JOINING FORCES:
LAW ENFORCEMENT AND TECHNOLOGY UNITE TO ADVANCE CRIMINAL JUSTICE IN CALIFORNIA

The Integrated Law and Justice Agency for Orange County (ILJAOC) leads California in developing technologies that vastly improve the criminal justice and court systems in the state — but that didn't happen overnight.

A Joint Powers Authority (JPA) comprising 24 public agencies, including all 21 municipalities that provide police services to their residents, ILJAOC began to take shape as a "project" in 1997 to pursue improvement of criminal justice in the region. It continued to develop, and was formally restructured as a JPA in 2006. In California, a JPA is a collection of governments that forms another governmental entity for a specific purpose and can represent its members with one voice. This diverse affiliation takes advantage of its combined size to take on large-scale projects none could accomplish alone. Touching every criminal justice system in the county, ILJAOC represents the sheriff's department, probation department, district attorney, public defender, city managers and the Superior Court of California in Orange County, in addition to police units from University of California, Irvine, and California State University, Fullerton.

Since 2007, ILJAOC has been directed by Bob McDonell, a retired Newport Beach police chief with 38 years of law enforcement experience under his belt, 21 of which he served as a police chief in two different cities. McDonell says the group's initial vision has helped refine law enforcement processes in a way that has the potential to save the public enormous amounts of money, while at the same time boosting productivity, efficiency and safety.

"We completed a study years ago and found areas where the criminal justice system in the county could improve," he says. "As a result, we developed a strategic plan for the entire county, and during that process, asked each of the agencies, 'What improvements would you like to see to the system?'" The representatives identified 15 priorities in the region, and began methodically knocking them off, one by one.

From Pushing Paper to Sharing Data Electronically
One such priority was the creation of a widely embraced exchange portal to transmit and share information. The first project for the portal was to electronically process Probable Cause Declarations (PCDs). When police officers arrest suspects and want to detain them until an arraignment on the charges, they need concurrence from a judge who reviews the circumstances and decides whether there is sufficient cause to do so. Until recently, requesting PCDs in Orange County was a paper-based process, with duplicate, manually created forms faxed or physically walked over to the court by sheriff's deputies. Tracking the paperwork flow was, at best, a challenge, leading to the potential release of suspects because time ran out to verify concurrence from the assigned judge. It was a pain point for both law enforcement and the court system.

With funding in hand from Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) grants and some undesignated capital reserve monies, ILJAOC contracted with Sierra Systems in 2011 to streamline and expedite the probable cause declaration process. Sierra Systems partnered with Software AG to

align business and IT for end-to-end process improvement to handle design, infrastructure, architecting and development — together creating a secure exchange portal with Software AG's webMethods platform. They used out-of-the-box functionality as much as possible to develop the portal, including the webMethods Composite Application Framework (CAF) to customize the required screens based on business rules.

The project had a number of goals, such as automating workflow, reducing duplicate data entries and integrating with systems already capturing information — but at heart, it all came down to information sharing. "The ILJAOC shares data on a number of platforms and already has a reputation for statewide leadership in that field," McDonell says. "However, we needed a platform that could pass operational data and drive enhanced business practices at a more efficient level. The portal built by Sierra Systems, using Software AG's webMethods platform, provided that infrastructure."

The Software AG team focused on providing a solution with the potential to allow officers arresting and transporting suspects to jail to enter data once, and let it automatically populate other ancillary forms needed by separate entities, such as the courts and jail staff.

Adapting to Change, Innovating for All
Judicial hearing officers had long reviewed and made decisions for PCDs, but due to California's budget cutbacks — midway through the portal project — Superior Court judges took over this duty as a cost-savings measure. In addition, 180 judges rotate this duty, so that each is on call to review PCDs for only one week every two years. This meant a substantial switch-up for the design team, who needed to swiftly modify the interface format for a new audience and simplify it to preclude the need for constant retraining when a judge's turn at bat came up every other year.

Now, arresting officers can log into the portal, enter arrestee information and probable cause data onto a form and submit it electronically to the court. On their side, judges see a narrative description and green and red buttons to push, indicating "yes, hold suspect in custody" or "no, insufficient evidence to hold." Using unique IDs, judges can access the application on iPads anywhere, taking advantage of mobility and ease of use to render decisions quickly for arresting agencies. Management screens on the portal help the jail manage interactions with inmates, so they know who has been approved for release versus who must stay.

"For the Orange County Sheriff's Department, this solution reduces its role in managing the paper flow process — officers now have an automated notification for inmates awaiting the probable cause declaration concurrence process that warns them when time is running out to receive information before the suspect must be released," McDonell says. "The judges have embraced the electronic portal process, no longer needing to drag paperwork from place to place to accomplish the process. It provides more efficient data storage and the courts get a completed PDF back in the system that they can recover easily in a timely way."

The probable cause declaration pilot project was an instant hit, allowing the courts to replace a laborious, redundant manual process for an electronic, multipurpose one — a lightweight deployment that easily integrated into the daily workflow of the court. Since this solution went live in 2012, the 24 agencies have produced more than 20,000 records. "We built a very robust information-sharing system that can now move operational data all around the county," says McDonell.

Continually Improving Criminal Justice
With the exchange portal and other successes under its belt, ILJAOC is looking to leverage them for additional high-value solutions that will improve law enforcement processes.

Next up: Sierra Systems and Software AG will create another interface for ILJAOC that uses the data entered for PCDs to populate sheriffs' pre-booking and property forms — currently a cumbersome but necessary process needed to detain suspects. After that, they'll explore building solutions to digitize and share criminal case files, and refine electronic search and arrest warrants.

"Any time we can be more efficient, it saves the public money. That's the bottom line," McDonell says.

> "The judges have embraced the electronic portal process, no longer needing to drag paperwork from place to place to accomplish the process. It provides more efficient data storage and the courts get a completed PDF back in the system that they can recover easily in a timely way."
>
> — Bob McDonell, Executive Director, ILJAOC