

Technology often aids police officers, but may cause distractions

Tom Smith (Senior Staff Writer)



Tusculum police officer Bradley Puckett sits in the front seat of his cruiser, surrounded by technology.

Sheffield Police Chief Greg Ray remembers the first time he got into a patrol car as an officer in Lanett and the car was equipped with a two-channel radio and an AM car radio.

"Then we got FM radio in the cars and CD radios - we thought we were big time," Ray said with a laugh.

Today, a patrol car can be equipped with not only a multiple channel radio, but with radar, an in-car camera, a global positioning system, Internet-connected computer and a printer.

"Then, most officers have personal cell phones or BlackBerries," Ray said.

Florence police officer Eric Pollard said officers can sit in the car and do everything they need to.

"We can run a license tag, get the information on the driver or the passengers, write up tickets on the computer and do reports on the computers," he said. "The technology really makes it a lot easier for the officers."

Even emergency medical personnel have technology that helps get them to a location easier and faster.

"We carry a moving map GPS - it not only follows us but you can select the address and follow the roads," said Bruce Carson, director of Keller and Lauderdale EMS. "The system is our primary way to pick the quickest route to most everyone's address."

Advancements in technology have created valuable tools for first responders, but those advancement also can cause distractions, officials say.

"An officer has to be trained on the technology and they have to be trained not to be distracted by the technology that is in the patrol cars," said Russellville Police Chief Chris Hargett. "With so many things in the front seat of the car, it's difficult to get a passenger in the front seat."

"It would be easy to get distracted. The only thing he has to come to the office for is to transport a prisoner. Because of that, they have to be more aware of what's going on around them at all times."

As technology helps law enforcement and emergency medical personnel with their jobs, there have been numerous reports of how that technology has become potential hazardous.

According to published reports in April 2008, an EMT in New York looked at a GPS screen, swerved and hit a parked vehicle. The crash left a passenger in the ambulance paralyzed.

In another incident in June 2007 in Illinois, reports indicate a deputy sheriff was on patrol when he was radioed with a call. Reports indicate the deputy put the address into a GPS and then looked up just in time to see the patrol car hit a parked car. The accident seriously injured the driver of the parked car.

"There is no question that this technology has helped advance law enforcement into the 21st century, but there are distractions that go with it. Officers have to stay focused - more focused than ever before," said Tusculum Police Chief Tony Logan.

"There are times when you're going to a call, talking on the radio and looking at a GPS for directions," Ray said. "Being a law enforcement officer is multiple tasking at its best."

"But the bottom line is, you have to be careful and watch what you're doing, because the driver is still in control of the vehicle."

Logan said the technology has caused his department to implement policies to deal with in-car computer use and use of cell phones or Blackberries or social networks, "which are also distractions."

"The technology presents a challenge for officers, but you hope they are professional enough to understand the technology is a tool to help them with their work, not just fun and games," Logan said.

Eddie Russell, program director for the North Alabama Highway Safety Office in Tuscumbia, said all agencies in the Shoals have technology in some of their patrol cars, if not all of them. He said grants through the transportation department have helped finance many of the technical gadgets.

"No one has any money to hire additional people, so they are using this technology to get better management of their time and resources," Russell said.

Logan said the technology has almost become a necessity because many reports are mandated to be sent to the state department of transportation electronically.

"It's a great tool, which has helped law enforcement in general to be more efficient because most of an officer's job can be done sitting in their vehicle," Hargett said. "It's made them more visible and puts them out on the roads quicker."

Russell said technology has changed policing drastically in the past 25 years.

"It's like going from a Model A to a 2010 Cadillac, there has been that much of a leap in technology," Russell said. "I doubt if anyone would have thought 20 years ago all of this technology would be available to an officer and be mounted in the front seat of their car."

Ray said there is no question technology has helped law enforcement advance and has become a necessary tool for officers today.

"It's all about trying to help us do our jobs better, but in the end you have to weigh that with the potential distractions," Ray said. "We're always on people about keeping down distractions because their No. 1 job when behind a wheel is and should be driving. And we have to adhere to that, too."

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