

Atlanta Housing Authority NiceVision® Case Study

When Renee Glover took over as Executive Director of the Atlanta Housing Authority (AHA) in 1995, one of her top priorities was to stop “warehousing” people and put AHA into the business of being a good landlord. As Director of Protective Services, John Spillers knew providing a safe and protected environment for residents was at the top of the list in creating better communities. The Atlanta Housing Authority is the fifth largest housing authority in the United States with a mission to provide quality, affordable housing for the betterment of the Atlanta community while being a self-sustaining provider and a catalyst for community revitalization. AHA accomplishes their mission, in part, by designing and managing housing that becomes a part of each community in which it is located.

Creating a Better Living Environment for Every Resident

The Atlanta Housing Authority provides housing to people with widely varying backgrounds and needs. Two groups served by AHA with special needs are the elderly and the disabled. Eighteen high-rise buildings, located throughout the Atlanta metropolitan, are dedicated to serving these two groups. “I want to reduce the risk for all residents, or as we refer to them, customers, that they may fall victim to a crime. Our elderly and disabled residents deserve as much or more protection as anyone,” said Spillers. In response to what he observed at the buildings as well as concerns expressed by residents, he quickly determined AHA could do more as an organization, and in cooperation with the Atlanta police, to provide enhanced protection for its residents. John Spillers had worked in a security capacity at the Atlanta Olympic games prior to joining the AHA and he had observed the potential of CCTV (closed-circuit television) monitoring to fight crime and create a record for police investigation and possible prosecution.

The 18 AHA sites, comprising a total of 20 buildings, are home for more than 4,000 elderly and disabled customers. Spillers wanted to install a CCTV system throughout this network of buildings, integrated with the on-site security function and fed into a central monitoring station. A project like this would take time and a lot of work. “We push management to the lowest level, so decision-making and responsibility is delegated to each site.” Because of the potentially sensitive nature of CCTV surveillance, Spillers and his staff needed to conduct 18 separate negotiations with each on-site building manager and a group of residents as to what the system was comprised of, why it was needed, and where each camera would be located. The results of this long, but vital, process are 316 cameras in the 21 buildings (AHA Headquarters included) with on-site monitoring at a security post and in each on-site manager’s office, as well as simultaneous monitoring at the AHA command center in its downtown Atlanta offices.

In October 1998, plans were finalized for a February 2000 retrofit of all 20 residential buildings. Plans called for each site to record its own cameras onto standard VHS recorders. But even on paper Spillers could see he needed a much more robust CCTV security system—for the analog recorders to record 24/7 at a high enough frame rate, security personnel would be overwhelmed in a sea of tape cassettes. “From my experience at the Olympics, I knew digital [recording] was the wave of the future, and we needed a digital recording capability,” said Spillers.

Enter NICE Systems

John Spillers favored digital technology, but a digital solution for the entire installation didn’t fit the current budget—AHA would need a combined solution. Spillers looked to digital recording to provide record-on-demand from the central command center. He envisioned a system that would allow any of the more than 300 cameras to be fed into a digital recorder at any time to create a clear, superior record of what had transpired at any of the sites. “The difference in clarity between analog and digital is remarkable, the speed of picture from camera to monitor excellent, and I knew the ease of operation with digital was simply the best,” said Spillers.

While at the ASIS (American Society for International Security) Conference in 1999 in Las Vegas, Spillers visited the NICE Systems’ booth at the recommendation of his security consultants and took in a demonstration of the NiceVision digital recording system. “I observed the remote recording capabilities and the quality of the image, and I thought ‘this will complement anything we have.’”

