ayana said officers are immediately patched into a call unless they receive multiple calls at the same time. If that happens, the officer can pick one of the calls, usually based on proximity. He noted that calls at government buildings or schools are placed at the top of the list.



Officers have the ability to set an area around their patrol car, called a geofence, which has a range from a few blocks to the entire city. They won't get calls from outside that area. Officers can also check another map in their vehicle that shows the location of all police units logged into the Live911 system.

Ayana stressed that officers in Brookhaven are still responsible for their patrol area, and the dispatcher still directs them. But if it's an emergency, the officer has the ability to arrive sooner because they don't have to wait to be dispatched.

Since the department started live-streaming 911 emergency calls about four months ago, Brown said officers continue to mention in passing how the technology is something they can't live without.

"We don't want to just come to calls and just take reports after somebody has been the victim of a crime," he added. "If we can get there and stop it and arrest the perpetrator, that's always the best ... we can't go back."

About the Author

David Aaro is an Atlanta Now reporter for The Atlanta Journal-Constitution