

# CREATING AN EFFICIENT AND BROADLY-USED WEB-BASED CRIMINAL HISTORY SYSTEM

## 2005 COMPUTERWORLD HONORS CASE STUDY

### GOVERNMENT & NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

HENNEPIN COUNTY CREATED AN EFFICIENT, BROADLY-USED, WEB-BASED CRIMINAL HISTORY SYSTEM, WHICH PROVIDES AN ACCURATE SUMMARY OF CONVICTIONS, ACTIVE WARRANTS AND PENDING CASE INFORMATION TO CRIMINAL JUSTICE PERSONNEL, HELPING TO ENSURE PUBLIC SAFETY, EXTEND APPROPRIATE REHABILITATION SERVICES TO OFFENDERS, AND FACILITATE VARIOUS LICENSING ACTIVITIES WHILE SAVING TIME AND MONEY. [20055320]



*A Search for New Services*



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## SUMMARY

Hennepin County created an efficient, broadly-used, Web-based criminal history system. It efficiently provides an accurate summary of convictions, active warrants and pending case information to criminal justice personnel. This system helps ensure public safety, aids in extending appropriate rehabilitation services to offenders, and facilitates various licensing activities while saving time and money.

## APPLICATION

"... and justice for all." Those four words end the US Pledge of Allegiance and were the inspiration and cornerstone for the development of an automated criminal history system in Hennepin County, Minnesota.

Good data, distributed properly and used intelligently, is the foundation of a criminal justice program. Until Hennepin County's system went into place, local agencies were forced to rely on a court case management legacy system. Compiling a criminal history using this system was a very labor-intensive process that involved retrieving a list of all cases for the individual, looking up the case histories one at a time to determine if the individual has been convicted of any charges on that case, and manually keeping a record of each conviction. No screen existed that easily consolidated this information. The lack of access to critical data was repeated agency by agency throughout the criminal justice process. Sharing of critical data between agencies was inefficient, paperbound and labor intensive. Frequently, criminal justice practitioners were forced to manage an incident, case or individual with incomplete information. Perhaps even more seriously, law enforcement officers came in contact with individuals without knowledge of their criminal history.

The Criminal Justice Coordinating Committee (CJCC) for Hennepin County and its Executive Committee endorsed a project to create a Web-based criminal case history that would provide an automated summary of convictions, active warrants and pending case information as a way to provide employees of criminal justice agencies more precise criminal history information on individuals. Included in this system would be complete data on approximately 186,000 convicted criminals, 32,000 warrants, and 363,000 pending or completed cases. The system was implemented at a cost of \$225,000, and a complete return on that investment—as measured by staff time saved and greater efficiencies in the dispensation of matters such as fitness for work release programs, parole, foster care, and daycare licensing—is expected by May, 2006. Of immeasurable benefit will be the more complete and efficient administration of justice and improved decision-making processes in various agencies throughout Hennepin County.

The system works as follows:

- ? Web pages created requiring identification info such as case number, subject name, gender or date of birth. The user enters that information and then orders a search.
- ? The system then compiles and displays a list of matching subjects with information such as height, weight, eye color, hair color, race and address for each subject matching the search criteria. This information is useful in further identifying the subject for which a criminal history is needed.
- ? The user selects a subject from the list and the system compiles a summary of a subject's convictions, sentences, outstanding warrants and pending actions.
- ? This process is available to numerous criminal justice agencies and jurisdictions within Hennepin County, including officers in squad cars.

This new automated system is already helping the CJCC to fulfill its vision to provide a safe and secure environment for the people of Hennepin County by administering a system of justice that is community-centered, fair, timely, efficient, and accessible.

## **BENEFITS**

Hennepin County's automated Criminal Case History system has helped its staff as follows:

- ? Search time on individual cases decreased 85 percent.
- ? Officers in the field can check for outstanding warrants from their squad cars, saving a trip back to the office to query the legacy system and providing them with vital information prior to engaging individuals.
- ? Proper placement in rehabilitation programs for offenders.
- ? Appropriate bail decisions.

