

The ADVOCATE
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stamfordadvocate.com | greenwichtime.com | norwalkadvocate.com

9 Riverbend Drive South
Building 9A
P.O. Box 9307
Stamford, Connecticut 06907
tel: 203/964-2200
fax: 203/964-2345

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Energy and Technology Committee

Legislative Office Building

Hartford, CT 06106-1591

Dear Members of the Energy and Technology Committee,

Subject: S.B. No. 420 AAC The Broadcast of Local Police Dispatch Calls

I come before you today in support of Raised Bill No. 420, An Act Concerning the Broadcast of Local Police Dispatch Calls.

This bill is desperately needed to better inform the public of incidents in their community and as a matter of public safety.

Access to routine police, fire and emergency medical dispatch calls has been a staple of journalism for at least 50 years. In that time, the police scanner has been a valuable tool in informing citizens of situations from murders to motor vehicle accidents.

In Stamford, and in a growing number of communities throughout Connecticut, police scanners have fallen silent as more departments upgrade their communications systems to digital radio with encrypted frequencies.

As a newspaper, we wrote numerous editorials supporting the upgraded radio system to ensure the safety of police officers, who often found themselves in "dead spots" under the old analog system, and the public at large.

We did not anticipate that Stamford police would take the added step of fully encrypting all of their frequencies, including their routine dispatch calls that had always been accessible.

Undoubtedly, some in the law enforcement community may be justifiably reticent about the intent of this bill. Some will argue that it will make their job more difficult by giving criminals the ability to listen in on their communications. To be clear, this bill is only about opening routine dispatch calls. This bill will not prevent local police departments from using the same tactical channels and cell phone communications they have always resorted to when dealing with sensitive situations.

Digital radio systems allow for separate groups such as narcotics squads or SWAT teams to share their own channels and this bill would not interfere with those communications at all.

But this bill is about much more than allowing local media outlets to monitor emergency communications, it's also about public safety.

Local police departments are simply not equipped, particularly as budgets dwindle, to disseminate information about potential threats, fleeing criminals, missing children or motor vehicle accidents affecting traffic on a widespread basis.

Further, opponents of this bill fail to point out the number of crimes that have actually been solved because someone in the public either saw a suspect's photo in the paper, on TV or on the Web.

I have tremendous respect for law enforcement officials and I realize the difficulties they face, but this bill is only a threat to those who want to operate in secrecy and that is not healthy for our state.

I thank you for your consideration and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

Jonathan Lucas
City Editor
The Advocate