

The ties that bind

Business process automation has helped reduce false arrests while also saving money in Marathon County. **Tim Wacker** reports on plans to bring the technology to other areas of the Sheriff's Department

Two words no law enforcement agency wants to hear are "false arrest". In the halls of Wisconsin's Marathon County Sheriff's Department, this is becoming a very rare occurrence. Business process automation software within its Laserfiche system has helped the department reduce its dozen or so annual false warrant arrests to just one in the past 11 months. At the same time, the six-figure labour cost saving now being realised is expected to grow as business process automation is deployed in other areas of department's operations.

Marathon is the state's largest county, encompassing 11 communities and nine law enforcement agencies that serve a population of 140,000. Its City-County Information Technology Commission (CCITC) is tasked with supporting those communities, the city of Wausau and North Central Health Care with records management technology to best meet their public service goals.

LEGACY SYSTEMS

The sheriff's office saw the success of business process automation elsewhere and thought the warrant process would be a good place to start automating its own paperwork. The department had used its own legacy document management system for nine years, but it was cumbersome and time-consuming, according to IT analyst Heather Giddings of the CCITC. Under the old system, warrants took a couple of days to generate and a few more days to cancel. As a result, some criminals stayed on the street longer than they should have, while the delay in deactivating warrants resulted in a dozen or so false arrests each year, noted Anthony Nardi, the department's supervisor of dispatch.

In the antiquated system, an original paper warrant, once authorised by a judge, was distributed via interoffice mail from the clerk of courts to the sheriff's office. The sheriff's office, in turn created a physical manila folder for each warrant and a label



with the subject's name and date of birth. The office kept warrant notes on a green cover sheet. The sheriff's office then printed all supporting documentation, typically six to seven pages, and passed them to validation officers, who filed the documents. Once the sheriff's office detained an individual on a warrant, the validation officers printed and added all of the appropriate documentation to the corresponding folder.

Upon the cancellation of a warrant, a sheriff's office employee filled out the green cover sheet, moved all the documents to a different folder, and placed the folder in the canceled-warrants filing cabinet. Depending on the reason for the cancellation, certain paperwork might also need to be faxed to the jail and/or filled out and sent to the clerk of courts.

Incoming warrants are now processed in as little as an hour. After a judge authorises a warrant, the documents are routed directly to the clerk of courts. The signed warrants are then imported into the Laserfiche system, giving dispatchers instant access to them via the system's WebLink software.

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"The warrant business process automation is set up so that only authorised personnel can access it," adds Giddings. County wide, the system has 1,000-1,500 users across 28 different departments. Nonetheless, robust security software limits access to only authorised users, restrictions that are particularly important to the processing and handling of warrants.

"Dispatchers can go in and very quickly look up the information and supply it in seconds to officers in the field," Giddings says. "But that access is limited. The communication process was much slower before when they were using paper and it was less secure."

A handful of arrests over the previous four years have resulted in lawsuits, because county officers had mistakenly arrested someone who had already satisfied the conditions of the warrant. In each instance, and perhaps a half a dozen others where no lawsuit was filed, the mistaken arrest occurred because warrant cancellation had yet to move entirely through the

paper-based system, so the officers still thought the warrant was in force. Nardi says there have been no such mistakes since the installation of the Laserfiche systems.

Though Nardi cannot quantify the liability savings, the time savings are much easier to calculate. Each warrant processed took two to three days to move from the judge to the sheriff's office. Through business process automation, Nardi estimates the sheriff's department is saving two hours per warrant, or 400 hours per month. Those officers are now able to spend their time on more important tasks than moving paperwork.

"This has really sped up our processes," Nardi says. "No one has to wait to find somebody. They don't have to worry that someone is out of the office when they need to access warrant documents. It's all right there."

Officers can now validate warrants instantly rather than reviewing files once a month. The new system is also eliminating paper, filing cabinet and storage costs.

In addition to transitioning the warrants, the Laserfiche system has enabled the department to cancel 1,000 warrants that no longer need to be validated yearly. The county has about 4,000 active warrants – a number that remains fairly steady, as one gets cleared, another enters the system.

EXPANDED USE

With the success of using business process automation to process warrants, Nardi expects to expand the system to protection orders and processes. The CCITC recently rolled out Laserfiche's electronic eForms software, which eliminates manually re-entering information, a common source of human error, as well as copying, mailing and many other time-consuming tasks inherent in working with paper forms.

"We have a whole list of projects that eForms can be utilised for," Giddings says. "The more we work with business process automation, the more applications we find for it."

Although Marathon is the only county in the state to process warrants electronically, Nardi says he wouldn't be surprised if others quickly follow suit once they learn of his department's success with it.

"It's turned out to be a fantastic system that took us less than a year to get up and running," Nardi says. "In our 11 months, we've only had one error involving a simple setting that just needed to be changed. At this point, we've reduced our potential liability, which is a huge gain for us, all while streamlining the entire process." ●

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