

Devices pinpoint gunfire in Paterson

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PATERSON -- Seconds after a gun is fired on some of the city's most dangerous streets, police will know.

The Paterson Police Department plans to install a ring of technology around parts of the city that will alert authorities immediately as to where and when shots are fired.

The gunshot detection technology uses dozens of coffee can-sized acoustic sensors placed on rooftops around a 2-square-mile section of the city. When gunfire is detected, the sensors will work in concert to triangulate the exact spot where the weapon was fired. That location, guaranteed to be precise within 25 meters or less, is then relayed to police dispatchers as red dots on a satellite-generated map.

Dispatchers can then send police cruisers to investigate.

This process -- from trigger pull to police alert -- takes between five and 12 seconds, allowing police an incredible response time.

"The faster you get there, the more witnesses or suspects you have," Capt. Danny Nichols of the Paterson Police Department said.

The technology's manufacturers also claim the system can differentiate between gunshots, firecrackers and backfiring cars. And it will also give police more reliable statistics on the amount of gunfire in the city, its supporters say. Paterson police estimate that only one out of every five gunshots is ever reported to police, and many times, that's only when someone has been shot.

From January to September of 2006, there were 53 nonfatal shootings in the city, according to the Paterson Police CeaseFire unit. Over the same period this year, there were 27 nonfatal shootings.

On Wednesday, representatives from ShotSpotter, a California-based company that manufactures gunshot detection technology, briefed senior Paterson police officials at Passaic County Community College on the technology's promise and its implementation across the city.

When the sensors go up, Paterson will be joining a growing club of its early adopters. About 20 municipalities and counties across the country, including East Orange, have installed ShotSpotter. Many other cities, including Newark after a triple murder in August of three university students, have announced plans to acquire it.

The enthusiasm is partly bolstered by reports of captured criminals and deterred crimes. According to news reports, police in Washington D.C. say they have caught shooting suspects thanks to the ShotSpotter technology paid for by the FBI.

In East Orange, which has experienced a dramatic, 56 percent drop in crime since 2003, police credit ShotSpotter with deterring people from even pulling the trigger.

The promise of the technology has even swayed critics of the city's administration and police brass.

"It's a wonderful project, if it does as it claims to do," said Councilman Aslon Goow, chairman of the City Council's public safety committee. "Between our two (anti-gun violence) components, our CeaseFire program and that, I think it should be a tremendous success."

That said, the system is not cheap. In June, the City Council approved spending \$329,000 from its general funds to install the system and pay for its first year of service. After that, the city will pay more than \$49,000 for each additional year. Detailed incident reports from the system, used for investigation, cost up to \$1,000 each.

It's unclear where the cash-strapped city found the money to pay for the system. Mayor Jose "Joey" Torres did not return a telephone call to his office seeking comment.

The company plans to establish an initial ring around Paterson's northern edges, encompassing parts of the Totowa section, downtown and the city's Fourth Ward. About 35 sensors will be placed atop public, commercial and residential buildings with the landlord or owners' permission.

If the program is successful, then police Director Michael Walker said he plans to press for an additional 2-square-mile coverage area.

The ShotSpotter sensors will also be coordinated with the city's 12 remote cameras, which will be increased to 44 next year. If gunfire is detected in the area of the camera, then the camera will turn to focus on the source of the sound.

It will take approximately 90 days to install the sensors once the locations are selected, ShotSpotter representatives said. And, pending city approval, police will need to calibrate the system by going around the city and firing blanks into the air.

"If live fire is not allowed," ShotSpotter project manager AJ James jokingly told the gathering of Paterson police officials, "then we're going to have to let the community calibrate the system."

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