

THE BROWARD COUNTY LEAGUE OF CITIES'
SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY PUBLIC SAFETY
TASK FORCE

INITIAL REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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Exhibit #37

Broward not doing enough to fix police radios if another mass shooting occurs

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Not enough has been done to make sure Broward County's public safety radio system won't run into problems if there's another mass casualty, the father of a Parkland shooting victim told county commissioners Tuesday.

A crush of radio traffic from responding officers led to communication problems during the Fort Lauderdale airport shooting in January 2017 and again as units responded to the massacre at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in February.

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Max Schachter, whose son Alex was one of 17 killed at Stoneman Douglas, said the county knew back in 2016 that the Motorola-operated system needed to be upgraded, but didn't put in place temporary fixes to improve operations. He said it was inexcusable that the situation didn't change after the deadly shootings at the airport, where five were killed, and then at the high school, where 17 were also injured.

"If there's another emergency tomorrow, I don't want to hear, 'We bought a new system. It's coming in 2019 or 2020,'" Schachter said.

"It is unacceptable, Motorola, that in a mass casualty incident, the damn thing doesn't work. You cannot resort to hand signals to save people's lives. You cannot have a situation where SWAT cannot communicate. We need to fix this, thank you very much, and I hope we can get this done as soon as possible," Schachter said.

A consultant reviewing the county's radio system in 2015 said the overall system needed to be replaced and much of the equipment was "past the end of typical replacement periods." A year ago, commissioners approved spending \$59.5 million on a new system, but that system isn't expected to be in place until the end of 2019.

A Motorola representative said the public radio system used by the county did not fail during the Stoneman Douglas shooting.

“On Feb. 14, the system did not crash. It worked as designed,” said Motorola’s Danny Sanchez. The system went into “throttling,” a safety mode that prevented the system from crashing altogether from the increased radio activity, he said.

Throttling, when a channel reaches its capacity, gives users a busy signal or error message when they attempt to use the radio system. During the Parkland response, some officers were reduced to using hand signals to communicate; other times it would take four or five attempts for an officer to transmit a single piece of information over the radio, officials said.

Schachter wasn’t the only one uneasy about the current system.

“We are concerned about the vulnerability of the system today,” said Coral Springs Fire Chief Frank Babinec, head of the county’s fire chief association. “We do have some concerns with the amount of time it’s taking [to put in the new system].”

Commissioner Michael Udine said the delays were not acceptable.

“To the average Joe on the street, throttling is the equivalent of radio failure because it doesn’t let [police] do what they’re supposed to do,” Udine said.

County officials said there is no way to increase the current system’s capacity or bandwidth. Sanchez told commissioners the county’s new system would have more capacity, going from 28 to 39 channels, but it would still rely on throttling if it was over capacity.

Broward Undersheriff Steve Kinsey said he’s talked to officials in New York City, who don’t seem to have throttling issues even with the large events they handle.

Sanchez said the county’s new system has been designed based on the county’s own specifications.

“Every system is custom-designed to whatever the customer wants to achieve,” Sanchez said.

How the Marjory Stoneman Douglas school shooting unfolded | Graphic

That started commissioners wondering if they were getting the best system available.

“We weren’t the ones who made the technical decision on this,” Udine said. “If there’s a better system that can be used ... we need to be looking into it.”

County Administrator Bertha Henry said the county is expecting that a county consultant — Police Foundation — hired to review the Stoneman Douglas shooting response will look at the county’s radio system and make any appropriate recommendations.

Besides asking Henry to determine if the new system is the best available to better handle large-scale incidents, commissioners also want to know if the new system can be up and running sooner than scheduled.

They also said the county needs to train police and other radio users how to avoid stressing the system.

Officials said many officers don’t understand that simply turning on their radio or switching channels affects the operation of the entire network. So even officers not involved but trying to find out what is happening in an incident were taxing the capabilities of the system.

Kinsey of the Sheriff’s Office said there was no training about such issues between the airport shootings and the ones at Stoneman Douglas.

“Until last week, I didn’t know they didn’t want guys changing channel,” Kinsey said.

However, Babinec said one of the things being suggested for first responders, to not use their radios as much during a crisis situation, isn’t practical.

Another problem for the current county system is it’s not only public safety officers who are using it. County government operations and the Broward school district are on some of the available channels.

Babinec said the time of the day of the Parkland shootings, near when school was let out, could have impacted the system from school bus radios being activated as school buses started their routes.

Henry said those other operations will have their own system in the future.

"We are building a local government radio system, so that we can pull off all of the traffic that is not public safety," she said.