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## Video | MBTA takes steps to boost safety, security throughout system

Posted by Matt Rocheleau May 1, 2013 06:41 PM

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(Matt Rocheleau for Boston.com)

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

The temporary extra patrols of well-armed police officers and soldiers in MBTA stations are gone. But the quest to bolster the long-term safety of the public transit system is far from over.

The T still has \$80 million in unspent federal homeland security grants, which have been doled to public transportation systems across the country since 2002.

The \$60 million in federal grants spent by the T over the past decade has helped make the agency a national leader in the industry of public transit safety.

“The efforts toward security and policing that the MBTA has had in place for a number of years have really been looked at as a benchmark for the industry,” said Greg Hull, director of operations, safety and security for the American Public Transportation Association.

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And, when the bombs went off at the Boston Marathon two weeks ago, officials at the MBTA said that, while shocked and devastated like the rest of the city, they were prepared, largely due to the new equipment and training acquired in recent years.

“It was controlled chaos,” said Randy Clarke, senior director of security and emergency management for the MBTA and the Massachusetts Department of Transportation.

He described the atmosphere of the T’s central hub for dispatch and communications, or [Operations Control Center](#), as officials scrambled to secure stations and stop some service after the explosions at Copley Square, and then again several day later when the system was shut down during a lengthy manhunt.

“I hate to say we’re used to crises and trained for them, but we are,” Clarke said.

On Monday, two weeks after the Marathon bombings, MBTA officials gave a tour of the control center, which includes some of the transit industry’s most sophisticated technology for daily operations and security.

Housed near the top of a 10-story locked building in Boston’s Financial District, the center is lit largely by dozens of desktop computer monitors and a curved wall lined with 48 screens that are about three square feet each and display live surveillance camera footage.

Below those screens are detailed maps of the subway lines that change colors and blink constantly as they track trains and other key equipment and signify where problems have been detected.

There are typically about a dozen people working at once who direct all trains and control everything from overhead station announcements and electronic signs to the subway’s power system.

Many of the staff use two or more computer monitors at once and wear headsets, though radio dispatches are also broadcast aloud.

The center is manned around the clock. Even when there are no passengers, work is done each night across the system between 4 and 6 a.m. and

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work is done each night across the system between 1 and 5 a.m. and dispatchers are needed to keep track of the crews and to keep them safe.

“We’re literally leading the industry here,” said Clarke, as he showed off some of the equipment. “Technology has moved so far that a lot of people think a lot of this is a given because they watch CSI or NCIS, but this is actually really cutting edge.”

One recently-completed project proved helpful in the frenzied moments just after the recent attacks, Clarke said.

Several days before the Marathon, T officials who monitor the system’s several thousand security cameras were able to, for the first time ever, view live feeds from hundreds of other city- and state-owned cameras, he said.

That additional real-time footage proved helpful as T employees, in coordination with law enforcement, tried to determine which roads buses should travel on and which to avoid.

Surveillance cameras have been one of the most substantial investments of the past decade.

About 10 years ago, the T had fewer than 100 cameras system-wide. Within the next few years, there will be more than 10,000, according to T officials who declined to provide precise counts of cameras.

There are cameras [inside every station](#) and around other T property like its maintenance facilities and yards.

About 370 [buses](#) of the T’s 1,000-bus fleet have cameras. Each bus that does has between 8 and 10 cameras. And, 200 more buses are in line to get them.

Trains and trolleys do not have them. But, once new trains are ordered, they will come with cameras.

The cameras can be viewed in real-time at five security hubs located inside stations, at Transit Police headquarters, and, of course, at the [Operations Control Center](#).

There, Clarke clicked and dragged a mouse to show the ease with which

employees can move from one camera to the next. The "HD-quality" footage from the newest models of cameras is remarkably crisp

But, "It's not just a video system, it's fully integrated," said Clarke.

He said the video is just one component of an overall "smart security system."

The control center's aforementioned screen-lined wall automatically picks and rotates which surveillance video feeds it displays to show either the busiest points of the system or areas where there may be potential problems.

For instance, if someone enters a subway tunnel or another restricted area without authorization, they will trip lasers or other intrusion detection sensors that will alert T officials and will prompt the video system to pull up live feed of that area, which can also quickly be rewound to see what just happened.

Some, including the ACLU of Massachusetts, [have expressed concern](#) over the added surveillance as a potential invasion of privacy.

But, Clarke said the cameras are necessary to keep the system safe.

Public transportation "is about as complex of an environment as you can get from a security standpoint," he said.

"Video is neutral. It only gives factual information." The cameras "help significantly when it comes to prosecuting crime," said Clarke. And, "the more people who know these things are out there, it helps deter crime."

It is possible that [some of the T's cameras](#) might have captured footage that could be helpful for the FBI's investigation into the Marathon bombings

But T officials declined to comment on the matter.

"We do not want to say anything that may interfere with the FBI's investigation," said T spokesman Joe Pesaturo.

FBI officials did not respond to requests for comment.

The MBTA cameras are also used to help improve customer service and to help the system run as smoothly as possible.

Other new initiatives deployed by the T in recent years have helped improve service and security simultaneously.

There are smartphone applications to alert riders of train troubles and other emergencies and those apps also allow riders to tell T officials and police if they see something amiss.

Cell phone service has also become increasingly available in underground portions of the system, providing what some see as a daily convenience and a potential safety benefit in the event of an emergency.

But the federal grant funding has gone security-focused measures.

Devices have been installed to detect harmful chemicals in the air. Transit Police have robots to inspect suspicious packages. There are special trash cans around stations that are designed to minimize damage if explosives are placed inside them. Random bag checks are done throughout the system.

The T is also using the federal grant money to finish an [\\$8.8 million project](#) this summer that will turn an abandoned subway station into a state-of-the-art facility where first responders can train for emergencies in realistic conditions.

Pesaturo pointed out how serious crime on the T has decreased in recent years and credited enhanced policing strategies.

“Transit Police, both uniformed and plain clothed, continue to patrol the system each and every day,” he said.

*For the latest and complete coverage of the Boston Marathon bombings, visit [Boston.com](#).*

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