

# Justice systems need not fly blind

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Information truly does make the world go round. Until the late 1970s, the American economy was a product-based system. In the 1980s and early 1990s, it became a service-based economy. Now, as we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we have shifted yet again, this time to an information-based economy. The ability to know what you want, when you want it and how you want it is changing the world in which we live. But are we using these tools efficiently and effectively? In the world of business, perhaps. In the world of justice, no.

Nowhere is the transfer of data more crucial than in the area of justice. State troopers need to know that the traffic offender they just stopped is wanted in another state on a felony warrant. States need to share critical information on a paroled offender with other states. Courts need to streamline the use of information, thereby avoiding the forests of paper that currently drives their systems. Justice agencies need to eliminate redundancy in data entry and reduce costs. The technology to do each of these exists today, but like the rest of government, the justice system is not on the leading edge of technology.

The nature of the criminal justice system itself is what has precluded development and use of a universal information system for justice departments, agencies and states. Each justice agency has different needs and requirements. Needs differ from local

to state to federal and from one locality to the next and from one state to another. The information needs of a local sheriff's office differ from those of a state attorney general as do the needs of a state appellate court from those of a federal Drug Enforcement Agency agent. However, while each may have different needs, each could use a common system. The kink, however, is getting different departments, agencies, cities, states and the federal government to agree on a universal design.

Several state and federal agencies are developing integrated justice information systems independently that are not totally compatible with one another. Each system is designed primarily to meet an agency's needs. Few have been willing to bend or integrate their system into that of another. Before a truly integrated justice information system can be realized, several critical issues will have to be addressed. For example:

1) **Technology** — Different agencies have different levels of technology. While some states have state-of-the-art systems throughout all agencies and departments, others still track offenders on 3 x 5 index cards. Cost and expertise become critical factors. What states can afford differs dramatically.

2) **Knowledge** — Even when a state has modern information technology, using it effectively is still a chal-

lenge. Computers don't share information on their own. A person must query the system, grant access to a remote user or deny information retrieval to agencies or departments who don't need access to certain portions of a record.

3) **Access** — Should a patrol officer on a traffic stop see information that relates that a speeder hasn't paid child support in 18 months? Privacy, like cost, becomes a major stumbling block when designing and implementing an integrated justice information system.

4) **Security** — How can the data be protected and how are individual rights balanced against the common good? How much information should people and agencies have access to?

5) **Public Access** — How much information should be accessible to the public?

6) **Accuracy** — Information entered into and maintained within a system must be accurate and timely.

7) **Responsibilities** — Who is in charge of what? At what levels do local, state and federal agencies assume control of the information system? How do you maintain security and access control in such a system?

8) **Cost** — Who pays, not only for the design and installation of the system and the hardware and software, but also for maintenance of its infrastructure? ★

## Resources

[www.search.org](http://www.search.org) — The National Consortium for Justice Information and Statistics

[www.ojp.usdoj.gov/integratedjustice/](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/integratedjustice/) — The Integrated Justice Information Technology Initiative

[www.nasire.org](http://www.nasire.org) — National Association of State Information Resource Executives

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