GPS Fleet Tracking Solution Enables Mobile Command During COVID

Kearny, NJ DPW manager directs drivers, and meets residents' needs, right from his tablet.

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When snow falls in Kearny, New Jersey, a suburb of Newark, the community counts on the town's fleet of 18 multi-purpose vehicles to salt and plow the roads. With tight resources and no drivers to spare, Kevin Murphy, assistant superintendent for the Department of Public Works, relies on real-time visibility into the location of each vehicle to give residents the quality street services they demand.

Using the GPS fleet tracking system from CalAmp, Murphy can manage the vehicles from anywhere – including his truck or his home – via tablet. This became a vital feature during the COVID lockdown.

"I'll have a tablet with me out in my truck, in my car or even sitting at home," said Murphy. In the past, he noted, before the town used GPS tracking, "If we had a breakdown, I'd have to try to figure out who to send. Now I use my tablet to reassign drivers to make sure the whole town is covered."

"It's really, really helpful in a snowstorm," added Murphy.

GPS tracking also helps him respond to resident complaints. If he receives a call about a playground not being cleaned, he can use the GPS history from the utility truck used by the cleaning crew to check whether the driver stopped at that playground on his route. He might discover that the driver had to spend extra time at another location and didn't get to the playground, in which case Murphy can assign another driver to complete the route.

"If a resident calls us and says, 'The street sweeper hasn't been on my block in weeks,' we pull up the GPS…They're shocked that I can give them the time, right down to a minute or so, when the vehicle was on the block. It has come in very handy," said Murphy.

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Mitigating liability

With the CalAmp track-and-trace system, Murphy can track not only a vehicle's location but also its speed. This telematics history can help insurance companies and legal teams determine whether the city is liable in the event of an accident. In one incident, a snowplow driver working to clear the roads during an ice storm slid through a stop sign and struck a passenger car. "It was a bad one," said Murphy.

The driver was accused of speeding, but GPS showed he was driving 17 MPH, well below the posted speed limit. In another world, one without GPS tracking, the driver would likely have been suspended, Murphy noted. Thanks to telematics, however, he not only kept his job but went on to become one of the department's youngest supervisors.

"It's well worth the cost of these tools to protect the city from claims," Murphy said.

Success stories like Murphy's underscore the utility of GPS track-and-trace technology.

"The best technology is always in service of improving the way people work, live and play," said Bill Westerman, vice president, product management at CalAmp. "It's a powerful reminder of the value of our work when we learn how our solution protected an employee delivering challenging and essential work like clearing snow and ice from roadways during an unfortunate situation."

A true partner for the DPW

The Kearny Department of Public Works' original fleet tracking system, from a local GPS provider, was prone to breakdowns and difficult to use. In 2015, the city switched to the CalAmp system. But Murphy's predecessor hadn't been taking advantage of its capabilities.
When a vehicle stopped reporting, no one investigated. In addition, as new vehicles were added to the fleet, telematics devices weren't installed.

When Murphy took over in 2017, CalAmp reps reached out to let him know some vehicles weren't reporting in. But he was overwhelmed because three other supervisors were on medical leave. When he finally caught his breath, he contacted CalAmp for help with learning how to add vehicles to the system and, more important, making sure they were connecting and reporting correctly. CalAmp discovered that the devices in a few street sweepers needed to be rewired and also helped him set up disconnect alerts.

Now, as soon as a vehicle goes offline, Murphy gets a text message and an email identifying the problem.

"I can't say enough about how helpful the reps have been," he noted.

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