





Memorandum

TO: Kevin J. Jackson, Village Manager 

FROM: Shatonya Johnson, Chief of Police 

FOR: Village President and Board of Trustees

DATE: April 24, 2023

SUBJECT: **Public Safety Communications Radio Encryption**

The purpose of this memorandum is to provide information on encryption of public safety radio communications, as part of the project to upgrade the current 30-year old VHF radio system to a modern wireless communication system. Currently, the public can purchase radio scanners or install an application on their cellphone to listen to police communications in real time.

Background

Oak Park's Fire, Police and Public Works departments are part of a consortium with Forest Park's and River Forest's Fire and Police departments served by the West Suburban Consolidated Dispatch 911 Center (WSCDC). Currently, the departments are utilizing the AT&T, VHF800 model radios that are operating on copper connection (t-line), which were interfaced nearly 30 years ago, when the dispatch center was located in the basement with the Oak Park Police Department. The radios are at their end of life and the expense of maintaining the copper connection has increased by \$20,000 in a month. Lastly, there have been consistent challenges with dead zones throughout the village.

WSCDC purchased a new radio system P25, APEX-NEXT, which is a state-of-the-art digital system serviced by StarCom. StarCom is utilized statewide by multiple local municipalities as well as Cook County. This technology offers departments the ability to interoperate with agencies outside of the consortium with ease as well as many other functions. With the transition from analog to digital, StarCom has an option available to encrypt live radio communication. Encryption is the process of encoding information in such a way that eavesdroppers or hackers cannot understand the transmission.

Concerns

Critics of encryption raise concerns regarding police transparency and accountability due to the inability for the public to listen in on police communications in real time.

The Police Department's primary concerns are: Officer Safety, Community Safety and Police Operations. Law abiding citizens as well as individuals with criminal intent monitor police radio communications. Criminal offenders could use it to become familiar with police routes, practices and tactics. There is also the potential to impede preliminary investigations if individual(s) with a scanner arrive on the scene prior to the police. Additionally, encryption protects the community by preventing the personal information of victims, witnesses and suspects being broadcast over the air on an unencrypted radio band.

There were two incidents within the past seven months involving police that had the potential to jeopardize public safety and the integrity of an investigation. In one of the incidents police responded to a barricaded subject on Harlem Ave. Misinformation was shared on social media, due to the use of police scanners. This had the potential to create a volatile outcome. The other incident involved friends arriving at the scene of a homicide just as officers were responding.

Analysis

The Police Department explored several options with WSCDC to address the need for transparency and safety.

1. Permitting all radio communication available on a thirty-minute delay.
The current recorder does not have the capability to support a thirty-minute delay. The recorder was replaced approximately three years ago and has more than seven years of life. A new recorder would cost approximately \$250,000.
2. Encrypting only emergency and high priority calls.
The current recorder does not offer an option to make a distinction between call types.
3. WSCDC maintains the main band without encryption and directs staff to transfer to an encrypted band for emergency and high priority calls.
This creates a delayed response to emergency services when every second matters.
4. Full encryption.
All radio communication is available to the public via the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). This option offers the public an opportunity to evaluate police services and allows the police to serve the community uninterrupted.

Several local agencies have or are planning to incorporate full encryption, including DuPage County, Lake County, McHenry County, the Northwest Central Consolidated Dispatch Center, and LTACC, the consolidated dispatch center in LaGrange.

Recommendation

Oak Park is one-third of a consortium with equal voting rights. All three Police departments and WSCDC support encryption due to officer safety, community safety and police operations. There will be an opportunity to replace the recorder equipment that supports encryption in 2027 as part of the new RMS/CAD system project. At that time, a recommendation can be presented to implement a delayed release of police communications as an alternative to full encryption. That capability is unavailable at this time with the current recorder equipment

Next Steps

The WSCDC will meet during the week on May 22, 2023 and vote to formalize its affirmative position on encryption as part of the StarCom migration project that is scheduled for completion during the summer of 2023.

If you have any questions, please contact Shatonya Johnson, Chief of Police, at (708) 358-5504 or sjohnson@oak-park.us.

cc Lisa Shelley, Deputy Village Manager
Ahmad Zayyad, Deputy Village Manager
Christina Waters, Village Clerk
Dave Jacobson, Interim Deputy Police Chief
All Department Directors