Smaller cities across US opening high-tech crime centers

May 24 2016, by Dave Collins

Michelle Plante scoured a surveillance video for clues, trying to identify the man seen shooting at someone in a Hartford playground recently in broad daylight. Luckily, no children were there, and the man fled into a nearby house after missing his target.

Plante, who works in the new Real-Time Crime and Data Intelligence Center for Hartford police, determined the address of the house and who lived there. She ran names through databases, hoping to determine the name of the shooter.

Similar work is going on across the country at police real-time crime centers, where walls of flat-screen monitors are fed by surveillance cameras, and computers take in data from shotgun detection systems and license plate readers. Intelligence from the centers is sent to officers on the street, helping them find suspects and avoid harm by having crucial, real-time information, police officials say.

In Hartford, Plante quickly found a booking photo of one of the residents of the house who looked like the shooter. That information gave police a major lead they may not have had otherwise. Authorities say they are now building a case against the man.

New York City opened its Real Time Crime Center—the first of its kind—in 2005, and other large cities followed suit. Smaller cities are now opening their own centers after acquiring surveillance cameras, gunshot detectors and other technology. Civil liberties advocates,

meanwhile, have privacy concerns and are calling for better regulation of police surveillance operations.

Such facilities have opened in the past year in Hartford; Wilmington, Delaware; and Springfield, Massachusetts. Others are in the works in Bridgeport, Connecticut; Modesto, California; and Wilmington, North Carolina.

"It's such a great asset having everybody under one roof," said Sgt. Johnmichael O'Hare, who's in charge of Hartford's center, which officials unveiled in February. "It's all about transfer of information."

Although open only a few months, the center has assisted officers in hundreds of criminal cases that have resulted in arrests, O'Hare said.

"It's huge," he said about the new capabilities. "It provides them real-time intelligence."

Staff members at the centers can monitor surveillance video and tell officers at crime scenes about suspects' movements. They can enter names into criminal and private company databases and relay virtual dossiers on people to police. They also tap into surveillance cameras at schools and businesses—after getting permission in a process agreed upon beforehand—to help police respond to active shooters and other crimes. Much of the information, including video feeds, can be sent to officers' cellphones.

The centers reflect law enforcement's growing reliance on technology. Many cities are using federal grants and drug forfeiture money to help pay for the centers, which can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars to set up.

The American Civil Liberties Union says there is a lack of general rules

to limit privacy invasions and abuse of surveillance technology by police. The ACLU also is concerned about how long police departments retain camera footage and other surveillance data.

"The public really needs to be consulted, and there needs to be a debate," said David McGuire, legislative and policy director of the ACLU of Connecticut, which is keeping an eye on real-time crime centers in the state.

In December, the ACLU of Northern California criticized Fresno police for using social media surveillance software without the public's consent. One software program, the ACLU said, suggested identifying potential threats to public safety by tracking hashtags related to the Black Lives Matter movement. Another program assigned "threat levels" to residents, the ACLU said.

Police told The Fresno Bee newspaper that they were only testing the software during free trials for possible use against violent crime and terrorism and were not tracking Black Lives Matter on social media.

Civil liberties advocates also have concerns about airports and many police departments now using facial recognition software to track and identify people, saying such software is known for mistakes.

The Hartford center doesn't use facial recognition, but officials say that could come in the future.

Hartford Police Chief James Rovella said city officials are well aware of privacy concerns.

"We have to respect people's civil rights at all times," he said.