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Public Safety Partnership Debuts CAD, Records, and Jail System Serving 24 Agencies

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On December 31, 1999, a partnership of 24 Minnesota public safety agencies inaugurated operation of a single integrated CAD, police records, and jail management computer system to better serve and protect the public and public safety personnel. Now, one year later, this high tech partnership, known as the South Central Minnesota Public Safety System (SCMPS), has proven to be a technical, financial, and political breakthrough that bears notice by agencies planning for new computer systems. Once the viability and cost benefits of the partnership's technology sharing are recognized, including freedom from the baggage of historical consolidation issues, this e-business hosting solution for computer applications could find wider acceptance among public safety officials.

Before January 2000, most of the agencies that would eventually become partners in the SCMPS venture were unable to afford modern computer-aided dispatching hardware and software. Others were struggling with obsolete record systems whose vendors had gone out of business. No agency had a fully functioning CAD system. Certainly all agencies were mindful of the critical need for back up systems after a devastating tornado knocked out the dispatch center in St. Peter, Minnesota, on March 28, 1998.

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After investigating CAD solutions nationwide and considering the region's budget constraints, the agencies involved determined that a shared systems solution would best meet regional public safety needs. These solutions also brought the agencies face-to-face with the old specter of consolidation issues. The planning process took one year and resulted in an extraordinary degree of professional and political collaboration on the part of mayors, police chiefs, sheriffs, councils, and boards to resolve all issues on a regional basis.

Today, the SCMPS electronically unites five dispatch centers, four jails, and 150 workstations spread across 4,000 square miles southwest of Minneapolis. The partnership has overcome the increasingly serious information barriers that had previously hobbled law enforcement information exchange between and among the 24 agencies. One of the region's problems was that each of the 24 agencies had a different database. Even agencies with computers were unable to share information in a timely fashion. At some headquarters, dispatchers were still making notes on IBM punch cards. It was not unusual at that time for a detective to learn that an elusive suspect had been serving time in the next county's jail, and had been released. Often, the detective had to make 10 or 15 phone calls around the region to learn what other agencies knew about the suspect.

Planning the Partnership

The planning process started in mid 1998, when Mankato region chiefs and sheriffs convened to discuss common regional problems. Their agenda included regional disasters, mutual aid, information exchange, mobile computers, and Y2K preparedness.

Agencies in the area already knew from vendor contacts that replacing the agencies' legacy systems individually would exceed most agencies' budgets, and the replacement systems would still not address the regional needs. So the agencies took up the challenge of finding an affordable, high-tech solution by looking beyond current public safety conventions.

Their investigations led to an examination of the commercial uses of centrally-located computers that host applications serving thousands of users linked nationally and internationally through wideband networks. The question then on the table: Why not a single integrated system to host all of our public safety systems? One obstacle was that the words "shared" and "cooperative" had been stigmatized in the 1970s and 1980s by cost-cutting schemes that moved certain operating functions out of the hands of police chiefs and "consolidated" them with other agencies. Loss of local control, personal touch, and identity became hot-button issues.

However, the SCMPS officials soon recognized that a law enforcement cooperative using 21st-century technology would not conflict with individual agencies' control of their dispatch and records operations. The partnership specified a computer system that (a) retained each agency's autonomy over its own dispatch and records; (b) enabled real-time online sharing of information with total security; and (c) provided non-stop disaster recovery. After all, a tornado might again take down any police agency in the region.

Selecting the System

With these specifications firmly established, the agency searched nationwide for a vendor, eventually settling on Computer Information Systems Incorporated (CIS). At that time, 19 Minnesota counties were already using the CAD and record system from CIS, and eight other counties in the state were installing its new NT Windows Systems. That firm had won approval of the Minnesota Counties Computer Cooperative and had 700 installations nationwide, including the Utah dispatch center built for the 2002 Olympics. That center united the dispatching operations of the Utah Highway Patrol, Department of Corrections, the Department of Transportation, and other emergency services in the Salt Lake Valley.

The off-the-shelf system provided each agency with local control of its operations. The cities of Mankato and St. Peter and the counties of Blue Earth, Faribault, Martin, and Waseca required their own dispatch centers. They in turn provided central dispatch for their smaller communities. Now that those entities are connected online, they can access, enter, and maintain their own records and case reports, and integrate them with their dispatch records.

The system will also support combinations of central and single-agency dispatch centers. It is designed to operate at any agency location. It provides five geographically separated dispatch centers, any one of which can take over direction in the event of an E-911 telephone breakdown or catastrophic failure at another dispatch center. The system purchased by the partnership was capable of hot standby backup at a second site that would come online automatically and instantaneously with the latest records if the primary installation housing the system's hardware got knocked out.

Most of the chiefs and sheriffs involved knew from prior experience that system responsibility should be limited to a single point. Thus, the partnership asked the vendor to furnish all of the software and computer technology. It also coordinated with the telephone company to furnish the wide-band network, which it designed. The prime contractor also accepted total system responsibility. CIS provided the backbone hosting hardware at state contract prices, and furnished the latest IBM e-business servers to provide non-stop operation. Before delivery, agency representatives inspected the system at CIS, some 3,000 pounds of IBM servers in three racks, and conducted exhaustive tests.

