Harris County Public Safety Technology Services

When you think about the Super Bowl® game, you probably think about the players, fans, halftime performers, and even the food vendors. Most of us don't spend much time wondering how public safety personnel communicate. A huge part of putting together a massive event as popular as the Super Bowl game involves ensuring that the proper security is in place, and that first responders have the right tools to keep everyone safe, with the ability to communicate quickly and efficiently in the case of security issues.

AT A GLANCE:

SITUATION:
- Responsible for hosting an estimated 1.3 million people in one weekend during one of the largest sporting events in the country.
- Need for several law enforcement agencies to communicate in real time with text, voice and images.
- Critical need for alternative to radios and basic cell phone applications that did not meet the security and inter-agency needs of first responders.

SOLUTION:
- Mitel Secure Collaboration

RESULTS:
- Officers identified a suspicious-looking individual who had an outstanding felony warrant.
- Public safety teams shared photographs of counterfeit merchandise vendors.
- Users annotated and shared pictures to speed up the process of securing the event, including locating lost individuals.

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Organization

In February 2017, the City of Houston hosted Super Bowl® 51 game at the NRG Stadium, with an estimated 1.3 million people attending the game and Super Bowl LIVE, a free event taking place for several days before game day. Harris County Public Safety Technology Services (PSTS) supported the event by providing a Public Safety LTE network at key venues including NRG Stadium, the George R Brown Convention Center, and Discovery Green Park. The public safety operational period spans 10 days leading up to game day with various events and activities throughout Houston.

Scoring with Collaboration

While communication is critical to first responders' ability to react to situations, many of the tools currently used across the country are inadequate and not as efficient as one would expect. Most public safety organizations use handheld radios to communicate and relay information, which provides only verbal information, with no visual communications, opening the door to user interpretation of the information. This often results in misinformation, as well as traffic congestion on the radio frequencies. In addition, it's usually difficult to get agencies across disciplines to share information securely. All of this can lead to longer lag times in decision making and incident response.

Since 9/11, there has been an important nationwide initiative to provide public safety with better tools and technologies, and Harris County has been a trailblazer in identifying how public safety organizations can improve communications. For example, the county, one of five FirstNet Early Builders, was the first to deploy the new public safety broadband network built specifically for public safety to provide broadband connectivity as reliable as the mission critical public safety voice radio systems used today.

Prior to the Super Bowl, Harris County PSTS deployed new mobile technologies at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, but came to the unfortunate realization that the technology wasn't ready for the front line boots on the ground. They began searching for a new mobile communication and collaboration solution and developed a list of requirements, which included voice calling, group calling, global directory, video streaming and sharing, location services, and the ability for field personnel to communicate with each other and command staff individually or in small groups. They ultimately turned to Mitel Networks and the Mitel Secure Collaboration solution for emergency

> "The use of mobile apps during Super Bowl LI facilitated a paradigm shift in the way public safety communicated by augmenting voice radio with messages, pictures, video sharing, location services and more. We are leading the way in operationalizing the use of data in public safety and hope that the industry is able to learn from the great success we had at Super Bowl."

Shing Lin, Director, Harris County Public Safety Technology Services

service/first responders. Mitel Secure Collaboration is a team messaging and collaboration application with features such as document sharing and annotation, plus enhanced security features. For example, the level of invite control is higher than other team messaging services, enabling only the originator of the project stream or their delegate to invite others to participate.

During deployment, Harris County PSTS developed an information architecture to define the flow of information between individuals and agencies. Groups were set up so that every unit had their own "chatgroup," such as the police, bomb squad, SWAT, etc., enabling individuals to have private conversations within their teams and to communicate with the key personnel in the overall command post, providing a fast and efficient way to relay information.

For the Super Bowl, Mitel Secure Collaboration was used by 9 local, state and federal agencies, with 855 first responders registered, and 390 active users on game day, with the application being viewed 58,535 times during game week. While the PSTS expected voice calling and live video streaming to be the primary

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features used, group text messaging quickly became the key method of communication and collaboration. According to one individual, "Group messaging was the real killer app, enabling group text messages to be sent quickly and efficiently."

