

Orlando Nell

#2,

January 27, 2026

San Francisco Police Commission
1245 3rd St
San Francisco, CA 94158

Dear Members of the San Francisco Police Commission,

I am writing to you as a California resident, a scanner listener, and someone who follows public safety operations closely throughout the Bay Area. I am reaching out with serious concern regarding the San Francisco Police Department's near total encryption of routine police radio communications and the long term consequences this policy has for public safety, transparency, and civic trust.

San Francisco is one of the most complex, densely populated, and high profile cities in the country. It is also a city with an unusually strong tradition of local journalism, community oversight, and public engagement. For decades, open police radio traffic allowed journalists, neighborhood groups, and ordinary residents to understand what was happening around them in real time. That system worked. It did not prevent police from doing their jobs, and it did not meaningfully endanger officers. What it did was allow the public to verify facts, avoid dangerous situations, and hold institutions accountable.

Today, nearly all routine SFPD radio traffic is encrypted. The public cannot hear dispatch activity. Independent journalists cannot monitor unfolding incidents without permission. Community members cannot understand what is happening in their own neighborhoods unless the department chooses to issue a statement, often long after the fact. This is not transparency. It is controlled information.

I understand the argument that encryption is sometimes necessary. Tactical operations, undercover assignments, and sensitive investigations should absolutely be protected. That has never been in dispute. What is deeply concerning is the decision to encrypt everyday dispatch traffic that contains no sensitive information at all. Calls for service, unit assignments, response locations, and general situational awareness do not place officers at risk simply by being heard. Many major cities across the United States continue to operate safely with open dispatch channels, including cities with crime rates comparable to or higher than San Francisco.

San Francisco's current approach, which limits live radio access almost exclusively to credentialed media, is better than a full blackout, but it still creates serious problems. When law enforcement decides who qualifies as legitimate media, it introduces gatekeeping into public oversight. Independent journalists, freelance reporters, researchers, and community watchdogs are excluded. Ordinary residents are excluded entirely. This is not how a democratic city should operate.

There is also a real public safety cost. I recently experienced an aviation incident in which law enforcement resources were deployed based on incomplete information. I only became aware of the response because I was able to hear open radio traffic in another jurisdiction. That knowledge allowed me to clarify the situation and prevent a prolonged and unnecessary search. In San Francisco, that kind of situational awareness is no longer possible for civilians, even when they are directly involved in an incident.

Fire departments, emergency medical services, and police agencies exist to serve the public. Encrypting routine communications does not make the public safer. It makes the public less informed, more anxious, and more dependent on delayed official statements. It also weakens journalism, which relies on independent verification rather than press releases.

It is worth noting that California law does not require full encryption of police radio traffic. Recent Department of Justice guidance provided agencies with options. Some departments chose the most restrictive interpretation, while others adopted balanced approaches that preserve public access to dispatch channels while protecting sensitive communications. San Francisco chose the most restrictive path, and I believe that decision deserves reconsideration.

I respectfully urge the Police Commission to review SFPD's encryption policy with the goal of restoring public access to routine dispatch communications. A model that keeps tactical and investigative channels encrypted while reopening dispatch would significantly improve transparency without compromising officer safety. This approach has worked elsewhere and can work here.

San Francisco prides itself on openness, accountability, and progressive governance. A city that demands transparency from others should not operate its own public safety communications behind a wall of encryption. I ask that you treat this issue seriously and consider the long term impact this policy has on public trust and civic engagement.

Thank you for your time and for your service to the City and County of San Francisco. I appreciate your consideration and would welcome any opportunity for further discussion.

Respectfully,

Orlando Nell

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