The new system has given staff more confidence that the decisions they make are based on accurate and pertinent data, and the community benefits from the quality of those decisions. Decisions are also timelier.

The greatest fundamental change is the elimination of having to comb through legacy systems and paper records. Having all pertinent data in one place, available instantly, has improved morale and allows staff to use the time savings to focus on other critical job tasks.

The community and societal benefits have also been enormous. Individuals participating in work-release programs and other rehabilitative initiatives are those who are most qualified; licenses granted to day care, foster care and other childcare related agencies are dispensed swiftly and more accurately; and field personnel are now able to handle situations with more complete data onsite leading to more appropriate outcomes.

Criminal justice and rehabilitation have been and continue to be a tremendous challenge for our society. Hennepin County's system, providing accurate and timely information, ensures that the humans making criminal justice decisions have the data they need to act in as appropriate a manner as possible. The fact that the system also saves public money and helps ensure that various licensees are indeed who they seem to be helps answer important challenges in our society.

## **IMPORTANCE**

Choosing the appropriate delivery platform for this application was critical to the success of its implementation. The infrastructure needed to be able to handle high volumes of traffic to personnel throughout the county and provide 24x7 application availability to local law enforcement through a secure extranet environment.

Sybase Enterprise Application Server was selected as the deployment platform because of its proven reliability and scalability in hosting many of Hennepin County's Internet, intranet, and extranet applications.

The application's architecture also had to be flexible enough to facilitate integration of data from disparate legacy systems. Industry standard J2EE design patterns were applied to the application's design to ensure performance and allow future enhancements to the system.

## **ORIGINALITY**

Historically, the criminal justice agencies within Hennepin County have approached the development and modification of their computer systems and business practices from an individual agency perspective. Their systems and processes for handling information met their own needs, but often didn't address the overall needs of the criminal justice enterprise.

Unlike other justice development efforts that came before it, the Criminal Case History Project was a collaborative partnership between diverse criminal justice agencies and jurisdictions in Hennepin County, Minnesota:

- ? District Courts
- ? Municipal Police Departments
- ? County Sheriff
- ? City Attorney Offices
- ? County Attorney Office
- ? Public Defender Office
- ? Community Corrections

Representatives from these agencies and disciplines were involved in defining the application requirements through their participation in design workgroups and discussions.

Once the application was developed, these groups piloted it for several months to validate its accuracy and usability. The result was a system that:

? Provides instantaneous checks of Hennepin County convictions, warrants, and pending cases. Unlike many other online criminal history applications, information displayed through Hennepin County's Criminal Case History system reflects the up-to-the-minute, real-time record of the courts.

? Gives criminal justice personnel and partners access to critical criminal data whenever and wherever they need it. Criminal information from the District Courts' legacy system is compiled into an easy to interpret browser-based display.

? Helps criminal justice decision-makers do their jobs more efficiently and effectively by summarizing key criminal conviction and sentencing data.

## **SUCCESS**

The Criminal Case History system was launched in October 2004, on time and on budget.

Hennepin County agencies and local law enforcement officials who frequently compile criminal conviction histories of individuals are realizing tremendous timesavings. Individual criminal histories that previously took several minutes (or even hours) to compile using old legacy systems are now being generated in seconds.

Although increased productivity is a significant outcome, the Criminal Case History system, most importantly, is achieving the County's goal of improving public safety.

On the first night of its use, Minneapolis Police officers were able to identify and locate an individual with an outstanding warrant and bring him into custody.

Customer Testimonials:

"This site is a very useful tool in locating wanted parties," Minneapolis Police Officer

"This saves us so much time. I can't imagine going back to the old method of compiling criminal histories!" - Hennepin County Workhouse staff

"Your comment that 'most people that have used it have found it to be much more user friendly than SIP (District Court's legacy system)' is an understatement. Very easy to search and navigate." - Children, Families, & Adult Services staff

## **DIFFICULTY**

This cross-agency development effort required several diverse groups to come to agreement on the specifics of the information that would be provided in a Web-based criminal history system. Because of the sensitive nature of the data, it was at times a challenge for these groups to agree on how and what criminal information would be provided to a broader criminal justice audience.