Avoiding Potential Flags

There were several examples of how Mitel Secure Collaboration was used during the Super Bowl and Super Bowl LIVE events. For example, a patrol officer noticed a suspicious-looking individual who quickly drove away from the scene. The officer used his mobile data terminal to run the individual's license plate, and determined that he had an outstanding felony warrant. Using the Mitel Secure Collaboration app, the officer shared secure text messages containing information about the suspicious individual, including his name, description, and license plate number. Using driver's license information, one team member accessed the suspect's photo, which was shared with various teams and command posts across multiple units and agencies. An officer at one of the convention center entrances had seen the suspect enter the building, units began searching for him, and officers were able to detain the suspect and make the arrest. Prior to using the Mitel Secure Collaboration solution, these different agencies were not able to communicate with each other as quickly or efficiently with voice-only communications, but now were able to collaborate cross functionally and make the arrest quickly and efficiently.

Mitel Secure Collaboration was useful in supporting communications for a seamless operation during and leading up to game day. End users quickly found that being able to annotate and share pictures helped speed up the process of securing the event, such as locating lost individuals and tracking suspicious persons. A picture

is worth a thousand words, and a picture with additional comments is worth even more! The public safety teams shared photographs of counterfeit merchandise vendors and various "scammers," resulting in numerous arrests, while protecting fans from being conned. Without Mitel Secure Collaboration, undercover officers and others were limited to voice communications, but with multimode messaging, they were able to share videos and photos to identify offenders and dispatch teams quickly.

Moving beyond the Super Bowl, there are many scenarios where Mitel Secure Collaboration is now being used. At a local rodeo, a man with early onset dementia wandered off and his family was searching for him. The dispatcher sent out information describing the individual over the radio, but also posted the information to a team on Mitel Secure Collaboration, including a photograph of the missing man. Shortly afterwards, officers found the man, mostly due to their ability to identify him from the photo. After the dispatcher put out the description on the radio, several officers entered the security office to ask the dispatcher to repeat it because they had not heard it. Even if they had, it was unlikely that they would have identified the man based on the original description because they were looking for someone without a hat. By using Mitel Secure Collaboration and being able to view the man's photo, the officers found him much more quickly.

Messaging Helps Augment Communications

As mentioned, most public safety organizations use handheld radios to communicate and relay information, which limits communications to only audio, and requires that individuals listen to the correct radio channel to hear any important information. Using Mitel Secure Collaboration and its team text messaging capabilities reduces the amount of traffic that goes over the radio. In addition, users can view messages and information across multiple teams, which reduces the risk of missing any important information, although it increases the risk of information overload. Collaboration is enhanced, making it easier to facilitate multiagency and multiunit information sharing.

Security is key, and while consumer-based messaging tools have been used by some agencies, they don't provide the level of security and privacy needed by public safety officials. Using a sanctioned messaging platform

like Mitel Secure Collaboration is a more secure way of disseminating sensitive information, while enabling groups to control their information and what they share or don't share.

As with other team messaging applications, there are some important things to keep in mind when using the Mitel Secure Collaboration application. Sometimes irrelevant messages and information are shared, creating clutter. To avoid information overload, it's important to share the right information with the right people, as overload can create an officer safety situation if they are distracted by tons of messages rather than monitoring the crowds/surrounding.

In addition, only a small portion of public safety employees use cell phones provided by their employers, and individuals are generally reluctant to put work-related applications on their personal devices. In order for a group messaging application like Mitel Secure Collaboration to be valuable and effective, the appropriate people need to have access to it on their cell phones, which will require the agencies to provide phones to more workers or adopt Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) policies to protect users' personal information by keeping public information confined within a secured, encrypted app.

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Leading the Way with Secure Communications

Using the Mitel Secure Collaboration solution at the Super Bowl, arrests were made, medical calls were expedited, lost children were found, and criminal activity was reduced. Public safety officials noted that information sharing and multiagency interoperability was improved, while individuals and teams were able to communicate and collaborate securely and effectively across voice, text, and video.

As a representative at Harris County PSTS noted, "In public safety, it's all about protecting lives and keeping first responders, citizens, and communities safe." She added, "The 'bad guys' are using the latest technology, and first responders need to stay one step ahead." With Mitel Secure Collaboration, public safety personnel can quickly and easily share messages, information, photos, video and more – allowing them to score big.

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This case study was first published by Blair Pleasant of Unified Communications Strategies:
"Helping public safety responders get a touchdown"

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