

SPD upgrading in-car, body cameras

By Nate Delesline III
Staff Writer

Cameras are an integral part of modern law enforcement and public safety.

That's why Smithfield's Police Department is pursuing technology upgrades. Over the next few years, the town plans to equip all patrol vehicles with a system that will digitally link in-car cameras and body cameras.

Deputy Chief Chris Meier said all of the department's patrol vehicles currently have cameras, but the upgraded system will hopefully further enhance safety, trust and accountability between officers and the community.

Here's how the new system works: when an officer turns on the emergency lights, the system automatically activates the in-car camera and the officer's body camera. The body camera of any other officer who is within about 30 feet of the activation will also start recording.

The system also connects with the officer's tasers. When the weapon is turned on, the cameras activate.

"Sometimes when the officers are getting into quick situations, high stress situations, they forget to turn on their body cameras," Meier said. "So the second they hit their lights, it turns their body camera on for them. It removes some of that human error."

Adding four in-car camera systems to the town's existing contract with Axon, which makes devices and software apps for public safety, will cost \$31,635 over the next three years. Town council approved the move at its Jan. 5 meeting.

Meier said law enforcement camera technology has evolved exponentially.

"When I started, there was still VHS [tapes]. We had to change the VHS out," Meier said. Then technology evolved to CDs, then hard drives. Now the latest generation of camera technology is

internet cloud-based.

The system also allows officials to sync up footage from multiple in-car and body cameras, providing multiple perspectives of an incident. The system also automatically adds a few seconds of video footage from before the cameras are activated, which provides additional context.

"There's always something that happens before we turn the blue lights on," Meier said.

Additionally, the software also allows officials to cut a long clip down to a shorter clip and blur out people's faces for their privacy and safety. This is useful, Meier explained, if a major incident happens and the video is about to be released, but there are bystanders in the recording who aren't directly involved.

The system is connected to a router and SIM card, which automatically sends video clips to the cloud. Finally, for further accountability, the system also automatically stamps the digital file with a tracking history showing who watched the video and when.

And since the system is cloud-based, videos can easily be shared with prosecutors or other public safety agencies, eliminating the need to make physical copies.

Officer Anthony Cooper, who demonstrated some of the system's features for The Smithfield Times, said the system inspires more confidence for him when he's on the job.

"What I like about it is I was just talking to Officer [Donna] Hughes. I did a traffic stop earlier and when I initiated the traffic stop, obviously my camera came on and her camera came on as well even though she was driving past. So everybody's body camera comes on."

On every traffic stop, "everything is in sync when I walk up to the door," Cooper said.

IW receives new disaster response vehicle



By Nate Delesline III
Staff Writer

Isle of Wight County has a new tool available to support local and regional public safety.

The county recently took delivery of a new mass casualty incident bus. The specialized vehicle, which is purpose-built on a 2019 Ford F-550 truck chassis, is designed to transport nine people on stretchers, two people in wheelchairs and 10

seated patients, according to information from the county.

Although the vehicle, called the MCI bus for short by public safety staff, cost about \$125,000, the county got it for free, with no matching funding required, through the Hampton Roads Metropolitan Medical Response System. The regional organization was established in 1999 under the Hampton Roads Planning District

• See BUS, p. 4



Greg Parsons, a captain with Isle of Wight County Emergency Services, stands at the front passenger door of the county's recently delivered mass casualty incident bus. The vehicle is deployed in advance of or in response to events where a large public safety response is needed. (Nate Delesline III/The Smithfield Times)

Bus

• Continued from p. 1

Commission.

Capt. Greg Parsons with Isle of Wight's Department of Emergency Services said the new vehicle replaces a converted school bus that was used for the same purpose. The county has had the new vehicle for about a month.

"It's designed to give us a place to treat multiple patients at one time," Parsons said. "And that treatment may be that they come here and then they're taken to an ambulance for transportation later." In the event a large number of people need medical attention, "not all of them are going to be transported to a facility, so they can be evaluated, some can be treated here and released,

some may be treated and transported," Parsons said.

