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Chicago police take AV upgrades to the precinct

By Sherrie Morreall - September 20, 2001 From: Presenting Communications

In the past, the Chicago Police Department (CPD) relied on conventional methods of communication in officer training and briefing, using everything from TVs and VCRs to handwritten notes and slide projectors.

However, with advances in technology, today the CPD is designing face-to-face communication with an electronic edge. Each of the district's squad rooms and the Command Planning Center are undergoing a major face-lift that includes large-scale digital walls, touch-screen commands and videoconferencing.

With the start of the new millennium, the CPD wanted to upgrade and improve its ability to communicate and train officers. To this end, it contacted Fred Weituschat, president of Audio Visual Systems (AVS), based in Chicago.

Give them what they want

"Thanks to AVS," says Patrick Camden, deputy director, new affairs, CPD, "we have an advanced technology system that works the way we want it to. AVS really took the time to see what we needed and what would work in our environment."

Creating a system that would work in such a traditional and formal environment took some time.

"You have to remember that you are working with police officers," says Weituschat. "Trust is the key. They have to trust their fellow officers everyday in emergency situations, and they want equipment that they can also trust in emergency situations. It took time to listen to them and learn what their needs were."

Once he learned what they needed and wanted, Weituschat had to figure out how to fit it all in the limited space. "The average size of the district rooms that we set up is about 20 x 30 feet. This was a challenge, we needed to fit people, not just equipment."

AVS contacted Clarity Visual Systems to see what they had to offer that would fit in such a space and still leave plenty of room for viewers.

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"We work with a wide range of products to fit the needs and wants of the customer," says Lisa Vielbig, marketing director, Clarity Visual Systems. "With the flexibility in design and product that Clarity offers, it was easy for the Chicago Police Department to find something that really worked for them."

Currently, the Command Planning Center system displays information from 20 workstations and eight 52-inch Tigress displays from Clarity Visual Systems. Each workstation is assigned access to specific display cubes dedicated to a variety of sources, including the interdepartmental computers, broadcast and cable TV, live feeds from other districts and video from department film crews.



The Tigress displays are operated by a Crestron touch-screen system, bringing any workstation's information up on the wall. A master controller also offers the officers the ability to have any one workstation's image occupy the entire wall. Command officers can display PowerPoint-based summaries of previous shift activities, including reviews of major incidents, and cases in progress.

"The big-picture approach gets everyone quickly up to speed on what has transpired previously and focused on the top priorities for the current shift," says department spokesman, David Bayless.

Face-to-face communication

In both districts and at the Command Planning Center, streaming video can be displayed in real-time on the data walls. "In the case of a major incident involving several locations," says Sgt. Jonathan Lewin, CPD, "we can display up to four live video feeds simultaneously, giving us a comprehensive picture of events. This lets us make highly informed, real-time decisions about where and how best to deploy officers."

The superintendent can also videoconference with all the districts simultaneously, says Weituschat.

"They can instantly show mug shots, area statistics, and [it] even has a city mapping program, which can show aerial views of the areas they are discussing," he says. "About three weeks after the first prototypes had been installed, there was an armed robbery in town. The CPD pulled the tape from the security camera and had it up for all the officers to see. They were able to ID the guy and picked him up in two and a half hours."

Of the 25 police districts in the Chicago area, 19 have the complete system installed and the others are in process of installation. The Command Planning Center cost \$1.2 million, while the district prototype cost ranges from \$160,000 to \$214,000, depending on the needs of each district.

Although relatively simple to install, says Weituschat, installations average about 10 days because of the mandatory security installation procedures and testing. "It can be installed in under three days," he says, "But because of the importance of the security in this installation, the equipment is tested rigorously."

While each district has differing needs and costs, the same Clarity-based data walls are installed in the design. "This is such an easily-operated system," says

Weituschat. "Anyone can learn to use it in a minute and a half. An officer can transfer to any district and the display configuration will be the same, so there is no learning curve for a transferred officer to overcome. This reduces hours of training and re-training, allowing the department to focus on doing their job. And, it's been a great morale booster for the officers. They feel like they have the tools they need to work with in the 21st century."

Sherrie Morreall

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