

More Than a Match for Potholes

Bellefontaine Neighbors Police Transition to Ruggedized DVRs

Police Chief Robert Pruett has chalked up a lifetime of experience in his 36-year career as a police officer and is well acquainted with the limitations of VCR monitoring technology.

CHIEF Pruett, who oversees the police department serving Bellefontaine Neighbors, a residential suburb of St. Louis, Missouri, recalls one incident in particular that occurred when he was with another department.

“One of our officers stopped a vehicle and the guy took off. The officer pursued him and at the end of the pursuit, the gentleman grabbed a high-powered rifle and fired off eight or ten rounds. The officer was shot in the arm and went through the cruiser’s windshield.

“We were counting on the VCR system to record what happened,” recalled the Chief. “Unfortunately, it had a habit of turning itself off and on every time it went over a bump in the road. The quality of the tape was compromised and we couldn’t use it as evidence.”

The Bellefontaine Neighbors department had already authorized the purchase of a new security system for the police station and details relating to the installation were being sorted out when Chief Pruett joined the force a year and a half ago.

Digital

“I had the opportunity to meet with a representative of Alarm 24, the company doing the installation, and the subject of mobile digital video recording units came up during the conversation,” recalled Chief Pruett. “That’s when I first heard about the March Networks™ product. I thought it would be an opportunity to resolve some of the issues I was aware of with the VHS equipment.”



To start off, the department purchased March Networks 4120 DVRs for its two traffic cruisers. Mounted in the cruiser's trunk space and connected to a single camera attached to the windshield, the DVR begins recording when the officer activates the cruiser's overhead lights.

With the cruiser parked immediately behind a pulled-over vehicle, the DVR is able to record the vehicle, the license plate number, and the activities of both the police officer and the occupants of the vehicle. A wireless microphone clipped to the officer's uniform also records audio.

Storage

An internal hard disk drive stores weeks of data and in the event of an incident, video is downloaded and saved to a computer inside the station. The data is transferred by pulling up to the police building and attaching a cable from the DVR to an externally accessible network connection. The new version of the March Networks ruggedized DVR simplifies the process further by offering wireless video transfer through an integrated modem.

These "ruggedized" DVRs are built for bumps in the road and a whole lot more. The sturdy, hermetically sealed recorder is dustproof, waterproof and shock and vibration resistant, meeting and exceeding industry standards.

The units in service at Bellefontaine Neighbors support up to four cameras and one audio input.

Housed in a sleek, compact chassis and purpose-built to withstand harsh operating environments, they are designed for bus, rail, emergency and law enforcement applications.

Reliability

"I'm pleased about the reliability of the system and the fact that I don't have to worry about changing tapes, making sure they're good, replacing tapes and storing them," said Chief Pruett. "If something occurs, the officer can notify his supervisor and we can save the data to a file. And if it's needed, we have the data to support any investigation that we might conduct."

The Bellefontaine Neighbors Police Department is one of the first law enforcement agencies in the St. Louis area to acquire mobile DVRs.

"There are some departments that have installed DVRs in their buildings, but as far as I know, we're the first to go the DVR route for mobile use."

There probably isn't a law enforcement agency in and around St. Louis, though, that hasn't heard about mobile Digital Video Recorders. A representative of Alarm 24, the March Networks Certified Solution Partner responsible for the sale and installation, and a March Networks product manager made a presentation to the St. Louis Police Chiefs

About the Department

The Bellefontaine Neighbors Police Department provides the citizens of Bellefontaine Neighbors with a safe environment in which to live and raise their families and a neighborhood for peaceful retirement. The department works in co-operation with the residents of the community to enforce the laws and preserve the peace.



Association recently and generated considerable interest in the technology and its application in law enforcement agencies.

Wireless

The DVRs were installed at Bellefontaine Neighbors Police Department early this year in two of the department's nine marked cruisers. As for the future, Chief Pruett says he would like to equip the rest of the fleet and is impressed with wireless access functionality.

"We have recording devices in police cars because of the liability issue and for investigations and evidence," said Chief Pruett. "But it's also a good training tool, too. I find it useful to evaluate officer activity and conduct, and address concerns or issues relating to specific occurrences. It's a good way to improve the professional delivery of police services."

Bellefontaine Neighbors, a residential suburb of St. Louis, has a population of 11,200 and encompasses an area of approximately five square miles. The department consists of 27 commissioned police officers as well as several civilian employees. □

Following in His Father's Footsteps

Bellefontaine Neighbors Police Chief Robert Pruett became a St. Louis police cadet at the age of 17, following in the footsteps of his father Allen, who served as Bellefontaine Neighbors' police chief for 27 years, beginning in 1950 when the city was first incorporated.

The younger Pruett served 13½ years as a City of St. Louis police officer before moving over to the nearby Florissant Police Department, where he served for 22 years.

As the Chief puts it, he "retired" at the age of 55 from the Florissant Police Department and promptly joined the Bellefontaine Neighbors department in the same role as his dad.