

## Science and Technology

# E-government: Integrated justice for all

BY ED JANAIRO

**W**hen Minneapolis resident Douglas Welch pled guilty to being a felon in possession of a gun, the judge released him until his formal sentencing date on a reduced bail of \$5,000. Shortly after his release, Welch murdered his ex-wife.

At the time bail was set, the judge was not aware that Welch previously had been arrested for domestic assault against a girlfriend and that another girlfriend had filed a protection order against him after he threatened to shoot her. Had the judge known these facts, he would not have reduced the bail.

To avoid such tragedies, justice agencies must change the way they work and communicate with each other. Moreover, the need for exchange of justice information will increase as the population becomes more mobile and borders become less restrictive.

Fortunately, technology is available to improve information sharing. Many states are beginning to employ technology that allows their justice information databases to connect with those of other justice and public-safety agencies throughout the country, whether local, state or federal. This trend will bring the nation's justice systems into the age of electronic government.

## Virtual database

The U.S. Department of Justice is driving this transformation with its ambi-

tious effort to build a national justice information network. The goal is to “enhance, expand and link the current networks and systems under open, Web-based standards that enable broader sharing of appropriate information,” according to a report by the department’s Global Justice Information Network Advisory Committee, which heads this effort.

The proposed network will link justice information systems throughout the country. The network will allow for information to be shared “vertically” — that is, among local, state and federal jurisdictions — as well as “horizontally” — among police, courts, prisons, probations, prosecutors, public defenders and others.

Based on open Internet standards, the decentralized network allows individual agencies to continue to own and manage their databases. The network itself will not be a master database of all justice information. Instead, Web-based technologies will link individual state and federal databases into a seamless whole.

The sharing of justice information is not new, but the means and breadth of sharing over a national integrated network are. Law enforcement agencies already have several centralized systems that provide crime information. The National Crime Information Center, for example, collects data from state and local jurisdictions, such as information about wanted persons, and stores it in a centralized database. The system is incomplete, however,

because it does not contain all data from all agencies. Moreover, the courts and prosecution, probation, parole and corrections agencies do not have similar national databases.

## Pennsylvania’s system

Integration is well under way in several states such as Colorado, Florida, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska and Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania implemented its Justice Network, or JNET, in 1997. JNET uses Web-based technology to link the police departments, courts, prisons, probation and parole board, and transportation department.

“Currently, 15 state agencies, 16 Pennsylvania counties and Pennsylvania-based FBI offices use the Justice Network,” said Linda Rosenberg, executive director of JNET. Full statewide deployment of JNET is expected in 2004.

JNET’s features include a notification system that “pushes” information to relevant agencies. For example, if a parolee is arrested, the parole agency automatically sends information about that person to the arresting agency. In the past, the arresting officer may never have learned of the suspect’s parole status until after he or she was released.

JNET’s success largely is due to the cooperation of many agencies and professionals. “JNET has commitment from all

*continued on page 22*

from page 19

levels of criminal justice professionals — from the governor through all the committee levels represented in the JNET governance structure,” Rosenberg said. “Everyone involved has a sense of ownership ... and we’ve needed that to make the project successful.”

### Necessary architecture

The Department of Justice’s Office of Justice Programs is coordinating the national justice information network effort at the state level.

The office assists states in integrating their justice information networks into the nationwide network by providing consultation and targeted grant funds, said Patrick McCreary, program manager for the office’s Information Technology Initiative. The office is “not seeking to mandate technology solutions, but rather to offer strategic assistance and coordination within a national justice enterprise framework,” according to its Web site.

The Department of Justice awarded a grant to the National Association of State Chief Information Officers to assist states in establishing a common information architecture. Ultimately, the architecture that NASCIO is establishing will allow the states to integrate not only justice information systems, but all government systems.

“It is essential that agencies come together to agree on an appropriate architecture,” said Gerry Wethington, Missouri’s chief information officer and leader of NASCIO’s Justice/National Information Architecture Committee. Otherwise they “build their own infrastructure, they incur expense, select varying technology and establish different standards, and in the end they don’t communicate and they can’t exchange information.”

### Road blocks

Integration is not cheap. Pennsylvania’s JNET system has annual operating costs of \$11 million. North Carolina is spending as much as \$91 million to integrate its justice information system, and Alaska expects to spend as much as \$84 million.

Federal agencies, such as the Office of Justice Programs, provide financial and other assistance, but the states bear the brunt of the cost for justice information integration.

“Turf wars” also inhibit the sharing of justice information, since agencies often jealously guard data. This means interagency collaboration is imperative when building an integrated system.

“You can’t just use law enforcement to drive integration, or the courts, or state government. You’ve got to have an inclusive process within a governance body where everyone can clearly articulate their issues and concerns,” Wethington said.

Confidentiality of justice system data always has been important, but sharing information through Web-based technology heightens privacy concerns. Not only must agencies guard sensitive data from the public, but also they must ensure they release only appropriate information to other agencies.

Typically, the justice community is conscientious of these risks and relies on the latest advances in Web security, including highly sophisticated encryption techniques and digital-signature technology. However, state agencies must remain vigilant in securing data, and the debate on privacy must be ongoing and more widespread.

### Bottom line

Despite these obstacles, the benefits are clear and many. In a Web-based nationwide justice information network, there is a single point of data collection. Because multiple agencies do not have to enter the same data into different systems, there is less chance for data-entry error.


High-speed networks and servers allow the near-instant exchange of information. Data in an integrated network is “real time” and up to date.

In the long run, an integrated justice information system will save money. Eliminating paperwork and redundant data entry will reduce labor costs, and electronic data retrieval is cheaper.

More importantly, with an integrated justice network in place, better-informed justice officials can avoid tragedies such

as occurred in Minneapolis.

Pennsylvania’s JNET already has proven the value of integrated justice information systems. The murder of an elderly woman in Philadelphia was unsolved for 21 years. “Fingerprints at the scene had identified our prime suspect, but in 21 years we’d never been able to link the prints to an individual. Thanks to JNET, we matched those fingerprints with a man who’s currently in prison in Pennsylvania for another crime,” said Lt. Harry Giordano of the Philadelphia Police Department.

The realization of a fully integrated, nationwide justice information network is still several years away. But the goal is in sight and the path is clear. As a recent NASCIO report indicates, “The achievement of nationwide governmental information sharing does not depend on any future technological breakthroughs; present technology is sufficient. ... It depends on leadership, on funding, on participation and on patience.” 

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### Internet Resources

National Association of State Chief Information Officers  
[www.nascio.org](http://www.nascio.org)

This site provides information on “hot issues” in information technology, including NASCIO’s Justice/National Information Architecture project.

SEARCH, the National Consortium for Justice Information and Statistics  
[www.search.org](http://www.search.org)

This site provides information technology headlines, resources for justice agencies and information on SEARCH’s upcoming Symposium on Integrated Justice Information Systems.

Global Justice Information Network  
[www.ojp.usdoj.gov/global/index.htm](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/global/index.htm)

This site explains the network and links to the Office of Justice Programs site for technical assistance and grants available to assist states to integrate their justice information systems.