Right after delivery, the partnership used the train-the-trainer approach to train city and county personnel. Ten trainers were selected and trained by CIS within one week. In turn, these trainers trained the staffs of all agencies in just a week. One benefit of this approach is that

participating agencies now have their own staff trainers and need not rely on outside training for new personnel.

Transition was made easy, said Mankato trainer/dispatcher Brenda Keenan, "because the system is so user-friendly. I threw away my pencil." Operator guides and trainer manuals allow the partner agencies to walk step-by-step through the various operations: 'How do you book an arrestee?' 'How do you dispatch this type of 911 call in this type of location?' The guides are operator-oriented how-to manuals supplied in soft copy on the system's host computer. Each agency then customizes the guides to its own operation. An operator's guide goes, say, from A through Z. But if an agency only uses A, J, O, and Z, it edits the guide accordingly and adds its own procedures.

Improved Efficiency

Once the system "went live," the region's public safety agencies immediately noticed that centers were dispatching police, fire, and ambulance units more quickly. Dispatchers no longer had to look up anything. When a call comes in, its location pops up automatically on the CAD screen, as do the names of the emergency response units for that location.

"In the past," said Sheriff Brad Peterson of Blue Earth County, "an officer making a traffic stop had to rely on the dispatcher to check out the vehicle. Now, all the officer has to do is hit a button on the squad car's laptop. A quick report provides a check of the license plate and any outstanding wants and warrants on the driver." Peterson added that there has been an increase in the number of arrests of motorists driving without insurance, driving with revoked licenses, or driving stolen vehicles.

The system tracks criminals and complainants, produces a variety of statistical and crime analysis reports, and performs useful chores, from displaying burglary patterns to tracking prisoner schedules for court appearances.

Sheriff Robert Meschke of Martin County is impressed with the system's "accountability." He said, "Every call and response time is logged automatically. As such, we can identify the number of calls at the exact time they come in and our response time, such as when the ambulances were dispatched, arrived, and cleared. Once we have captured that information," Meschke continued, "we can give city councils and grants officials the information they need concerning any call and our level of performance."

The system has compiled a vastly larger amount of criminal information and made it available to all participating agencies. Every officer has at his or her fingertips background on suspects that goes far beyond the classic NCIC and state databases. As Waseca County Sheriff Timothy Dann said, "The system can produce a field contact record in one agency of a suspect who loitered about a park in one county and link the suspect to a record from another agency in another county, aiding the investigation."

Additional Benefits

What's more, the system also tracks criminals and complainants, produces a variety of statistical and crime analysis reports, and performs useful chores, from displaying burglary patterns to tracking prisoner schedules for court appearances. Knowing burglary patterns enables command staffs to place stakeout teams and better allocate personnel.

Dispatchers report that their stress level is reduced by the new system. As dispatcher Keenan said, "Everything is right here on my CAD screen. It automatically tells me which ambulance service, fire department, or police units to dispatch."

In the past, if a dispatcher got busy, he or she could be distracted from monitoring an officer on a traffic stop. Now, timers both sound and flash messages on the CAD screen after a preset time interval. Dispatchers track each individual officer, the type of call he or she is working on, and response status. If an officer does not report in, the CAD alerts the dispatcher to make contact.

Mutual aid among SCMPS agencies is supported by a feature that enables dispatchers to view the in-progress call screens of the other centers. Not only do dispatchers know what is going on or coming their way, but they can also lend assistance immediately or take over for a city or county.

Officers are better protected as the screen provides a listing of

any past incidents at an address each time a 911 call is received. Dispatchers know if the address is a domestic-violence location, houses elderly or disabled individuals, or is used to store chemicals. If there was a warrant issued for someone on the premises, they know that, too.

This system capability is a real safety plus. It also works to reduce officers' time to service complaints. And if there's a court order involved, officers no longer have to search through piles of paper to discover whether it is still active. The court order appears on the CAD screen, prompting a rapid response. For smaller communities in the region, the new system provides the kind of big city technology they could never have afforded on their own, and all SCMPS participants are reaping savings from the trainer training approach. The partnership also expects to realize major productivity gains over time, through more effective allocation of personnel, and improved crime prevention. Because of tight manpower budgets, wireless field reporting will be important. It will eliminate much in-station paper work by officers and deputies, allowing them to spend more hours on the street. ■

About Computer Information Systems Inc.

Computer Information Systems, headquartered in Skokie, Illinois, develops, markets, maintains and supports its seamless Windows® Systems: Computer Assisted Dispatch (CAD) System, Records Management System (RMS), Civil Process System (CPS), Jail Management System (JMS) and Mobile Computer System (MCS). Since 1985, Computer Information Systems has had a single market focus of Public Safety Software Solutions, which are being used by hundreds of agencies who rank CIS as the most trusted and reliable provider nationwide. For more information, visit www.cisusa.org.

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