Meeting the Emergency Notification Challenge in the Heart of the City

Point Park University in Pittsburgh, PA, US, is in phase 2 of a three-phase, multi-year project to equip its entire campus with the Metis Secure emergency communications system. In an emergency, campus police, emergency, and safety personnel will now be able to instantly notify all students, faculty, staff, and visitors at the emergency location and direct them to safety. And, people in need can press the button on any Metis Secure Help Station to instantly speak to Campus Police, report trouble or request assistance, and automatically transmit their location. In addition, designated University personnel are equipped with Metis Secure "Hot Key" keyboard shortcuts, so they can discreetly launch a location-identified panic alarm from their computers if trouble strikes.

Identifying the Emergency Notification Target

Point Park, which is situated in the midst of the downtown business district, has unique public safety challenges. With fifteen of its own buildings plus additional properties, the university has one of the largest footprints in the city. At Point Park University, a single building such as Lawrence Hall may serve such diverse functions as housing a cafeteria, department offices, dance studios and residence quarters. Point Park buildings and students are interspersed among the non-university population.

According to Jeff Besong, Chief of Police at Point Park, responding to the challenge requires clarity and cooperation. "Part of our public safety mission is to respond to and assist our students," Besong said. "The City of Pittsburgh runs right through campus. While we have defined our perimeter, something that is technically off campus might be construed as on campus. For example, our main sidewalk is shared by students and ordinary citizens. So when something happens, is it Point Park University or City of Pittsburgh?"

To meet this emergency communications challenge, Point Park turned to Metis Secure.

A Solution with Speed, Accuracy and Identity

Point Park's first notification concern was to provide a clear university presence in its outdoor Urban Park, which is enjoyed by the university community and the larger neighborhood. It is in this showcase location that Metis Secure's MS-6100 Outdoor Emergency Help Stations were installed. The goal was to establish a highly visible emergency notification solution that could double as a call for help and an outdoor notification station.

Metis Secure's outdoor Emergency Help Stations provide the right combination of visibility, reliability and ease of use to help Point Park University police respond to incidents in the park. Made from bright yellow molded fiberglass, outdoor Help Stations allow anyone to press the help button to make a hands-free call for help. The Point Park University logo is displayed on Help Station built-in LCD screens. Decals with Point Park's name, logo and police phone number are on the stations and when people in need press the help button, a voice announcement tells them that they are contacting Point Park University police.

Calls made from Help Stations are delivered over the university's local area network (LAN). One benefit of pushing the Request for Help over IP is that it allows the system software to identify the exact location of the help request, and record and log it for future reference, without the cost of dedicated emergency phone lines. And, emergency response to calls made from Help Stations is much faster than to calls made from cell phones—when an emergency call originates from a cell phone, the dispatcher does not automatically know where to send help.

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"The Metis Secure outdoor stations give us a high degree of visibility. This provides our students, staff and visitors a clear and direct line to campus police. Better yet, when someone presses the Help button, we know their exact location and can respond immediately," Besong said.

"One of the things I like about the Metis Secure system is the actual alerting device. It is visible, it attracts you to it. It is much better than a speaker hidden up in the ceiling. I think you feel a sense of comfort and it puts people at ease. If something is going on, people know they will get information or help from the Metis unit."

System Expands Indoors

The challenge of being embedded in the city landscape is not restricted to shared outdoor spaces—the university also needed an in-building solution. In an emergency, Point Park University officials have to be able to target specific locations. There are times when an event outside Point Park University's jurisdiction may overlap into Point Park University space—for example, a fire in an adjacent building or a city police action outside a Point Park University building. According to Besong, there is a need to target alerts to university spaces to inform people about non-university events.

Point Park chose to expand Metis Secure's system with MS-5100 Indoor Help Stations because they enable Point Park University to instantly communicate emergency alerts and instructions to students, faculty, staff and visitors in university locations throughout the city, or just to specific trouble spots. "Targeting emergency notification is extremely important.

MS-5100 Help Station

Some problems do not relate to us, but they occur in our midst. For example, let's say there is an incident on the sidewalk outside one of our buildings involving 3 or 4 city police. We can notify our people inside the buildings to shelter in place because a non-university incident is occurring. That's why it is imperative to have the ability to target locations and customize our messages."

