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Fortinet Provides Enterprise-Quality Security to Life-Altering Nonprofit

The People Concern works with vulnerable individuals in Los Angeles County as they rebuild their lives. The nonprofit connects people experiencing homelessness and survivors of domestic violence to temporary and longer-term housing, medical, mental health and substance use services, and other resources.

"We offer a range of services to people currently or previously experiencing homelessness," says Winnier Pereira, director of IT. "Our ultimate goal is to connect our clients to permanent housing solutions." The various services are available through dozens of sites throughout Los Angeles County, including several directly operated by the agency.

Clients can access Wi-Fi connectivity and often computers at these housing sites. "Internet access enables clients to research jobs and access community resources," Pereira says. "They can also use this connectivity educationally or recreationally. Because we give residents access to the internet, our IT team needs to provide protection as well. Network security is crucial to keeping our clients safe."

Fortinet: "A No-Brainer"

Upon joining The People Concern two years ago, Pereira prioritized security to strengthen the organization's existing protocols. The existing firewall ultimately did not provide comprehensive solutions to meet the organizations' complex needs.

Pereira had previously worked with Fortinet solutions, "And I loved them," he says. "We approached Fortinet with our authentication challenges, and they explained how FortiAuthenticator could help."

At the same time, Fortinet offered to solve another issue with The People Concern's legacy environment. "IT had very limited visibility into what was happening on the network," Pereira says. "With Fortinet, we could capture data about all incoming and outgoing traffic. We could also centrally manage all endpoints and the core infrastructure."

Pereira's team worked with consultants to design their ideal network. "Fortinet was a no-brainer for me because Fortinet solutions provide a much higher level of decision support than the systems we had in place," he emphasizes. "In addition, Fortinet provides many different tools to transition our security from point A to point B, implementing our road map a little bit at a time. So, we started with firewalls."

THE PEOPLE CONCERN

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Details

Customer: The People Concern

Industry: Nonprofit

Location: Los Angeles, California

Business Impact

- Streamlined access control reduces time to manage situations such as employees leaving the organization

- Improved insights into network and security performance highlight vulnerabilities that were previously not visible to the IT team

- Faster response and remediation in the event of a cyberattack

Granular Security That Is Easier to Manage

The People Concern rolled out FortiGate Next-Generation Firewalls (NGFWs) in all its primary locations. Its headquarters building runs two NGFWs connected to different ISPs. "That helps ensure our headquarters will always be online," Pereira explains. Each other primary location, including the organization's housing facilities, has a single FortiGate NGFW.

All the firewalls utilize the FortiGuard AI-Powered Security Services Unified Threat Protection (UTP) Bundle. The NGFWs segment the network, providing specific access rights to certain groups of people.

"These facilities all have two different networks," Pereira says. "There is a designated area specifically for guests. This area is secured with a password and is equipped with appropriate security measures, while still maintaining a level of accessibility. Web filtering is crucial. Web filtering is crucial for protecting users of our guest networks. The other network at each site is for our staff. It holds confidential information and must be HIPAA [Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act] compliant. So, we use FortiAuthenticator for staff access, eliminating our worries about password sharing."

Staff can access the same servers and databases with the same authentication process, whether they are working onsite or connecting via VPN. "We can assign permissions by MAC address, either for individual users or groupings such as executives, staff, and clients," Pereira says. "When they log in, the same security applies to every device they access with their network credentials."

The People Concern uses the FortiManager platform to centralize and standardize network management. "FortiManager makes management much easier," Pereira says. "For example, if we need to define the roles and responsibilities of our network admins, we will leverage Administrative Domains (ADOMs) to ensure each admin only has the privilege to access specific areas of the network and perform specific functions. And we use 20 minutes to integrate an acquired organization into The People Concern's security infrastructure versus two weeks with our legacy solution.

Fortinet Architecture Lights up Security Analysis

Now, The People Concern is starting to migrate its network from a mix of several switch and access point vendors to FortiSwitch secure Ethernet switches and FortiAP access points. It also deploys FortiGate NGFWs to protect the People Concern offices in other organizations' facilities. "We aim to establish a firewall at every site where we employ staff. This initiative is essential for enhancing our network security and ensuring data protection across all locations," Pereira says. Fortinet significantly enhances financial resources to ensure every office has the same level of security as our headquarters.

The rollout is progressing steadily. "Our internal technicians are working to facilitate the migration of 60 locations. This endeavor involves approximately 850 staff members and accommodates over 10,000 clients utilizing our guest networks," Pereira says.

As The People Concern adds more sites to its Fortinet architecture, Pereira's team is leveraging the Fortinet Security Fabric to radically boost insights into security events networkwide. Centralization of management is key. "One office location is in Lancaster, about a two-hour drive from headquarters," Pereira says. "FortiManager gives us full visibility into how the switches and access points in Lancaster are doing, which clients are connected, the bandwidth and available resources, and more.

Business Impact (cont.)

