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MEDIA RELEASE

Boston Bombings: Five policing lessons for Australia

Across Australia there are around 400,000 first responders– our police officers, firefighters, ambulance paramedics and emergency services personnel–who are there when you need them most, when public safety is at serious risk.

It might be natural disasters like the 2009 Victorian Black Saturday bushfires and the 2010-11 Queensland Floods; or a public transport accident in one of our capitals; a Cronulla riot; a stadium collapse at a big sporting spectacle; a New Years' Eve gone wrong; or a mass casualty terrorist incident like the Boston Marathon bombings.

In the lead up to the Boston Marathon, and knowing that there would be huge crowds in attendance, the commercial communications carriers expanded their mobile phone services to cope. Even so, the systems went down with the surge of calls generated when the bombers struck.

In Australia, the uncomfortable truth is that the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) is standing in the way of police and emergency services having the radio spectrum they need to achieve effective mobile broadband communications for situations like Boston.

For a police officer, being able to communicate is all about survival. Not even an officer's service weapon is more critical when it comes to safety. Their lives and the lives of those they are trying to save are at risk.

Lesson 1: Police cannot be expected to switch across to commercial carriers for vital communications because they will go down when police need them most. They must have their own dedicated communications system–hardened and secure.

We know that 30 to 45 minutes into the Boston terrorist incident, the police shut down all cell towers and repeaters within the area to prevent ignition of any additional improvised explosive devices (IEDs), with the secondary benefit of curtailing any additional 'chatter' between the then unknown number of terrorists.

The extra advantage of that police action was to enhance interagency communications between the FBI, and the Boston and other police and emergency services responding to the mass casualty incident and the hunt for the bombers.

Lesson 2: In a mass casualty event or a natural disaster, first responders must have interoperable communications so they can work effectively as an integrated team.

In Boston, they call this a “mutual aid” response. We call it inter-operability. In Boston it meant that certain radio frequencies were opened up allowing all the agencies to communicate on one frequency with additional channels given the large number of officers involved.

Lesson 3: The Australian plan is to have all States and Territories on a national network for mobile broadband communications. This will achieve the necessary seamless communication on a permanent basis.

In Boston their first responders’ communications allowed for the combined response of tactical units and equipment including SWAT Teams, Field Command Centres, helicopters, patrol boats, bomb squads, specifically trained canines, tactical vehicles with video equipment, GPS, heat scopes, night vision equipment and so on.

Mobile broadband communications makes these capabilities infinitely more effective.

Those aggressive deployments were supplemented by a team of crime scene investigators and evidence collection specialists. And of course the city’s CCTV cameras and footage from the alert community proved crucial, along with the decision to shut down the entire City of Boston with the advice to “Stay in Shelter”.

Lesson 4: Our law enforcement agencies need to be able to deal quickly with masses of information from CCTV footage and from the public. This means dealing with rich sources of information, including broadband information, analysing it and turning it into useable intelligence.

Many Australians watching as events unfolded in Boston were impressed by the speed and coordination of the law enforcement officers involved in the pursuit of the bombers and so was the Boston community as demonstrated by the unscripted applause in the streets of the city. The multiple police services had the capacity to operate as an integrated team.

The Australian public, themselves accustomed to having access to modern communications tools via the internet, also expect that key essential services they rely upon will have the same kinds of tools and rapid access to all the information available to do their critical work – especially when it matters most, in so called “mission critical” circumstances.

Lesson 5: Mobile broadband communication between police and other emergency services is central to saving lives and pursuing criminals during “mission critical incidents” and “mass casualty events”.

The ACMA are proposing only half the spectrum needed to do the job (10 megahertz in the 800 MHz band from 2015).

The ACMA says once the emergency services network reaches capacity in any critical event, they should switch across to the commercial carriers. This is demonstrably nonsense as Lesson 1 shows.

So far Senator Stephen Conroy has backed the view of the ACMA in defiance of the considered view of all State and Territory Premiers and Chief Ministers.

In the USA and Canada, experts have determined that 20 MHz is the minimum for these mission critical communications. All of Australia’s Police Commissioners agree, and NSW Commissioner Andrew Scipione, considered something of an expert in this area, gave evidence to this effect to a Senate inquiry into emergency communications in 2011.

The States and Territories have all signed on to the *Public Safety Mobile Broadband National Implementation Plan* to roll out the nation-wide mobile broadband network once the spectrum becomes available in 2015. This shows unprecedented cooperation to get this essential tool up and running.

The mistake the ACMA is making is in planning for emergency services in Australia to have only enough spectrum for a “business as usual” day of operations by police, fire, ambulance and emergency services, and for planned events like New Year’s Eve. The ACMA is not expert in public safety and their intervention in this critical decision is unprecedented. The ACMA would not be making the same judgments in relation to Australian Defence Force needs for spectrum.

Planning only for a normal day of police or emergency services operations is the opposite of what first responders do, but that is what the ACMA is basing their judgment on. Our reason for being means we must plan for serious unfolding criminal activity, natural disasters at a moment’s notice, and for unexpected terrorism incidents.

The ACMA has expressly ruled out providing enough capacity for mobile broadband communications in the event of a terrorist incident in a major Australian capital city like Sydney or Melbourne, and they have admitted as much in documents released to the PFA under a Freedom of Information request (documents available on request).

The folly of ignoring the clear needs spelled out by the Police Commissioners in every jurisdiction around the country will mean that our police forces will not have the modern communications tools they need when a mission critical event occurs and the public is in danger.

Any notion of police “roaming” onto the telco’s congested systems for their mission critical communications is fanciful, even if it was technically possible. As we understand it, roaming is not used to increase the capacity of the police forces own network in say a metropolitan area like Sydney or Melbourne, but can only be used to extend communications coverage in an area not covered by the police network such as a remote part of the country.

Learn from these Lessons:

This matter has been in the hands of ACMA bureaucrats for too long and their delaying tactics are unacceptable.

The Police Federation of Australia calls on the Prime Minister and Senator Conroy to direct the ACMA to provide 20 MHz of the 800 MHz band so that first responders have the dedicated mobile broadband communications they need to keep the public safe in all sorts of unexpected emergencies, including potential terrorist incidents that could occur.

The Federal Government, and the Opposition, is committed to providing the Australian public with broadband of a speed and capacity necessary into the future.

Australia’s 57,000 police officers and 400,000 first responders across the country similarly need **mobile** broadband communications to meet their current and future needs in protecting life and property.

Of course now that this weeks’ auction of the Digital Dividend (the 700 MHz band) has left 30 MHz of spectrum unsold due to lack of demand, 20 MHz of that spectrum for public safety would be even better than the 800 MHz band because of its ready availability, the lower cost of handsets, and the fact that that band will be cleared of existing users by 2015.

The Federal Government now has two clear avenues for ensuring that public safety agencies get the spectrum they need to do their jobs, but in both cases 20 MHz is essential. And the government needs to heed the five lessons for policing from the Boston bombings.

Australia’s 400,000 first responders and the broader community are relying on the Australian Government to do the right thing by them in the national interest.

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