King County RAIN Project, a Model for Criminal Data Sharing

Information sharing failures occur every day in law enforcement jurisdictions, resulting in unsolved crimes committed by repeat offenders. The King County, Washington, Sheriff's Office is resolving this problem through the assistance of the Regional Automated Information Network (RAIN) Pilot Project.

RAIN is an information sharing initiative of the King County Police Chiefs Association, hosted by the King County Sheriff's Office, enabling cross-jurisdictional data searching among law enforcement agencies in King County. Other participating agencies include the Tukwila Police Department and Bellevue Police Department.

Chief Keith Haines, Tukwila Police Department, said "Although local agencies have access to the National Crime Information Center and other federal databases for felony warrants, stolen vehicles, and other items, the majority of information is housed in individual records management systems …because [law enforcement] agencies are usually reluctant to share data, moving toward an information sharing attitude is evolving."

Launched on November 4, 2002, RAIN is a set of new technologies enabling agencies to access multiple criminal databases from a single secure Web site. RAIN is not a data warehouse; rather, it is a querying pathway to the Records Management Systems of participating agencies. Agencies maintain full control over their information. All agency-to-agency communications are fully encrypted to the 128-bit industry standard with data being exported in Extensible Markup Language (XML) format.

Microsoft Corporation helped develop the system at no cost to the participating pilot agencies. Mr. Jeff Langford, a dot-net technology specialist with Microsoft's Justice and Public Safety Division, was instrumental during the pilot's inception and development. According to Langford, the "police-only, Web-based system runs on a dot-net framework and links all the records management repositories of about 20 different systems to create a searchable portal." No setup is necessary for users to access RAIN from their laptop or desktop PC. The only acquisition agencies need is an integration software product called Justice Information Server, provided free-of-charge to pilot participants. Langford, who now travels throughout the country demonstrating this technology to other law enforcement agencies, said that "everybody loves it."

The King County Sheriff's Office, serving as RAIN's host agency, houses a server, donated by Dell Computer Corporation. At initialization, each agency queries this server to identify which resources are available through their RAIN Web site. Officers can search for incident information on specific people, specific vehicles, and also choose which participating agency to search. Each search result includes rich media such as mug shots, photos, and other records, as well as contact information of the originating officer.

Although only three agencies are current participants, the population coverage is vast. King County's population, alone, is the largest in Washington State—over 1.6 million. The population covered by all three agencies, combined, is about 710,000 people. This will continue to grow as additional agencies join in the months ahead. It is anticipated that 39 municipalities in the region and other public safety agencies, will contribute to and utilize RAIN by the end of 2003.

In the coming months, as more and more users put RAIN through its paces, its scalability and performance characteristics will become more apparent. "We didn't have any particular incident at all that sparked this," Haines said, "just a growing acknowledgement by law enforcement leaders that we would be much more effective if we found an automated way to share our records data."

For more information, contact Chief Keith Haines at khaines@ci.tukwila.wa.us, or Ms. Kelly Furner, Project Manager, at kelly.furner@metrokc.gov.