That's The Ticket!

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When Advanced Public Safety Inc., a Trimble Company, (APS) began developing solutions for mobile computers 12 years ago, almost no agencies had electronic ticketing. Today, e-ticket systems are common in larger agencies, but not as common in others. While more and more places are adding them, Jack Siney, APS chief operating officer, says significantly less than half of agencies have e-ticketing systems -- maybe about 2,000. Eric Fultz, president and CEO of a relatively new company called Saltus Technologies, also estimates the number hovers around 10 percent.

Agencies without e-ticketing are beginning to look at the benefits and cost-effectiveness of such a solution, while agencies that already have e-ticketing are already looking to expand their capabilities.

Today's benefits

Officers routinely scan drivers' license numbers and enter data using a handheld or laptop computer. An electronic ticketing system will print subsequent tickets in the field; a copy of that ticket will then be sent electronically to the records management system at the police department and court system. "There's a lot of value-add with just those functionalities," Siney comments.

In Oregon, the Keizer Police Department first implemented an APS electronic ticketing system in 2008 with motorcycle officers using three handhelds, and then expanded the system to 20 Panasonic Toughbooks in the patrol cars. The new system was added to save on personnel hours.

"We were able to determine that an electronic ticketing solution would save the equivalent of one half of a full-time employee every year of the project," says Keizer Police Department Sgt. Lance Inman.

While it takes about 16 minutes to handwrite a citation, approve it and enter it into two databases, Inman says they predicted they could cut that time by 87 percent. He says that has proved to be a relatively accurate estimate.

Reducing the time an officer spends on the side of the road during a traffic stop also equates to increased safety. And make no mistake -- electronic ticketing helps reduce errors. Fultz says larger agencies can have a 10 to 15 percent error rate, which, in turn, means a significant number of dismissals and lost revenue that agencies with electronic ticketing don't have. No longer is it a problem if an officer's handwriting is illegible or an officer thinks the date is different than it actually is (the computer automatically fills it in).

After using digiTICKET from Saltus Technologies for a year, the Sand Springs Police Department (Ok.) found that in addition to other benefits, electronic ticketing helped reduce vehicle collisions.

Between May 2009 and May 2010, Sand Springs reports collisions dropped 11 percent. Over a two-year period, collisions dropped more than 16 percent.

Sand Springs Assistant Police Chief Mike Carter reports overtime funding from the Oklahoma Highway Safety Office and digiTICKET are making an impact. DigiTICKET handheld devices with built-in GPS can map where citations are issued, so officers can see where the most collisions are taking place and target those locations.

Looking at stats via the system's Web component, Carter discovered there was what he calls an under-performing segment of the department. While the agency has no quotas, he says finding that some officers are issuing three tickets while others are issuing 50 is a noticeable difference.

Compared to agencies in its area, Sand Springs isn't anywhere near the top ticket-writing agency per capita. Carter says writing more tickets isn't their focus, though they are writing more than they had been and essentially the program paid for itself.

The department started with seven officers using digiTICKET in May 2009. All 22 Sand Springs patrol officers have had a digiTICKET handheld device since February 2010. Since Sand Springs implemented the system, Carter says they've had fewer complaints from citizens saying traffic stops take too long.

Mistakes worth avoiding

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As agencies look to make the move to e-ticketing, Siney suggests avoiding three common mistakes:

1. Thinking electronic ticketing means you just have an electronic version of your form.

There's more to it. "Once you do an electronic ticket, the impact throughout the law enforcement agency and the city can be very significant," he says. "Not only do you have an electronic form, which is faster for officers and creates electronic data, you're also able to immediately transfer that data to the RMS and the court."

2. Not fully understanding all the nuances involved in processing a ticket from the time it's issued until it is adjudicated in the court system.

Picture a citation with 80 data fields. There are a lot of potential options as forms are filled out. Siney gives an example: if an officer in the field is allowed to mark gender as male, female or unknown, but the court database only recognizes male and female, the data cannot be properly uploaded to the court system.

3. Assigning the implementation of the new ticketing system to a patrol officer as an "additional-duty-as-assigned" that he or she does not have enough time for.

Like any automated system, Siney says there needs to be a project manager in place whether it's someone on staff or someone who's contracted for several months.

Before you buy

The e-ticketing solution is nice, Siney says, but it's an ancillary system to the CAD, mobile data system and RMS. It should be able to plug into anywhere you want it.

A solution also should be able to adapt to changing laws and be able to scale to other forms as agencies look to add more electronic capabilities.

Whether or not new computer hardware is needed, Fultz advises not to choose a solution that locks an agency into using one type of technology. Choose hardware that can be used for something other than e-ticketing and choose software that can be easily altered to work with new systems or process changes. For example, if you're using an AT&T network and you want to move to a Sprint network, you don't want to have to replace all of your equipment.

Cost considerations

One of the biggest misconceptions smaller agencies may have about e-ticketing solutions is that they are expensive. With advances in hardware and software, costs have come down.

Small agencies often approach Fultz saying budgets are tight and there's no money for an e-ticketing system, but they want to see a demo anyway. When they hear about the benefits and how such a system can positively impact their budget, they start looking for ways to make a purchase. Many times agencies will buy four or five units and use them for a few months, and as the system pays for itself they'll add more units, he says.

"Adding on is basically buying hardware," Fultz says. "There are no services or additional expense for deployment. The hardware is really just off the shelf; we install our software and we're ready to go." Some agencies start small or with their motorcycle units.

One of the first things agencies should look at is what they already have. Often printers will be needed, and sometimes barcode or magstripe readers. But are there MDCs that could be used as part of the e-ticketing system, or will new laptops or handhelds be needed?

The next level

Often after agencies capture data electronically on the front end, they want more. They want to do more with the data and increase their automation.

Siney describes agencies are taking e-ticketing to the next level by:

- Adding the back-end portion of an e-ticketing solution. They're looking to take the citation data they've captured electronically and do ad hoc reporting.
- Doing more electronically. Rather than print out tickets and have a supervisor initial it, they want to electronically send the document to a supervisor for

approval.

- Data mapping. Agencies want to geocode data and see on a map where tickets were issued.
- Adding e-commerce. The ability to process payments is fast becoming part of the e-ticketing solution.

Growing ROI

Looking to the future, form automation will likely increase. Keizer PD officers are completing traffic crash reports in limited capacities in the field while the drivers are still present, and finish their report after the scene is cleared. Part of this report is an electronic diagram.

Inman would like to start using GPS technology to populate the location field on electronic forms, but the agency currently lacks funding to add the GPS hardware.

Down the road, the agency will look at other types of electronic form completion. When Keizer PD and other agencies get there, options might include crash reports, towed vehicle slips, property receipts and arrest reports. This will further increase agencies' ROI.

"The ROI ... is already enormous, probably more so than with any other solution an agency could deploy in a short term," Siney says. Fultz adds the ROI is the same for small agencies as it is large agencies.

"They have the same productivity gains, elimination of errors and cost decreases on the back-end," he says.

With the flexibility afforded by today's technologies, just about anything an agency wants to do can be done. It often comes down to cost. But Carter tells agencies over the course of a year or two, a e-ticketing system could likely pay for itself.

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