Ammon creates software to assist emergency responders in crisis event

October 2, 2014

Greg Warner, director of emergency communication for Bonneville County, answers questions about a proposed safety application that links security systems to dispatch centers with high-speed Internet. The system can detect a gunshot and immediately send an alert to dispatch, as well as images from security cameras near where the shot was fired. Monte LaOrange / mlaorange@postregister.com

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The city of Ammon has teamed up with the Bonneville County Sheriff's Office and Bonneville Joint School District 93 for a project that would allow emergency responders to act more quickly in the event of a school shooting.

The three have entered a contest put on by the National Institute of Justice, a branch of the Department of Justice, and have made it to the second phase, comprised of five finalists. There were 15 initial submissions. The contest will reward entities for coming up with a new application for using an ultra-high speed computer network to enhance public safety. The DOJ will award prizes to the top three finalists; $75,000, $50,000 and $25,000.

Ammon created software that uses a private fiber network to give police an upper hand in the event of a school shooting. Tested earlier this year at Sandcreek Middle School, the application uses a ballistic-detecting sensor along with video camera and audio systems already in place in schools. In the event of a shooting, the sensor will alarm the surveillance network to pull photos or video from the cameras, and send them directly to the Sheriff's dispatch center within less than five seconds.

Dispatch then can send a photo of the shooter, along with GPS coordinates, to officers' hand-held devices as they travel to the scene. All told, it would take less than 30 seconds for officers to receive the images.

Bruce Patterson, Ammon's technology director, said the implications of such a system should not be understated.

"We're really changing the paradigm, which renders all the previous methodologies ineffective," Patterson said. "If dispatch can send (officers) a photo of the person holding the weapon, isn't that going to change how you're going to respond?"

In addition, dispatch will be able to use the existing two-way audio system in schools to talk with people in the school while officers are on their way. It could also be used to talk with the shooter in a negotiation scenario without having to enter the building.

John Pymm, director of safe schools for District 93, said the district is lucky to be able to participate in the project.

"We're absolutely thrilled with the way the test turned out," he said. "There is a real possibility that there could soon be a product on the market to lower emergency response times."

Greg Warner, county director of emergency communications, said the system would change how dispatch and officers respond to an emergency.

"We're going from no intelligence to almost total intelligence, if we can be successful," Warner said. "The ability to strategize when approaching a situation like that, and keep people safe, is an exponential change."

Sheriff's Capt. Sam Hulse agreed. One of the biggest issues officers would face in responding to an active-shooter situation, he said, is conflicting information from eyewitnesses on the scene.

"The benefit of having the technology in place is it can bring clarity to a chaotic situation," Hulse said. "Eliminating that propensity for error allows us to respond better."

Patterson said 60 percent of the score for submissions in the National Institute of Justice contest is measurable impact. Because it is so easy to see how the software would affect the community and emergency responders, he feels they have a good shot.

The winner will be announced by the end of the year. If the Ammon project wins, each of the partners will receive a third of the prize money. All have agreed to put it toward implementing the new technology in schools, but the potential is greater than that. The software could be used in banks, city hall, dams or anywhere else it's desired, Warner said.

If the project does win, Sandcreek would become the test site for a beta version of the application. While the new technology is fun and exciting, Pymm said, increased safety is the biggest aspect.

"The more you can do to deter someone from even thinking about bringing a weapon to the school, the safer you are going to be," he said.

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