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For cops, high-tech device is just the ticket for fast citations

February 16, 2007 | By Mary Knowles, Sentinel Staff Writer

Caught speeding in Orange County?

Now the deputy who pulls you over can swipe your drivers license in a hand-held electronic device and generate a digital ticket in less than five minutes.

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No more five-part carbon-copy notepad tickets, which took deputies up to 15 minutes to fill out and were often difficult to read or incorrect.

The Orange County Sheriff's Office and the Orlando Police Department have joined law-enforcement agencies in a nationwide shift to electronic traffic ticketing.

About 500 cities nationwide use the PocketCitation units, which are produced by Advanced Public Safety in Deerfield Beach. Florida has among the most law-enforcement agencies using the devices -- along with Texas, California and Illinois -- said Jack Siney, chief operating officer of APS. More than 80 Florida law-enforcement agencies, including Miami, Altamonte Springs and Winter Springs, use some version of the technology.

All 40 motorcycle deputies in the sheriff's motors division have been carrying the units for about a year and a half. Five officers in the road-patrol division have them now.

Here's how they work:

A deputy can use a drop-down menu to call up Florida statutes and a keypad to enter information about the ticket. Then the deputy can print the ticket on the spot, and drivers are on their way in less than five minutes.

The new devices are helping drive an increase in tickets, deputies say. Orange County deputies gave 44,881 tickets in 2006, up 60 percent from the previous year, when about 28,000 were issued. Deputies could issue up to 20 percent more tickets this year than last, thanks to the faster stops, Cmdr. Ken Wynne said.

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"We're able to knock out a traffic citation much more quickly," Wynne said. "If you do it properly, you're able to clear out a traffic stop in four minutes."

Electronic tickets also can help when someone is stopped for more than one offense, such as speeding and not wearing a seat belt. This occurs about 20 percent of the time, Deputy Charles Kochanowski said.

Some of these secondary violations are non-moving offenses such as illegally tinted windows or loud stereos. Wynne said such citations went up 97 percent from 2005 to 2006 as deputies created an additional ticket with just a few keystrokes instead of writing a new ticket.

"We used to give them a correction notice or just let them go," Wynne said. "Now they're getting a ticket."

The increased accuracy of electronic tickets is another benefit, deputies said. Mistakes such as citing the wrong statute or an incorrect court date cause about 20 percent of tickets to be thrown out in court, Siney said. That doesn't occur as often with the electronic device, Kochanowski said.

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Instead of the days it can take before a Sheriff's Office technician manually inputs details of a traffic ticket, electronic data from the deputies' handheld devices can arrive in the system in 24 to 48 hours, Siney said.

What's more, tickets filled out electronically are easier to read, Kochanowski said.

"Not everybody has got the greatest handwriting, but these citations are clear. We're getting less calls at the office that 'Hey, I can't read the writing on this particular officer's or deputy's citation.' "

Orange County paid \$3,500 per unit, plus about \$500 per unit for accessories. About a third of the devices were paid for through a federal grant. Deputies who carry the units attend a four-hour training session.

Because traffic citations generate revenue for Orange County, more efficient technology soon pays for itself, Kochanowski said.

Orlando police also have signed on to use the technology. Ten OPD officers have the handheld units, which they have been testing since February 2005, said Sgt. Andy Brennan of the motors division.

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