Motion Picture & Television Fund

- Meraki APs and switches provide wireless coverage across 46-acre campus
- Corporate laptops, phones, and tablets managed using Meraki Systems Manager
- Simple Auto VPN setup provides secure connectivity from residents' rooms

Hollywood is a place where stars are continuously discovered and where filmmakers push the technological envelope to bring stories to life in new ways. Behind this constant evolution, Motion Picture & Television Fund (MPTF) has served as a consistent backdrop since 1921, a sense of stability in an industry where a lot can change in a short amount of time.

Founded over 96 years ago by moviemaking legends such as Mary Pickford and Charlie Chaplin to provide support for the Hollywood community, MPTF hasn't strayed far from its roots. Today, the organization provides a senior living community, including a fitness center, a UCLA-MPTF primary care health and physical therapy center, a skilled nursing facility (with a memory care unit), and a geriatric behavioral health unit; a children's center in West Los Angeles; and a group of 16 social workers in the greater LA community — all geared toward ensuring a healthy, engaged, and purposeful lifestyle for active and retired workers in Hollywood.

MPTF's main campus, sprawled across 46 acres in Woodland Hills, CA, is home to the organization's senior living campus, nursing facility, hospital, and corporate offices. It's a busy place humming with activity: 230 residents live on the campus, which has a large movie theater and a gym with a warm water therapy pool. Moreover, MPTF hosts at least five large events a year, including fundraisers that attract the who's who of Hollywood. To celebrate its 95th anniversary, MPTF brought around 800 guests, including Hollywood A-list celebrities like board member George Clooney, onto its campus.

To keep the buzzing campus running smoothly, Chris Livanos, Chief Information Officer, needed a solid network infrastructure in place. Not only do residents and guests expect seamless connectivity across their devices, but staff and contractors need reliable communication services to ensure activities run smoothly. "We have around 400 employees, with around 100-150 visitors on campus on any given day," Livanos said. "There are lots of activities going on. I would say that on an average day, with the residents included, there are around 1,000 people on campus."

A few years ago, Livanos realized that MPTF's network needed an upgrade. The organization's network load had grown faster than the previous network could scale. Upgrading the legacy network piecemeal wasn't a viable option; the gear was extremely old, so it made more sense to replace the system entirely with more modern infrastructure. From a management standpoint, the old equipment was so complex that Livanos had to rely on a third party for configuration and ongoing maintenance. "This resulted in many mistakes, long turnaround times, and high levels of frustration with our internal IT group and our end users," Livanos said. "It was time for a change."

Livanos asked his staff to trial a few Cisco Meraki access points, pitting them against access points from a couple of other vendors. MPTF's chosen partner representative, Josh Close from Presidio, recommended the head-to-head test. After a few weeks of testing, Livanos decided that Meraki was the way to go. "Josh told us that if you want an easy, solid solution for your wireless, go with Meraki," Livanos said.

Livanos set plans in motion for upgrading the organization's aging infrastructure to Meraki. First, MPTF replaced the old APs with just under 100 Meraki APs to provide more reliable and widespread wireless connectivity across the campus. To handle the load on the new APs, Livanos also had new Meraki access switches installed throughout the campus.

"Thanks to Meraki, just a few people can support the network."

– Chris Livanos, Chief Information Officer

But Livanos didn't just stop at networking equipment: he also transitioned off the organization's old mobile device management software and onto Meraki Systems Manager, Cisco's official unified endpoint management (UEM) solution. "We liked Systems Manager because it was easy to use and played well with the iPhone and laptop clients on our network," Livanos said. "Our old system had some issues here and there; Meraki SM makes it a lot less cumbersome to control our employees' phone, tablets, and laptops."

In a short amount of time, Livanos and his team saw impressive results from deploying Meraki. One of the pain points that staff, guests, and residents had encountered in recent years was difficulty acquiring a strong cellular connection. New construction on the campus is largely made out of glass and metal, which hindered good phone reception. Thanks to the excellent Wi-Fi coverage that now blankets the campus, people can now use Wi-Fi calling on their phones and no longer have to worry about spotty reception.

With Meraki, the team can use content filtering for certain groups of network users and protect users with Meraki's built-in advanced malware protection (AMP). Prior to Meraki, MPTF only had a basic firewall in place that couldn't provide adequate protection against newly emerging threats.

By far the biggest difference that Meraki made for the MPTF team was significantly reducing the workload on the organization's small IT team. At less than 10 individuals, the IT team needed a network solution that was easy to manage and troubleshoot. "All we have here is helpdesk services, a network manager, a network administrator, and app support," Livanos said.

The ease of use of the Meraki dashboard lets Livanos's small team easily manage the entire network stack in one place using an intuitive, web-based GUI. More individuals on the team now handle routine configurations, reducing the burden on higher-level staff. For example, lower-level staff can manage port configurations on Meraki switches in just a few clicks, resulting in quicker service and higher user satisfaction. The team also set up Auto VPN in just a few clicks — "this was ridiculously easy to set up," Livanos said — helping to reduce the organization's WAN costs.

What's even more impressive than these initial results is how MPTF plans to expand and build on its Meraki network to modernize the living experience for residents and guests. To ensure faster, more secure Internet access for residents, MPTF is rapidly deploying more Meraki APs in residents' rooms and in the children's center, replacing consumer-grade equipment and connecting these networks to the main campus network via a secure VPN tunnel. MPTF also plans to add more ruggedized Meraki APs for outdoor coverage. These will not only provide a better user experience, but also support a more robust W-Fi-based security camera system.

The organization also plans to add more RFID door access control units around campus to make it easy for residents and staff to enter different buildings; these also rely on the Meraki infrastructure. "We're looking forward to having an end-to-end Meraki network," Livanos said. "We feel it provides us with the best features, while enabling our team to be self-sufficient and to remain nimble in execution."

Because MPTF is a non-profit organization, funding can sometimes be tight. Even with that challenge, Livanos and his team believe Meraki is worth the investment. "We like Meraki all around — we like the ease of use and the quick response times. It's easy to deploy and we don't have to constantly rely on third parties to configure and manage it," Livanos said. "Meraki helps us focus on doing what we do best: fostering a close-knit community for everyone in Hollywood."