In addition, Parsons said the vehicle can also be deployed in advance of large events as an additional resource to maintain everyone's health and safety — being available for first responders and members of the public to step into as a place to cool off if they are overcome by the heat during a community event on a summer day, for example.

Parsons clarified that the vehicle is not set up to function as an ambulance. There's no defibrillator or stocked medicine cabinet regularly kept on board. "When you're dealing with an ambulance, you have room for one patient, pri-

marily. This just gives us some more room and the flexibility to deal with multiple patients," Parsons said.

Through the regional partnership, the bus allows Isle of Wight to "supplement the other jurisdictions if there were to be a mass casualty event where they would need mutual aid." The Hampton Roads Metropolitan Medical Response System includes 17 jurisdictions, covers 2,900 square miles and has a population of 1.7 million — essentially every community in the region. Between 1999 and 2014, the region received nearly \$10 million in federal grants to develop and support regional public safety co-

operation and training initiatives, according to the organization's website.

Isle of Wight has 83 full-time and part-time staff supported by approximately 300 volunteer fire and emergency medical service responders, according to Pat Humphries, the county's chief of emergency services.

In the spirit of mutual regional cooperation, Isle of Wight's old mass casualty vehicle will stay in service.

"The old MCI bus will be going to Surry County Emergency Management," Humphries said. "This will be an asset that Isle of Wight can still use as a mutual aid request as needed."

Spanish-language hotline available

Línea directa en español disponible

By Nate Delesline III
Staff Writer

In a crisis, hearing “No habla Español” can be heartbreaking or even terrifying.

If you speak Spanish and can't connect with someone who can speak and understand your language, it could be a matter of life or death. That's why a non-profit wants everyone to know that bilingual and bicultural help is only one call away for anyone in Virginia who is a victim of violence or injustice.

A first of its kind in Virginia, 24/7 phone hotline went live Jan. 4 that will providing direct access to trained Spanish-speaking advocates who are ready to assist. The hotline is operated through the Richmond-based Latinos in Virginia Empowerment Center and will serve the entire state.

All of the center's services are free and confidential.

“I would put it this way,” said Gabriella Telepman, the center's support services coordinator. “Imagine if you were in a non-English speaking country on a vacation or for business travel purposes and something happened and you needed emergency assistance but you didn't know who to call and everywhere you called there wasn't a person that was able to speak English over the phone?” For people who are new to the U.S. and haven't adjusted to the culture or aren't proficient with the main language, “that's what they're going through,” she said.

The center previously operated a help line during regular business hours. Seeing a missed call from overnight or over the weekend would leave the center's staff concerned about what may have happened to that person. Enhancing the helpline to an around-the-clock hotline has been a longstanding goal of the organization's leadership since the center began operating, first as a grassroots organization of volunteers,

‘We can empathize with your situation because we're from the same culture and speak the same language.’

Gabriella Telepman
Support services coordinator

and then, about two years ago, as a 501c3 nonprofit.

“Why not expand our services to be able to fully attend to these victims of violence in any case, no matter where in Virginia they are, no matter what time of day or night it is? It only seemed like the natural progression for us,” Telepman said.

Trained volunteers are on the hotline who are prepared to help people with crisis intervention, domestic violence, shelter placement, sexual violence, human trafficking, hate crimes or similar situations.

More in-depth services, such as court accompaniment, are available for people who live in the Richmond area. “If we get a call from a client somewhere that's a bit far away in Virginia, we might not be able to go to court with them, but we can advocate for them over the phone and get them to the appropriate local, bilingual court advocate that can accompany them,” Telepman said.

And being culturally literate is just as important as language literacy, she said. “You might not know how to say things like ‘protective order’ in Spanish,” she said, which can make it hard for people to navigate through the legal or social services systems.

“What we try to do and what we pride ourselves on is making that process a whole lot easier for that population because we're always able to guarantee

our services are provided by bilingual, bicultural and trained advocates,” Telepman continued. “We can empathize with your situation because we're from the same culture and speak the same language.”

The statewide hotline number is 888-969-1825.

More information about the Latinos in Virginia Empowerment Center is available at latinosenvirginia.org, on the organization's Facebook page, by calling the regular office number at 804-658-3341 or by emailing hola@latinosenvirginia.org.

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