



**INTERNATIONAL POLICE EXECUTIVE SYMPOSIUM
GENEVA CENTRE FOR THE DEMOCRATIC CONTROL
OF ARMED FORCES
COGINTA - FOR POLICE REFORMS
AND COMMUNITY SAFETY**

WORKING PAPER No 48

**Innovations in Information Sharing: An Overview of an Initiative
at Sarasota County Florida Sheriff's Office**

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JULY 2013

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Working Paper No 48, July 2013

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ABSTRACT

Advancements in computer technology have benefitted police with a wealth of information, but they are often still ineffective in their practices because much of this information goes unused. The Sarasota County Sheriff's Office is on the forefront of the information sharing movement among law enforcement agencies with their adaptation of Microsoft SharePoint®. This application gives the Sarasota County Sheriff's Office an innovative way to provide actionable information to strategically guide their law enforcement activities. This overview details how the Sarasota County Sheriff's Office has collaborated with surrounding law enforcement and legal agencies to enhance the entire region's police practices.

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Introduction

In early 2010, the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) issued several recommendations to law enforcement agencies in pursuit of more effective information sharing practices. The IACP emphasized the critical importance of information sharing as a fundamental practice to achieve effective policing (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2010). The advent of new computer information systems, developed largely in the corporate sector, currently offer innovative methods for police agencies to archive and share information with one another. These methods are especially helpful because they are available at a time when accountability to external agencies is increasing and the need to manage extremely large amounts of information has become a necessity (Luen & Al-Hawamdeh, 2001).

In addition to these recent technological developments, perceptions of sharing information among police have also evolved. In the past, secrecy between law enforcement agencies and, at some level, among officers in the same agency was the standard cultural approach. The lack of rewards or incentives for inter-agency cooperation and shared investigations did not encourage sharing information (Geller & Morris, 1992). Emphasis on intelligence-led policing, especially with increased attention devoted to the potential threat of terrorism has completely reoriented this point-of-view. In fact, this reorientation has challenged law enforcement agencies to engage in cross-jurisdiction information sharing at the highest possible levels (Dunworth, 2000).

Despite the acknowledgement that information sharing is vital to the police mission, there are many barriers that can prevent the full implementation of a cohesive and comprehensive information sharing strategy, especially at the local level. Some of the obstacles local law enforcement agencies may encounter when implementing a successful information sharing strategy include identifying a user-

friendly computer software program that can meet the specific needs of the agency, effectively collaborating with surrounding agencies with jurisdictional overlap, and obtaining the necessary resources not only to implement the system, but to regularly manage, adapt, and upgrade the system as necessary. Overcoming these obstacles is imperative to developing an effective information sharing system officers can rely on.

The Sarasota County Sheriff's Office (SCSO) has recently embarked on a unique collaborative mission to significantly enhance information sharing on a variety of levels. To move toward this goal, SCSO has implemented a computer software program, Microsoft SharePoint®, to increase the capability of deputies within the agency to share data with one another, but also to foster information sharing between law enforcement agencies who share jurisdictions and among other key criminal justice agencies (i.e. other police departments who share jurisdictional overlap and county attorney's offices). Other law enforcement agencies currently have implemented information management strategies based on SharePoint® software (e.g. Ogden, Utah Police Department, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma Police Department, Maryland State Police, Miami-Dade Police Department (Florida), and Australia's police forces), but the level of collaboration taking place in Sarasota County, Florida is distinctly progressive and can serve as a model for other agencies to build on.

A Framework for Information Sharing in Law Enforcement

Law enforcement agencies, like all organizations, operate according to specific goals and establish relevant priorities to accomplish these objectives. The use of computer technology is becoming ever more critical and routinized in the daily operation of law enforcement agencies. There are, according to Manning (1992), several factors that determine how technology is used in the law enforcement context and these factors can be applied to the newest trends related to criminal justice information sharing.

One of the primary influential factors related to information sharing in the law enforcement context is organizational practice. Law enforcement, by the very nature of the mission and the geography of policing, requires personnel to move about and respond to criminal activity where it occurs. This obviously requires

officers to leave any centrally located office and move around the community. Once in the community, officers usually make contact with a complainant or initiate a traffic stop, for example, and immediately begin gathering information about the incident to which they have just responded. This process usually begins with an informal interview and the officer commences with individual documentation of the exchange.

Based on the inherent highly segmented organization of most police agencies, the information gathered in this face-to-face contact may be restricted for use only the immediate situation (Manning, 1992). After the police-civilian contact has ended, the responsibility rests with the officer to share what they have gathered. In the past, distributing data gathered in the field was likely to take place by word-of-mouth to other officers or through hand-written reports. The technological advancements available today can overcome the impediments to information sharing associated with the segmented nature of the police.

