Illinois Fire Department Conducts "Virtual" Training Via Videoconferencing To Maximize Emergency Response Capabilities

Sony IPELA Network Connects Fire Houses; Saves Money And Time.

The Palatine, Ill. fire department is creating a new model for first responders across the country. Village officials in this Chicago suburb recognized the need to keep firefighters up-to-date on the latest safety and emergency response techniques; however, with limited personnel and budget resources, bringing crews out of the fire-houses and off-site for training meant they would not be able to respond to emergencies when the call came.

The Village found its solution through the use of a Sony IPELA® videoconferencing network. The network links five Sony PCS-1 communications systems installed in separate firehouses to a PCS-G70 codec unit in another firehouse used as the primary training site, allowing the department to conduct "virtual" training sessions.

"Ongoing training is crucial for firefighters, but until now, it required taking personnel out of their stations to attend off-site sessions," said Fred Hoegler, Palatine's deputy fire chief. "With this video-conferencing system, we bring the training to the firefighters, making better use of everyone's time and resources.

"Firefighters can stay up-to-date on the latest information, while remaining in their houses and ready to respond to any situation at a moment's notice," Hoegler added.

According to the deputy chief, finding ways to streamline training has become critical in recent years for the 95 firefighters serving the city's 69,000 residents. A Palatine firefighter spends about 20 hours each month attending classes relating to fire fighting and safety alone.

According to Hoegler, Palatine's firefighters perform double-duty as paramedics and also have homeland security responsibilities, which puts additional demands on their already limited time. Using the Sony IPELA videoconferencing system, training is now conducted at the stations, so the firefighters remain ready for emergencies, resulting in significant cost and time savings for the city, as well as improved services.

The training sessions are also recorded, so firefighters can make up any training that they might have missed because of scheduling conflicts or due to responses to emergency calls that occurred during the original training session.

According to Hoegler, the combination of the PCS-1 systems and the PCS-G70 system was "the logical choice for its ease of use, affordability, and simplicity of implementation."

The PCS-1 and PCS-G70 units' dual ISDN and IP connectivity, as well as support for a wide range of standards including MPEG-4 and H.264, enable easy integration and interoperability.

High-level imaging capabilities are achieved through the efficient use of bandwidth – up to 2 Mbps over IP networks and up to 768 Kbps over an ISDN network.

"Responding effectively to emergencies requires an intensely collaborative effort between people and technology,"he said. "This initial phase of our training system is the first step in the creation of a network that will stretch across the entire region, and can hopefully create a new model for first responders nationwide."

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