- Better experience for network end-users, as IT team deals with network issues more proactively

- 30% reduction in IT support tickets, freeing up IT staff for more strategic tasks

- 20 minutes to integrate an acquired organization into The People Concern's security infrastructure, vs. one to two weeks in legacy environment

- Enterprise security capabilities available on a tight nonprofit budget

Solutions

- FortiGate Next-Generation Firewall

- FortiAuthenticator

- FortiManager

- FortiSwitch

- FortiAP

Services

- FortiGuard AI-Powered Security Services Unified Threat Protection Bundle

"We are providing better service at a lower cost. Our network is much more secure, even as the number of support tickets we field is down by about 30%."

Winnier Pereira,
Director of IT, The People Concern

"Our Fortinet infrastructure also helps us detect situations where a computer is behaving abnormally," Pereira adds. "Two years ago, when I joined The People Concern, conducting security analysis resembled traversing a dimly lit room with merely a flashlight. I could see only what the beam illuminated, which often left me uncertain about where to direct my attention. Today, thanks to Fortinet, it is as though a light bulb has been installed, illuminating the entire space. I can now comprehensively understand the room's layout and concurrently examine multiple elements. Our team has significantly enhanced visibility regarding changes in network traffic."

Moreover, the FortiOS operating system makes this information easier to understand. "The beauty of FortiManager is that all our network and security data is on one simple, web-based dashboard," Pereira says. "We get a fabric-wide view with reports and graphics that make everything easy to understand. And we can do updates, change settings, and remotely connect to the firewalls from the same interface."

Just 20 Minutes to Integrate a New Site into the Security Fabric

As they rolled out FortiGate NGFWs, Pereira and his team discovered vulnerabilities they could not see with their legacy security architecture.

He believes his team's new perspective would accelerate their response if The People Concern experienced an attack. "Because our security solutions are standardized, we can update all the devices simultaneously," Pereira says. "In the event of a security breach, we would fix it and replicate that solution so none of our locations could be affected." The new visibility also helps the IT group proactively deal with network issues. This, in turn, has substantially improved the end-user experience.

"We are providing better service at a lower cost," Pereira says. "Our network is much more secure, even as the number of support tickets we field is down by about 30%. We now have zero tickets from clients: They log in to the network, see a page where they agree to our network terms, and go straight to the internet. And if they try to access unsafe resources, the FortiGate provides a message explaining why their action has been blocked."

These improvements in efficiency support rapid growth at The People Concern. "We are expanding to roughly one new site every month," Pereira explains. "Establishing a partnership with Fortinet enables us to standardize security practices across newly acquired locations. This collaboration allows us to replicate scripts, security protocols, and policies effectively, thereby facilitating our expansion to more than 85 locations."

This process takes "maybe 20 minutes," according to Pereira. Before the move to Fortinet, the same rollout would have taken one to two weeks, he adds. "Even with our lean team, we could deploy more than 20 firewalls in a single month with FortiManager." The speed of deployment enables The People Concern to offer services to increasingly more Los Angeles County's unhoused community daily.

Along the same lines, the ability to quickly bring new networking and security equipment online means that if The People Concern experiences a failure of an NGFW or other device, it can be replaced immediately. "Previously, if something happened to one of our firewalls or access points, we would have to talk to several vendors, wait for new equipment to arrive, then work with them on reimbursement," Pereira says. "Replacing the equipment would take a week or two. Fortunately, Fortinet is more helpful and lets us move the license from one device to another. If a firewall fails, we can run the last backup onto a replacement FortiGate, and in less than half an hour, we will be up and running."

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> Director of IT, The People Concern

The People Concern Works Smarter, Not Harder

Clients, staff, systems, and data are now more secure. "Our visibility and security improved dramatically when we transitioned to Fortinet," Pereira says. "We went from a flat network to the robust security environment we have today." The People Concern also freed up the IT team's time to focus on more strategic work.

The fulfillment derived from streamlining work processes is one of the most significant achievements in a professional career," asserts Pereira. "The adage 'work smarter, not harder' is indeed pertinent, and Fortinet plays a crucial role in enabling this approach. In my role as IT director, I have found that Fortinet equipment effectively simplifies data management. With the comprehensive dashboard, I am able to focus more proactively on various areas, thereby facilitating continuous improvement of our network."

In fact, he continues, "Fortinet makes enterprise-quality security available to nonprofits like The People Concern. We cannot afford to hire a security engineer, but Fortinet support strengthens the security capabilities of our networking team. If we are struggling, we can call Fortinet and their engineers will guide us through. With our legacy firewall vendor, we would submit a ticket and then usually wait a long time to hear anything."

Next up on The People Concern's networking and security roadmap is secure access service edge (SASE). Pereira envisions installing the FortiSASE agent on all devices the organization's employees and clients use. "We would be providing safety stops for our users' cloud traffic that would be similar to what we have set up on our FortiGates," he says. "We are also considering FortiEDR for endpoint detection and response."

"Of course, we are constantly looking at how we can further upgrade our security," Pereira concludes. "As a nonprofit, working through a robust security roadmap can be challenging because budgets are always tight. But Fortinet enabled us to transition our firewalls, switches, and access points, significantly improving our security and ability to see what users are doing on the network."

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