Protecting a crisis shelter from intruder threats.

Women's Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh safeguards residents and staff with an integrated 2N network video intercom and access control solution.

Organization:
Women's Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh

Location:
Pittsburgh, PA USA

Application:
Safety and security, access control

Axis partners:
2N, Cisco

For over four decades, Women's Center & Shelter (WC&S) of Greater Pittsburgh has been providing emergency shelter to thousands of women and children fleeing domestic abuse. Recipient of an award for excellence by the United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania and a four-star rating by Charity Navigator, the non-profit organization supports and aids more than 8,000 individuals a year. In addition to safe harbor, the organization provides a 24-Hour Hotline, Legal and Medical Advocacy Programs, Support Groups, and more.

Over the years, WC&S relocated twice to meet the growing need for sanctuary by moving to larger facilities in the Greater Pittsburgh area. Recently, however, when they reached the point of turning away more women with children than they were able to serve, the Board of Directors decided to renovate the current building rather than relocate.

"It had been over 30 years since our last renovation," said Mark Ritter, Information Systems Administrator for Women's Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh. "By now the building's security and phone systems were pretty antiquated."

Because the Center's 24-Hour Hotline is often the initial point of contact, the first priority was to install a robust Cisco Call Manager system to serve as the communication hub of the operation. Once that was up and running, the next step was to upgrade building security. The goal was to create an integrated security solution, one that would link the new network video/telephony system with IP video intercoms and dynamic IP access control to maximize building security inside and out.

AXIS
COMMUNICATIONS

Restricting entrance with intercoms, cards and PINs

"Our residential population constantly changes," said Ritter. "So we need to be able to control who comes in and who leaves to protect our fragile residents from further trauma."

To secure entry points, WC&S decided to install 2N® IP Force Network Video Intercoms equipped with wide-angle HD-resolution cameras, two-way audio communication and integrated with access control at the three exterior entrances. Intercoms were also installed for interior doors on the first floor leading to restricted areas such as the administrative offices and children's play area. Because these devices seamlessly integrate with the Cisco phone system, office staff can remotely monitor entrances, visually and verbally screen visitors and service providers, as well as buzz in residents and employees who might have forgotten their access card or PIN.

"When a person pushes the intercom button, it sends a video call to the Cisco phone in the office," explains Ritter. "If the person is on a prescribed list they're buzzed in. In addition, we now have a video record of that person in case there are any issues."

Proactively tightening its safety protocols

Prompted by an incident in a nearby neighborhood, the Center decided to step up perimeter security by swapping out the 2N IP Force devices at its three external doors with 2N® IP Verso video intercoms equipped with built-in RFID card readers and touch keypads.

"The IP Versos add another layer of security to our property," said Ritter. "Now we use a two-step authentication system at those outside doors as an extra precaution. In addition to swiping an access card, the user also has to input a unique PIN which we've assigned. Without knowing the PIN, someone with malicious intent can't use a lost or stolen card to get into the building."

Simplifying maintenance through a single network interface

Having an integrated, network solution makes it easy to keep access credentials up-to-date even with a constantly revolving residential population.

"2N® Access Commander software lets me look at all my intercoms at a glance," said Ritter. "I don't have to remember each one's IP address to manage changes. I can assign different access levels to different groups of users, program user names and PINs, without having to update each card reader individually." Ritter also uses 2N Access Commander to monitor the health of all the intercoms. "In an environment like ours, it's especially important that every access point is secure and maintained in proper working order," said Ritter.

Raising the security bar

Ritter continues to explore ways to shield residents and staff from the physical and emotional trauma of abuse. One of the newest tools he hopes to deploy is the motion detection feature available on the 2N IP Force and IP Verso intercoms. When the intercom detects motion, it can trigger a preprogrammed audio message to anyone approaching the front gate. This discourages loitering and assists first-time guests and visitors in locating the intercom to request access into the facility.

"The Center is situated on a fairly busy road," said Ritter. "We thought that all the traffic would create a lot of false positive triggers. But when we tested it, the intercom could filter out all that background movement and work perfectly."

The Center also introduced a panic PIN feature into its two-step authentication process at exterior doors. "If an assailant tries to force entry by grabbing a staff member, our employee can use their access card and enter a special PIN that automatically triggers a call to the Pittsburgh Police Department," said Ritter. Because of the Pittsburgh PD's proximity to the Center, officers can get to the Center in less than 10 minutes.

"Having a fully-integrated, network-based framework for security gives us the flexibility to add new capabilities as needed," said Ritter. "Going forward we want to make sure we're doing all we can to ensure that our Center continues to be a safe harbor for those facing domestic violence."

Women's Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh

2N
An Axis company

CISCO

AXIS COMMUNICATIONS

For more information on 2N solutions, visit www.2nusa.com
To find a reseller of Axis products & solutions, visit www.axis.com/where-to-buy