County Cuts Cop Couriers From Warrant Requests

By Shiawassee Chief Assistant County Prosecutor Daniel Nees and Tim Wacker

Police in Michigan's Shiawassee County called it the "Prosecutor Run." A trip made twice daily by officers from Shiawassee's 16 police departments to the county prosecutor's office to drop off the paperwork required to issue arrest warrants. The Prosecutor Run took hours from an officer's workday while adding wear and tear on patrol cars and gas to the costs incurred by each department conducting them. Then there was the cost Shiawassee's communities bore of not having those officers on the streets doing the jobs they are trained to do.

All that and a lot more in the rigidly run process of issuing warrant requests have been eliminated or automated by computer commands now being executed by a county-run software system.

"Warrant requests were a pretty involved process for us prior to going with the county's Laserfiche ECM program," says Shiawassee Sheriff's Lt. Walter McPherson, referring to the software system the prosecutor's office opened to law enforcement agencies last year. "Before that, an officer would spend two or three hours every day running the paperwork back and forth, longer if it was a complicated case. Now department secretaries do it all electronically."

Secretaries could also conduct the Prosecutor Run for much less cost than dispatching officers in patrol cars, but confidentiality and numerous other legalities involved in processing warrant requests prohibits that. So, the Prosecutor Run was seen as an inevitable expense costing 300 to 500 hours per week that police spent carrying paperwork back and forth. The Prosecutor Run was also an unacceptable expense in this age of computer automation.

That was how national Laserfiche ECM reseller General Code put it in a presentation to the Shiawassee County prosecutor's office in mid-2013. At that time, the prosecutor's office was using an entirely paper-based records management system contained in rows of metal filing cabinets. The county knew it could realize considerable labor savings by converting the paper documents into electronic records, thereby eliminating the filing cabinets. General Code vice president of strategy, Daniel Foster, pointed out even greater labor savings is available from the numerous software modules within the system which can automate the handling of those electronic images once they are converted.

Foster first proposed using Laserfiche ECM's Workflow module to eliminate the Prosecutor Run. By opening up police department access to the county system, the warrant requests officers were carrying back and forth could be transferred in seconds via computer PDF files and email. It took General Code technicians a few weeks to make those connections using Workflow, but when it was finished so was the Prosecutor Run.

General Code wasn't finished. Its engineers still saw lots of paper and work that could be eliminated and automated in the prosecutor's office to cut hours and days off the time required to turn warrant requests into court appearances for people breaking the law. When a warrant request arrives at the county prosecutor's office, it kicks off what often is a long chain of official actions and authorizations needed to meet all the confidentiality and legal requirements to produce a document that will withstand a judge's scrutiny.

Numerous offices and officials can be involved in the various combinations of manual tasks assigned to the different types of warrant requests received every day. Working with Laserfiche integration consultants IPDigital and the prosecutor's IT staff, General Code automated dozens of steps once done manually to issue those warrants.

If the warrant request involves a juvenile offender, the redactions deemed necessary to insure confidentiality are now conducted automatically. If screening staff at the county decide a warrant request is incomplete—which includes about 20 percent of those submitted—they note the missing items and Workflow automatically returns it for correction, eliminating yet more prosecutor runs for police departments.

If a warrant request passes the initial screening for further processing, emails alerts of the pending paperwork are sent to those next in line to receive it while the sender is also alerted when the warrant request has been successfully received. If problems arise, or supplemental information is needed at any step along the way, staffers note the revisions needed and Workflow returns or reroutes the request with similar alerts to sender and receiver. Nothing gets lost in the system anymore.

"It's one of the most elaborate process automations I've ever seen," says IPDigital president William Peyton. "I've not received any calls for support in months and the system is little more than a year old. It makes you wonder what the limitations of this technology are."

Shortly after the system was up and running, those limitations were tested and surpassed in two key ways. First, General Code proposed using another of the system's software modules called Forms to eliminate the still very time-consuming process for police to manually pull the information from department records management systems and then type it into the PDFs sent over to the prosecutor's office. The next step was to tie the county system into the state's arrest and convictions records repository, called ACT, for assignment of a case number, the final step before an arrest warrant can be issued.

Now when police request a warrant, the supporting documentation is automatically uploaded from police records management systems into an electronic form which is then uploaded into the warrant request PDF emailed to the prosecutor's office. When it clears the prosecutor's office it is routed to the state's ACT system where it is reviewed again and, if deemed complete, assigned a case number and forwarded to the submitting police department. All this happens

automatically. The county's integration with the state's ACT system also allows the prosecutor's office to access state arrest and conviction records which often play a key role in promulgating the final charges put into the warrants, eliminating yet another function no longer handled by police.

"We no longer need to pull the conviction and criminal histories and copy them and send them over," McPherson says. "The time and cost savings for the departments is significant. It took some work, but it all seems so simple now that it's up and running."

Elegant is a better word to describe the system, Foster says. Workflow now automates dozens of operations police and prosecutors previously did by hand but the build-out took several months of collaborative efforts by IT staff at both agencies. Tying the local, county, and state systems together required another several weeks of effort by staff at all three levels of government, Foster says.

"From the outset, the police and prosecutors involved had a keen appreciation for what this technology can do for them," Foster says. "That is vital, when building these systems. It required a level of commitment and patience to put everything in place, but now they are reaping the rewards."

What used to take two or three days now takes little more than a morning. Moreover, as staff become more accustomed and proficient at using the system, unexpected benefits and opportunities for expansion into new areas of operations continually arise. Chief among the benefits is the elimination of a lot of errors in Shiawassee's warrant requests. The accuracy of input into ACT from Shiawassee County has improved dramatically, while other counties still have had some pretty serious problems.

As a result the state has congratulated Shiawassee on the improved accuracy of the warrant requests it submits to ACT. That fact is not being lost on other counties in Michigan and elsewhere in the country which all must conduct pretty much the same prosecutor runs and cope with all the manual work behind warrant requests, according to Foster.

"We're implementing similar solutions in Oneida and Tompkins counties in New York, and in Franklin County in Pennsylvania," he says. "Those systems are not quite as elaborate, but now that Shiawassee has so successfully automated so much of its warrant request process, those offices and others are showing greater interest."

The automation of the Prosecutor Run has law enforcement in Shiawassee County looking at expanding Workflow into another time consuming operation police must still conduct manually: printing out the warrants the prosecutor's have issued and driving them over to the courts to be executed. That too will be automated if the county courts agree to allow electronic signatures to

be legally binding. There does not appear to be a name for that courier service yet, but if Workflow is brought into the process one will not be needed.

"It will save Shiawassee's police departments even more time," says Foster. "Courts in other counties we work with have adopted electronic signatures, we expect it's just a matter of time before Shiawassee's courts do so as well."

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