

Washington Police Take Command To the Next Level

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The Washington, D.C., Metropolitan Police Department's Joint Operations Command Center, or JOCC, includes a wall of displays that can show information ranging from three-dimensional simulated fly-throughs to live video feeds from around the district. On each side wall is a live radar feed from Reagan National Airport.

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Lessons learned fighting crime apply to international terrorism.

The focal point for national efforts to combine federal and local law enforcement security activities can be found just a few blocks from the White House in the Washington, D.C., Metropolitan Police Department headquarters. The police charged with patrolling the nation's capital are finding that conventional police work is proving far more useful in dealing with terrorist threats than anticipated. And, the department's Joint Operations Command Center, or JOCC, serves both as a

center for tracking conventional crime and as a base for coordinating multigovernmental responses to violent demonstrations and terrorism in the nation's capital.

The JOCC literally underwent a baptism of fire when it was rushed into use ahead of schedule on September 11, 2001. Its more than three years of operation have encompassed those terrorist attacks and heightened terrorism alerts along with major events such as protest activities and the recent inaugural. With those experiences comes a greater understanding of the challenges facing the capital's security efforts, along with a wish list for new technologies to significantly upgrade the command center.

Located in police headquarters in Washington, D.C., the center already was under development before the September 11 attacks. Metropolitan Police Department Chief Charles H. Ramsey explains that the Metropolitan Police have had a long history of handling demonstrations. During these demonstrations, federal and local law enforcement agencies would work together to maintain peace and respond if violence erupted. Because of that need for cooperative planning coupled with the requirement for spontaneous response to an event, these federal and local authorities decided to build a center where key personnel could co-locate for an event.

The first step was the construction of a Command Information Center that began operation just before New Year's Day 2000, when the primary concern was the feared collapse of computer systems from the so-called millennium bug. Shortly after the demonstrations at the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank meetings in April 2000, the police, along with the FBI and the Secret Service, decided to develop the JOCC in time for the fall 2001 IMF/World Bank meetings.

The JOCC was scheduled to become operational in late September of that year, but it saw its first use on September 11 before it was even completed. Many of the technologies remained to be installed, but enough were functional to begin operations just after the World Trade Center was struck—and before the Pentagon was hit, the chief relates. On-scene contractors did a superb job in bringing the JOCC to life even while its telephones were being installed, he adds.

A third element, the Intelligence Operations Center, has capabilities similar to the JOCC, but it is used by department intelligence officers to screen information before it is entered into the system. This helps

protect undercover officers, and it serves to validate much of the information that is fed to the JOCC. Chief Ramsey notes that the intelligence center is used only during major events.

In addition to serving everyday local police needs, the JOCC is designed to serve as the nexus for federal authorities to work with their district law enforcement counterparts. An FBI secure compartmented information facility, or SCIF, is located behind one wall of the JOCC. The Secret Service has the capability to tie into its command centers, and the U.S. Marshall Service as well as other federal law enforcement agencies also can tie into their own command centers through the JOCC.

According to Chief Ramsey, the JOCC does not operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week. That privilege belongs to the original command information center, which is located across the hall from the JOCC. The information center follows all crimes that take place in Washington, and it prints out a 24-hour crime log for review by the chief and other system chiefs. This log is used as the basis for a daily 10 a.m. crime briefing. That report is presented electronically onscreen in the JOCC. Leadership can supplement basic deployed units with support units that can be deployed to hot spots.

The chief explains that conventional criminal activities dominate police activities. While the unique homeland security needs of the nation's capital are an important element in police operations, fighting street crime remains the number-one mission for the force. Accordingly, it must maintain its vigilance and readiness posture for a potential homeland security crisis while simultaneously safeguarding the public from predatory criminal activities.

"This room is actually used more for the purpose of fighting day-to-day crime in the city than for anything along the lines of intelligence," Chief Ramsey states.

However, the chief maintains that the two activities are closely related. "We look at terrorism as something separate and apart from crime, but it is just a different kind of crime," he says.

This approach is important in applying crime-fighting tactics to homeland security, the chief points out. With the federal government cracking down on terrorist funding support overseas, the terrorists may need to turn to U.S. sources of financing for their elaborate operations. "They will have to fund themselves through traditional criminal means—trafficking in drugs, guns, identity theft—all those kinds of things that we deal with."

Dealing with this new challenge will require training police personnel to recognize the links between traditional crime and terrorism so that clues indicating this type of activity can be passed along to the appropriate federal authorities. "To me, that is a gap because we don't recognize it that way," Chief Ramsey declares. "We are looking for someone who is going to look like he is right off the plane from the Middle East and will be easily identified. That is not the case, and I don't think that there is emphasis yet on trying to look at that nexus between traditional crime and what terrorists organizations and their funding groups could be involved in."

