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PDA's upgrade security tools available to local airport police

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Chris Kullman, a Metropolitan Nashville Airport Authority policeman, carries the following items on his belt: a radio, a cell phone, a gun, pepper spray, a multipurpose cutting tool, rubber gloves, extra ammunition and a flashlight.

Now, there's one more thing for him to carry: a PDA, or personal digital assistant.

The technology is part of continued attempts to upgrade security at the Nashville International Airport since the 9/11 attacks.

Should a wayward passenger breach a security area, cameras inside the airport can shoot photos or video, which can be sent immediately to Kullman's PDA.

That way, he won't have to rely on someone's attempt to describe a suspect via radio; he will have a photo.

Ten Dell PDA's were purchased about a month ago and set up for officers at the airport. Although they are still in the testing phase, the airport's chief of public safety, Duane McGray, already is getting calls from other airports interested in setting up similar systems.

"The advantage here is it's mobile, it's real time, and (officers) don't have to have someone bring them a printed copy of a picture," said Vanessa Hickman, the Metro Nashville Airport Authority's chief information officer.

It was not clear last week how many other airports already have adopted similar technology.

"It sounds like the latest thing in a string of advances in technology at the local level," said Scott Wintner, a spokesman for the Washington-based Airports Council International-North America.

The nation's airports are always pushing for more funding to handle technological safety initiatives.

But this project, at a cost of less than \$5,000 and paid for out of the airport's operating budget, was a small expense compared with some others, McGray said.

Most recently, the airport spent \$2.5 million to add fences and cameras.

Airport officials would like to add an automated X-ray system to screen every bag. Currently every bag has to be handled by a person. An automated system could cost about \$30 million, McGray said.

Still, he admits the PDAs haven't been used much since the airport got them about a month ago.

A security breach that shuts down operations at the Nashville airport, while a suspect is sought, occurs about once every six months or a year, he said.

The last one he remembers happened about a year ago when an elderly passenger accidentally wandered outdoors onto an airplane ramp looking for a wheelchair for his wife.

Nashville airport security specialist Fred Kemper said he could envision using the PDAs for a notice of a missing child or to share suspect photos with other law enforcement such as the FBI.

The officers "will find a hundred uses for them we haven't even thought of," he said.

The system uses an existing Wi-Fi network at the airport. Chicago-based Concourse Communications gave airport security a private port to use on the network to transmit photos.

Dispatchers can use photos taken at cameras at the airport and send them to all officers' PDAs.

The system only works inside the airport terminal, and McGray wants to upgrade it so the photos could be sent to laptop computers inside patrol cars around the airport.

Sgt. Thomas Quarles, an officer at the airport, said it took a while to get used to the laptops that were introduced to the squad cars a little more than a year ago. Now he doesn't know how he'd do his job without them.

"You have to enter the technological age," he said. "It's really unlimited what you could do."