

Connecting Law Enforcement and Transportation to Improve Public Safety

By Rodell Notbohm

Every day law enforcement personnel respond to incidents on transit vehicles. In fact, in large metropolitan areas, it is not uncommon to see police officers and security guards on-site monitoring transit stations and vehicles. They work hand-in-hand with transit officials ensuring the safety and security of commuters and in-vehicle transit personnel. However, advances in mobile video surveillance are making it possible for law enforcement personnel to monitor transit vehicles and stations remotely. Likewise, law enforcement personnel have at-the-ready access to transit video evidence to assist in incident response.

Problem

Historically, involving law enforcement personnel in transit incidents was an inconvenient and manual process. In order to efficiently assess a transit situation, those monitoring bus activity and security, including transit stations and terminals, were required to be on the scene or arrive in-person to efficiently assess the situation on-board a vehicle.

The need to obtain video evidence following an incident has always been an immediate priority. However, without wireless capabilities for acquiring video clips, agencies are forced to take transit vehicles out of service and manually identify, locate, retrieve and send the necessary footage to law enforcement personnel. This not only wastes time and money for the transit agency, but also for investigators as their ability to immediately begin processing the scene is delayed.

Solution

In recent years, many transit agencies have focused on procuring state-of-the-art technology to extend incident response and investigation for law enforcement personnel and, in doing so, have increased public safety. The technologies these agencies are turning to, particularly Local Area Networks (LAN) and Wi-Fi and cellular networks, are increasing transit and law enforcement access to decisive video evidence and reducing the time and money associated with discovery. This increased access is reducing legal liabilities and increasing passenger and operator safety throughout entire fleets.



These wireless connectivity capabilities allow transit security and access to surveillance video to become truly mobile. Secure wireless connectivity improves incident investigation by enabling transit managers and first responders to log on remotely, view the scene through cameras on-board, and download and archive video to quickly investigate passenger and employee concerns. For example, when an incident occurs, or a vehicle operator is in need of assistance, transit managers can respond immediately and provide the necessary assistance to operators and riders. Police also have access to live video feeds and can determine from outside the bus or in a remote location if a vehicle needs to be stopped in order to prevent or assist with incidents.

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Examples

Washington, D.C. is one of the most safeguarded cities in the world and the region is known for having the highest level of security and safety in place to protect government officials, residents and those commuting in and out of the city. Montgomery County, situated directly northwest of Washington, D.C. in the state of Maryland, operates the largest suburban transit system in the region. Its Division of Transit Services has just completed a major purchase of mobile video surveillance systems to replace 118 older systems onboard its fleet of Ride On buses. The purchase in June is the culmination of a five-year overhaul to replace outdated equipment, a welcomed accomplishment by the agency's transit managers, operators and law enforcement officials.

The new system includes a DVR, which records continuously when the bus is on, along with four interior cameras and wireless local area network (LAN) equipment installed on each vehicle. The recordings are stored on the system's hard drive for review by agency officials. The police department and other first responders have access to live video feeds on in-vehicle laptops. This access helps officials determine if a bus needs to be stopped in order to prevent or assist with incidents.

The Department of Transportation also works with a police department liaison to share information and supply video of bus, bus yard and traffic incidents, which routinely aids in solving cases and serves as supporting evidence in litigation. Video footage often assists in identifying suspects.

Montgomery County is setting a standard for mobile video surveillance equipment throughout its fleet as well as those in neighboring counties. With many other Washington, D.C.-area agencies also operating equipment from the same vendor, first responders from surrounding counties can cross county or city boundaries and still benefit from the compatibility of a standardized system.

San Diego Metropolitan Transit System (MTS) uses state-of-the-art Wi-Fi and GPS capabilities, allowing transit officials to monitor real-time video and

location data. Last year they installed new systems, including DVRs and fleet-wide management software, on 246 transit buses. The installation included interior and exterior cameras, motion detectors and wireless LAN equipment, through which they can receive vehicle status reports, event logs, on-demand video clip retrieval and automated video downloads.



The DVRs are connected to seven to nine cameras, depending on the bus type. Each camera system has Wi-Fi, accelerometers and GPS, so transit officials can monitor real-time video and view location data along with video playback. To capture potential incidents inside the transit yards overnight, the cameras include passive infrared motion detection sensors that trigger the system to start recording. The sensors also detect movement inside the vehicles when they are turned off. All of this helps MTS and area law enforcement personnel to react more quickly to incidents.

Conclusion

Transit agencies across the nation like Montgomery County and MTS are increasing their technology use to improve

the connection with their local law enforcement personnel, reducing the resources spent on discover, decreasing legal liabilities, and increasing public safety. Wireless networks are increasingly integrated into sophisticated video surveillance systems, changing the way transit and law enforcement agencies monitor and address the safety and security needs of their communities.

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Photos courtesy of Apollo Video Technology.

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