The chief offers that the department could use trained analysts to uncover clues that personnel experienced in conventional police work might not pick up. "For example, the reason that chop shop ring you broke up was stealing cars and selling parts was to fund a terrorist organization," he suggests. "Someone must follow that paper trail. We're not capable of doing that. Federal authorities are, but we must know which ones to feed this information in order for them to take that [information] and go with it."

The JOCC includes several features common to command centers springing up in government facilities

across the country. A closed-circuit television system helps personnel monitor scenes in key areas around the district. While the police department has only about 14 fixed cameras and another dozen mobile cameras that can be deployed quickly, it can access many different systems in the district. "We didn't see a need to re-create the wheel," the chief relates. "There are video cameras just about everywhere you can imagine in the city, so the goal was just simply to tie into those existing systems. We have access to Metro transit, for example, so we can see the various train stations. We also are able to get video feeds from our Department of Transportation, the Virginia Department of Transportation and the Maryland Department of Transportation."

Other video feeds come from the U.S. Capitol and the U.S. Park Service as well as from some private sources, the chief allows. Helicopters belonging to the district government and the Park Police, among others, can feed up to five video images simultaneously to the JOCC. The police department accesses all of these outside video sources only with their operators' permission, he emphasizes. And, video imagery is recorded only at the expressed direction of the chief of police or the executive assistant chief. This largely takes place only during events such as the inaugural or a code orange terror alert, the chief observes.

Other display screens provide vital information on the region and ongoing events. Viewers can see a three-dimensional (3-D) model of the entire city that can be rotated as needed. Planners can trace routes of scheduled events as well as see how to reallocate resources in response to changing conditions. This 3-D model allows planners to simulate crowds moving in actual settings.

The JOCC is one of the first facilities to be connected to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Joint Regional Information Exchange System (JRIES), the chief offers. It is based in the information center across the hall, but its information is fed into the JOCC.

The also uses an internally developed system known as Columbo, which resides atop the various databases currently used in the department. It permits personnel to obtain maps, photographs of wanted subjects, criminal history sheets and other vital data. Columbo can consolidate these facts from different media into a report used in the daily crime briefing. It also can be used to search databases for various types of modus operandi that can be consolidated for generating a list of suspects for a string of crimes, for example.

The center has a videoconferencing system connected with the rest of the department's units. Any information that must be fed to the field can go through the teleconferencing system.

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) provides the radar feed from Reagan National Airport on a wall display. And, an FAA official can be stationed in the JOCC. Chief Ramsey relates how an FAA representative in the center during the September 11 attacks quickly squelched a popular rumor that several flights inbound from Europe were unaccounted for and possibly hijacked. This permitted the police to turn their attention away from bracing for more imminent aircraft attacks to other matters.

Other federal agencies, along with local jurisdictions, have slots for representatives in the JOCC. "It is important to have all the different agencies together whenever we have a major event," the chief states.

Chief Ramsey relates that the flow of information from federal officials to their local counterparts improved greatly after the September 11 attacks. "There was no real flow of intelligence information from federal authorities to local officials prior to September 11," he says. "The information flow is light-years better than it used to be. We are totally reliant on federal authorities for [this intelligence] information."

Many of the tactics and technologies for crime-fighting efforts that the department is undertaking can be applied to homeland security responses as well. Information exchange and force deployment are at the top of that list. For example, when a murder takes place, homicide detectives pass along information to the information center, and units in the field in turn receive this information so that they can interview people on the street during the course of normal police activities such as traffic stops. Knowing which questions to ask in which locations could steer officers toward information that might prove vital in closing the case, the chief offers.

However, one key shortcoming is that the JOCC cannot yet push all of its information—such as data compiled by Columbo—out to the squad cars. The existing mobile data terminals cannot accept all data, and Chief Ramsey cites this as a top priority for the force. “We need to be able to get that [suspect’s] photograph right out there ... we don’t have the wireless hookup that we need for officers in the field to be able to run their own queries.”

With more than three years of experience under its belt, the JOCC has accumulated many lessons learned for dealing with the many different missions it must face. Chief Ramsey cites the need for new technologies as well as some changes in the system to enable it to serve criminal and homeland security activities better.

“It needs a good refresh,” he states. “It’s not where it needs to be.”

