

NEWS

# BCSO, Schertz to implement shared digital records management

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After 30 years of typing reports and managing a growing storage dilemma, the Bexar County Sheriff's Office could see an end to a lengthy paper-filing process with the move to a digital system to manage crime reports and data.

County commissioners last month voted to spend as much as \$2.5 million to hire Niche Technology Inc. to supply and implement the law enforcement database system that will connect several departments within the agency.

The system will include the adult probation unit, constable's offices for precincts 1-4, the district attorney's office, county fire marshal, and the Schertz Police Department. The Cibolo Police Department also plans to use the system.

In addition to the initial expense, the system will come with a fixed annual cost of \$409,640 for the next five years for maintenance support.

"Imagine trying to be a data driven organization when everything is on paper," said Robert Adelman, the public safety communications manager for the Sheriff's Office. "This will allow us to retrieve information faster."

Adelman and Ottis Hutchinson, the Sheriff's Office's chief financial officer, noted that anything entered in the system by connected departments, including officers in

the field, will immediately be available to all its users. The information can also be shared with the San Antonio Police Department.

Hutchinson compared its benefits to systems that exist in fictional TV crime dramas where an investigator requests all the information about a suspect and it immediately appears.

“We’re looking for a red truck with a license plate that reads ABCD, they type it up and boom! Everything related to that plate comes up,” Adelman said. “That doesn’t exist in our world.”

The Sheriff’s Office accesses both the National and Texas Criminal Information Center databases for criminal background checks, BCSO spokesman James Keith said.

“We still look there to see background as far as how many burglaries have we had ... are we seeing the same crimes here,” he said.

Niche Technology, a Canadian-based company, implemented similar systems there and in the United Kingdom.

In the U.S., the system was implemented in the Greene County, Missouri, sheriff’s office in 2009 alongside the Springfield Police Department there.

In a phone interview, Greene County Sheriff’s Lt. Deborah Wade said she worked with the company to create what’s called a civilian process offered with the system, which allows employees serving court papers and warrants to see any history of incidents with an address or person.

“They might have busted a meth lab at an address that officer is going to, and if we were on different systems, that officer can’t see it,” she said. With the Niche system, detectives see information as soon as it is entered by any other officer.

The Bexar County Sheriff's Office is working to implement the same package.

It will allow deputies to file reports electronically, much like the San Antonio Police Department.

The county adopted its current system in 1987. It originally was developed for use with SAPD. Reports are written by hand and sent to Central Records, with numerous copies made along the way by departments that need it, such as the District Attorney's Office and other county units.

There, 13 clerks working in three shifts spend much of their time keyboarding the written reports word-for-word into digital storage.

"The system is an electronic repository, nothing more," Adelman said. "It's not linked to other agencies, who can call it up in a database. Printing and inputting is its sole function."

In a cluster of cubicles Tuesday afternoon, several clerks were typing away at the narratives of offense reports from 2014, a backlog resulting from other roles Central Records fills.

"All the grammar, spelling, syntax errors that are written in the officer's report are entered into the database," Adelman said. "If it's incredibly misspelled on the report, it gets incredibly misspelled on the record. There's no spell check to help us there."

If a report is not legible, it gets sent back to the deputy who filed it to clarify the information.

On top of typing in reports, the department provides police reports to people and agencies that request them. .

Space is an even bigger issue, as some cubicles had to be moved away from a wall to make room for a rotating cabinet that holds cards from back when the department

sorted offenders by fingerprints, not their State Offender Identification, an identifying number otherwise known as a SID.

Despite the promise of eliminating many of the steps required by the current process, Adelman said the system will still require paper forms.

“It’s not about going paperless, it’s about using less paper,” he said, noting the system should subtract four to five copies out of the filing process.

When it comes to filing BCSO crime statistics for the Uniform Crime Report sent annually to the FBI, employees spent two to three and a half weeks reading the details of each report and ticking off a mark when it could be listed as a rape, homicide, or other offense.

“The system will do that in two minutes,” Adelman said.

Clerks in the office will keep filing in the meantime and when the system goes live, Keith said, adding that they hope to have the system up in 2016.

Adelman said officials have yet to decide whether Schertz or Bexar County will be the first to go online.

“They’re smaller, we’re bigger, they don’t need it because they have something, we need it because we don’t,” he said. “We’re still gauging how it’s going to work. We don’t have a full time frame because we’re checking how it’s going as we progress.”

Regardless of which agency goes live on the system first, the next will follow in 30 days, he said.

“We have several other agencies watching to see how this goes,” he said. “If they like what they see, they’ll follow suit.”

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