Cops as Couriers Gets Cut from Warrant Request Process

Police in Michigan's Shiawassee County called it the "Prosecutor Run." A trip made twice daily by officers from Shiawassee's 16 police departments to the County Prosecutor's office to drop off the paperwork required to issue arrest warrants. The Prosecutor Run took hours from an officer's workday. This was time that officers could have spent protecting and serving the communities of Shiawassee County.

"Warrant requests were a pretty involved process for us prior to going with the County's Laserfiche ECM program," says Shiawassee Sheriff Lt. Walter McPherson, referring to the software system the Prosecutor's office opened to law enforcement agencies in 2014. "An officer would spend two or three hours every day running the paperwork back and forth, or longer if it was a complicated case. Now department secretaries do it all electronically."

Secretaries couldn't conduct Prosecutor Runs before due to the legalities involved in processing warrant requests. So, the Prosecutor Run seemed like an inevitable expense costing 300 to 500 hours per week of police time. But, it became an unacceptable expense in this age of computer automation.

That was how ICC Community Development Solutions stated it in a presentation to the Shiawassee County Prosecutor's office in mid-2013. At that time, the Prosecutor's office was using an entirely paper-based system contained in rows of metal filing cabinets. The County knew it could realize considerable labor savings by converting the paper documents into electronic records, thereby eliminating the filing cabinets. ICC Community Development Solutions' General Manager Dan Foster explained that an even greater labor savings was available from the numerous software modules within the system that could automate the handling of those electronic images once they were converted.

Warrant Requests Automated with Workflow

Foster proposed using Laserfiche's Workflow module to eliminate the Prosecutor Run. By giving police department access to the County system, warrant requests could be transferred in seconds as PDF files via email. It took ICC Community Development Solutions technicians just a few weeks to make those connections using Workflow, and when it was finished, so was the Prosecutor Run. ICC Community Development Solutions wasn't finished, though. They saw a lot of paper and work that could be eliminated and automated

in the Prosecutor's office to cut hours and days off the time required to turn warrant requests into court appearances.

When a warrant request arrives at the County Prosecutor's office, it kicks off a long chain of official actions and authorizations needed to meet all the confidentiality and legal requirements to produce a document that will withstand a judge's scrutiny. Numerous offices and officials can be involved in the various combinations of manual tasks assigned to the different types of warrant requests received every day. Working with Laserfiche integration consultant IPDigital

and the Prosecutor's IT staff, ICC Community Development Solutions automated dozens of steps once done manually to issue those warrants.

For warrant requests involving juvenile offenders, necessary redactions are conducted automatically. If a warrant request is incomplete (which happens with 20% of requests), screening staff note the missing items and Workflow returns it for correction, eliminating yet more Prosecutor Runs for police. When a warrant request passes the initial screening, email alerts of the pending paperwork are sent to those next in line to receive it, and the sender is alerted when the warrant request has been successfully received. If problems arise, or supplemental information is needed at any step along the way, staffers note the revisions needed and Workflow returns or reroutes the request with similar alerts to sender and receiver. Nothing gets lost in the system anymore.

"It's one of the most elaborate process automations I've ever seen," says IPDigital's President William Peyton. "I've not received any calls for support in months and the system is little more than a year old. It makes you wonder what the limitations of this technology are."

Re-typing Eliminated & Routing of Documents Automated

Shortly after the system was up and running, those limitations were tested and surpassed in two key ways. First, ICC Community Development Solutions proposed using another module called Laserfiche Forms to eliminate the very time-consuming process for police to manually pull information from department's records management systems and re-type it into the PDFs sent over to the Prosecutor's office. The next step was to tie the County's system into the state's arrest and convictions records repository, called ACT, for assignment of a case number, which is the final step before an arrest warrant can be issued.

Now when police request a warrant, the supporting documentation is automatically uploaded from police records management systems into an electronic form, which is then uploaded into the warrant request PDF emailed to the Prosecutor's office. When it clears the Prosecutor's office it is routed to the state's ACT system where it is reviewed again and, if deemed complete, assigned a case number and forwarded to the submitting police department. This is all done automatically. The County's integration with the state's ACT system also allows the Prosecutor's office to access state arrest and conviction records, which often play a key role in promulgating the final charges put into the warrants, eliminating yet another function no longer handled by police.

"We no longer need to pull the conviction and criminal histories and copy them and send them over," McPherson says. "The time and cost savings for the departments is significant. It took some work, but it all seems so simple now that it's up and running."

Elegant is a better word to describe the system, Foster says. Workflow now automates dozens of operations police and prosecutors previously did by hand. Tying the local, county, and state systems together required several weeks of effort by IT staff at three levels of government. "From the outset, the police and prosecutors involved had a keen appreciation for what this technology can do for them," Foster says. "That is vital, when building these systems. It required a level of commitment and patience to put everything in place, but now they are reaping the rewards."

Shiawassee Shines in the States Eyes

What used to take two or three days now takes little more than a morning. Moreover, as staff becomes more accustomed and proficient at using the system, unexpected benefits continually arise. Chief among them is the elimination of a lot of errors in Shiawassee's warrant requests. The accuracy of input into ACT from Shiawassee County has improved dramatically, while other counties still have had some pretty serious problems. As a result, the courts don't view Shiawassee in the same light as other counties when asked to act on its warrant requests.

The state has congratulated Shiawassee on the improved accuracy of the warrant requests it submits to ACT. That fact is not being lost on other counties in Michigan and elsewhere in the country, which all must conduct similar Prosecutor Runs and cope with the manual work behind warrant requests, according to Foster.

The automation of the Prosecutor Run has law enforcement in Shiawassee County looking at expanding Workflow into another time-consuming operation the police must still conduct manually: printing out the warrants the prosecutors have issued and driving them to the courts to be executed. That too will be automated if the county courts agree to allow electronic signatures to be legally binding.

"It will save Shiawassee's police departments even more time," says Foster. "Courts in other counties we work with have adopted electronic signatures, so we expect it's just a matter of time before Shiawassee's courts do so as well."