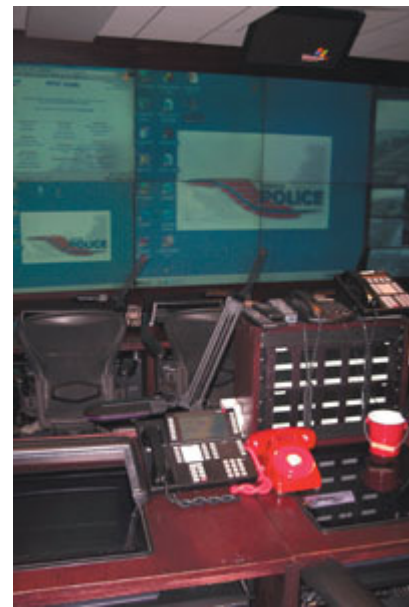
For starters, some of the display screens could be replaced by brighter and clearer versions that would allow greater detail of information presentation. Better communications technology would allow the force to move that Columbo imagery data down to the patrol car.

The network is old and “on a wing and a prayer,” the chief says, adding that the best components in the world will not solve the department’s problems on a network that is on the verge of collapse. The department already is witnessing crashes and delays in obtaining information.

Automated field reporting is high on the chief’s wish list. The department is still using paper reports that must be entered by someone who might not capture the information correctly. Instead of just digitizing a paper report, the chief would like to see a “TurboTax for cops” that would effectively fill out police reports in the same manner that the self-help tax software shortens the steps needed for an individual to file his or her own tax return. Police personnel would access this software and answer a series of simple electronic questions that, when finished, would present them with all of the relevant police forms filled out in the appropriate formats. They would not have to fill out any unnecessary sections, but at the same time they might provide information that they did not realize would be important to solving the case.

A systemic improvement would be to strengthen the ability of the JOCC to deal with activities that police do not traditionally handle, such as fire and emergency medical response. Currently, personnel from other government organizations provide liaison at the JOCC. The center does have software that can perform plume modeling, the chief notes.

Another problem is that many of the surrounding jurisdictions do not have the ability to pass along much



The position where Chief Ramsey sits in the JOCC affords him a centralized view of the displays as well as access to necessary communications systems.

of their data. Prince Georges County, Maryland, which shares many crime problems with Washington along their common border, gives the district a data dump only once every 30 days. That lack of timeliness hinders investigations, the chief notes. The large volume of data also proves more difficult for analysts trying to recognize patterns out of individual events.

And, technology is not the cure-all for whatever ails the JOCC. Simply having access to new sources of information does not necessarily translate to improved operational efficiencies, Chief Ramsey warns. “Too much emphasis is based on the electronic sharing of information,” the chief says. Roughly 80 percent of the information that comes across a system such as JRIES is not relevant to the user, he offers. It is not realistic to expect a person scrutinizing a steady information flow for hours will catch the one piece that is actionable for immediate action.

As recently as a year ago, the police department was getting too much information, the chief relates. Not only was it not really actionable, but also much of it was vague and general. That overkill has subsided, but the department still needs to receive vital data more efficiently.

One way would be to resort to a traditional approach. “Pick up the phone and give me a call,” the chief directs. “Do something other than say, ‘I notified them by putting it on JRIES,’ because [this approach] is not realistic.

“People talking to other people is probably the most effective means of communication in all of the world.”

Using Police Talents to Spot Terrorists

Applying crime-fighting tactics, techniques and procedures to homeland security activities is one of the steps that the Washington, D.C., police are taking to counter terrorist threats. Metropolitan Police Department Chief Charles H. Ramsey allows that a new program known as the Terrorist Intervention Program, or TIP, entails a partnership with various businesses to spot trends that might indicate terrorist activity in the making.

The police department is disseminating a list of activities that business people can watch for as signs of terrorist presence or activities. The approach is similar to one taken to combat more common crimes, the chief relates. For example, hotel personnel would be taught to watch for telltale signs of suspicious activity that might indicate narcotics activity, such as a guest might not let the cleaning lady into the room, or the guest might keep to himself or herself and come and go frequently. Many of these activities are similar to those that might be engaged in by terrorists who have something to hide, the chief notes.

A host of other businesses can be taught to recognize other signs particular to their trade, he continues. However, most people do not have a strong sense of just what kinds of behavior indicate terrorist proclivities. Not every hotel guest who cherishes privacy is a terrorist, nor is everyone who takes pictures of federal buildings in Washington, D.C. It is specific characteristics of those behaviors that can indicate terrorist activity, and teaching those characteristics can be difficult. “Policemen have a way, out of a sixth sense, of being able to tell if a person might be a burglar or an armed robber—just by the way they are acting,” the chief explains. “There are tips and clues about who might be engaged in some kind of surveillance that could indicate terrorist activity in the future, but I don’t think that we do enough yet to train people to identify those.”