"That's also the case with civic events that are not emergencies," he said. "I mean, the Super Bowl and Stanley Cup parade route runs right through our campus. On one hand it is nice, but on the other hand it creates a challenge for us and the Metis Secure system helps us define our messages and improve our response."

The network-centric Metis Secure platform is designed for easy integration and expansion, so the university can continue to scale up its system in phases, as needs change and it builds or acquires new buildings.

Integration, Automation, and Control

Campus police, emergency and safety personnel use Metis Secure's Command Center software to monitor and activate the university-wide system. The software features a powerful, easy-to-use interface, and provides a wide range of critical information and system controls. The Command Center is also the platform for integration with other communications, security, and life safety systems, so university personnel can manage multiple systems from a single interface.

The campus map shows the location and status of Metis Secure Help Stations and other key devices deployed on campus. Buildings with active Metis Secure systems are color coded to indicate their operational status. Clicking on a building provides information about the number of Help Stations in the building and their locations. While displaying the station locations, the software also shows each station's real time status.

The system automatically notifies users if power to one or more Help Stations fails, if batteries are running low, or if someone tampers with a unit. If power in a building goes out, for example, the Command Center software automatically displays a power failure warning on the map and sounds an audible power failure prompt; the building's Help Stations automatically switch to battery backup. The system can also send email and text alerts to key university personnel—for example, a text to facilities personnel, notifying them of a power outage.
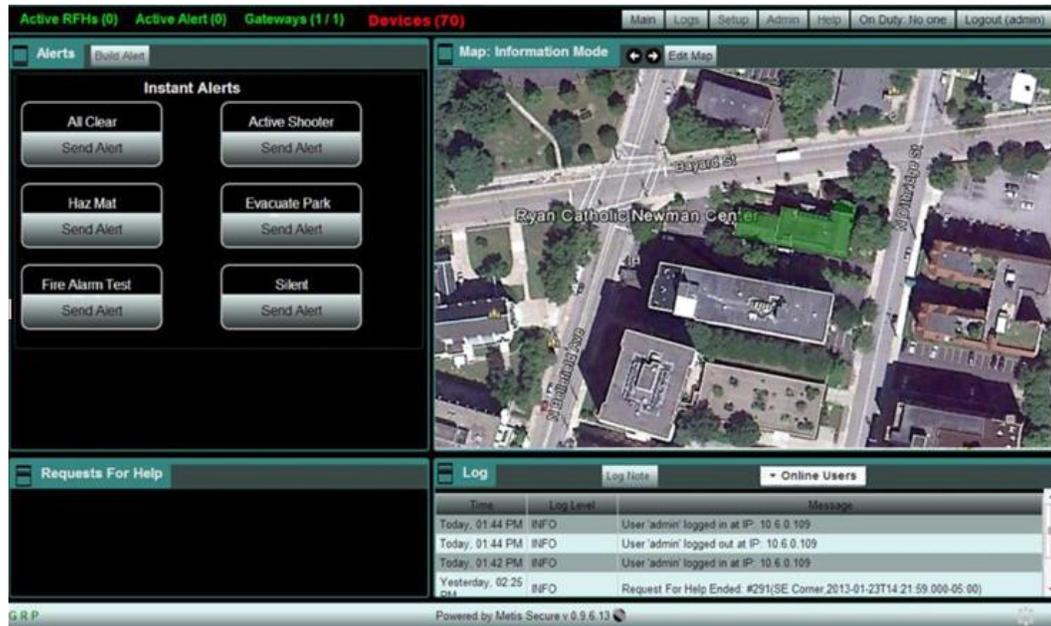
Fast, Effective Emergency Communications and Response

Point Park University now has an advanced emergency communications system that allows campus police to send emergency alerts and directives campus-wide or to specific locations, in seconds. The university also knows about power outages immediately, enabling facilities management to respond and repair problems before classes or other campus operations are affected. Finally, police dispatchers can instantly speak to people in need and see their locations, and response times are faster than ever.

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