NiceVision in Action

Initially, AHA has installed one NiceVision recorder in the central command room, providing 24 inputs for immediate recording of any camera on demand and for any camera programmed to record for a pre-determined, specific time period. The results have been highly impressive. “We can print still images from the recordings, and that has really paid dividends for us,” said Eric Kelly CPP, Deputy Director of Protective Services. The CCTV system, with digital recording, has been effective in a number of ways. First off, the Protective Services staff is convinced that prominent signage alerting residents and guests to CCTV surveillance is an effective deterrent. In addition, Spillers and his staff have been able to record specific areas at designated times to capture vandalism, improper resident behavior, and even crimes against residents. “We have had success on a number of occasions operating like this,” said Spillers. The image quality and 15 frames per second provided by the digital video recorder give AHA staff the evidence they need to go to the police or, in less serious cases, speak to customers directly to demand a change in their behavior.

Each building has three layers of security coverage the majority of the time, in concert with CCTV. There are individual security posts in each building with security personnel present 24 hours a day on weekdays, 16 hours on weekends. A resident manager is on hand eight hours a day, five days a week, and both the security person and the manager have CCTV monitors at their locations. In addition to on-site personnel, the central command center has a minimum of four operators on duty 24/7, 365 days a year. With security personnel in each building backed up by central command, they are able to patrol more freely and more often and respond confidently to incidents. While providing enhanced security and a better environment for its customers, AHA has also been able to cut weekend on-site personnel.

The system works in such a way that any of these three levels—security post personnel, manager, or central command—can request immediate digital recording or that a specific camera record for a designated time period. Central command had occasion to use the digital recording capability recently. “Just a few weeks ago, a Central Command operator saw someone who had broken into *his* car in the parking lot here,” recalled Eric Kelly. “The operator immediately initiated digital recording with the NiceVision system and called the police. The police apprehended the person before they left the garage area and we had clear pictures of who it was and the car they had broken into.”

How do the residents feel about the closed-circuit television monitoring system? John Spillers explains, “Residents love the system because it’s helping make their residences a better place to live. They’re completely invested in making sure that the CCTV system continues in place. We do active PR—when the system helps us catch someone doing what they shouldn’t be doing or our residents observe that problems are diminishing or a perpetrator’s been caught, word gets around.”

NiceVision Performance

Eli Gorovici, VP, Global Sales for NiceVision has watched the Atlanta Housing installation closely and is very pleased with their use of the technology and how the system has performed, “In my observation, the NiceVision system is simple to operate, very intuitive, and what the operators see on the monitor is exactly what they get in replay and in a print out. Thus far, their operators have experienced minimal problems with the system, and they’ve been pleasantly surprised at how much they can do with just a small investment of time in training. Through customer feedback we’ve learned that of all their equipment, the NiceVision system has had the least problems—it’s performed the best. On those few occasions where they’ve had a question or problem, our NICE technicians logged on remotely and solved it quickly. For AHA, the bottom line is this is a system that will last and it’s a system they can grow with to continue to achieve the ambitious security goals they have for their customers.”

Atlanta Housing Authority: A Leader in More Ways than One

Not only is the AHA one of the largest housing authorities in the country, but they're also showing leadership when it comes to security management. "We've been asked numerous times about our security system as well as our CCTV monitoring system from other housing authorities," said Director Spillers. At this time, industry trends suggest a number of housing authorities are interested in replacing old and less effective security components and using that process to improve communication and the overall security environment for their residents. "We really pride ourselves in making substantial progress on many of these challenges," said Spillers. "At AHA, we want to have the best management, equipment, service, and training so that we can be an innovator in every aspect—including security."

And down the road? "My goal is to eventually have everything fully integrated: every camera, access control, audio, alarms, etc. and whenever there is a problem it can be resolved immediately." John Spillers' plans for his Protective Services Division don't stop there. "My long-term goal is to transform security into more of a business entity. To put us in the position to generate revenue by providing security services to other authorities or organizations and to provide more comprehensive security; CCTV integrated with alarm management, for example. If we can derive revenue from our department, we can invest back into the security function so we can protect our people and our assets even better. High quality, high performing equipment such as the system is part of our plan today and part of our larger plan as we go forward."