Another significant factor related to why police use technology the way they do is related to the traditional division of labor inherent in the organization (Manning, 1992). Police agencies are organized into special divisions, with each one usually responsible for its own focused duties. The juvenile services division, for example, may be responsible for addressing criminal activity perpetrated by those under a certain age (depending on statutes) while the main objective of the Special Weapons And Tactics (SWAT) division is to respond to immediate violent threats to the community.

This division of labor has direct implications for how information sharing takes place. Certain divisions may not likely be interested in all the information available within the agency. In other words, information is only relevant for officers working within and collaborating with other certain divisions. Not all information needs to be shared with all divisions. Therefore, information needs to be effectively catalogued and organized so it can inform practices most efficiently.

Beyond the organizational features of police agencies that need to be taken into account in the development of an effective information sharing system, it is also critical to understand the types of information contained in the system. Most

patrol or line service personnel deal regularly with primary information (Manning, 1992). This is the information officers have gathered themselves, through initial contact with informants, through interview notes, activity logs, and other personalized data sources. Primary information is typically most useful to patrol officers who police certain areas and investigate common crimes in these areas. However, primary information can also be collected and stored for future reference, especially by other units in the agency, such as a crime analysis unit. In short, primary information is collected and recorded directly by patrol officers during their various types of investigations.

Primary information can be vital to patrol officers when responding to calls for service. For example, most patrol officers will agree they experience the greatest amount of uncertainty when initially approaching a suspect, especially someone with a criminal history. Increasing the amount of primary information gathered from other sources, such as prior arrests, convictions, or other officers' experiences interacting with a particular suspect, for example, can be critical in a number of ways. Officers can utilize accurate primary information to prepare themselves as they enter a potentially volatile situation. Sharing correct information is paramount to officer safety, public safety, and effective resolution of unstable social situations. In fact, officers have reported the more information they have available to them while they are on the street, the more confident they feel about handling the situations they encounter and making arrests (Lindsay, Cooke, & Jackson, 2009).

Secondary information consists of that which has been processed by managerial levels from one division in the agency to another (Manning, 1992). This can include, but is not limited to, sharing primary information between certain specialized units. A patrol officer may, for instance, suspect an elaborate drug smuggling network in operation during their response to several noise complaints at a single residence. The officer may document their initial investigation in a highly detailed manner and continue by sharing their report with a drug crime division detective. Once the officer transferred the primary information they had gathered, the information was transformed into secondary information.

The third and last type of information used in police agencies is tertiary information. This form of information has been transferred across several

divisions within the agency, and is usually aggregated at various management levels (Manning, 1992). Administrative decisions such as disciplinary measures, performance evaluations, and policy changes are typical of those based on this level of information. Another prototypical use of tertiary information can be allocation of resources. A lieutenant may be informed of patrol officer's observations of several vandalism incidents in a given area, for example. This lieutenant may then request all reports of vandalism (i.e. primary information) be transferred to the crime analysis unit (where it becomes secondary information). The crime analysis unit may then be responsible for analyzing the incidents more closely to identify patterns. This unit may be required to aggregate their findings and issue a report (which serves as tertiary information) back to the lieutenant who ordered the analysis. At this point, the lieutenant may make an informed decision on how to address the vandalism that has taken place.

Administrators' use of secondary and tertiary levels of information has become increasingly crucial for a number of reasons. Police are pressured to enhance internal performance standards and they are subject to higher levels of scrutiny from external agencies (Chan, 2001). Agencies are also required to improve efficiency and effectiveness with the same or fewer resources given limited budgets. Effective management and use of primary information at the secondary and tertiary levels is perhaps the best way to reach the highest level of performance.

All of these key aspects of law enforcement organizations must be taken into account in the development of an information sharing platform. All the key members of the organization, ranging from patrol officers to administrative personnel should be able to easily access the information that is most relevant to them. Ideally, the extremely large amount of primary information should be clearly organized and readily available so officers, support staff, and administrators can perform their duties to the best of their abilities.

Sarasota County in context

Sarasota County, Florida has a population of 379,448, which is spread out across 555.86 square miles (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The county is situated along the west coast of the state, includes 35 miles of shoreline, and is well-known for its

beach resort communities. The SCSO's jurisdiction encompasses this 556 square mile area and the agency has nearly 1,000 sworn officers and civilian personnel. The SCSO is a full service law enforcement agency with patrol, investigation, corrections, communications, youth services, K-9 officers, victim's assistance personnel, court security, animal services, aviation, mounted patrol, special weapons and tactics, and crime prevention divisions.

The SCSO shares jurisdictional overlap with three other police agencies. The city of Sarasota Police Department, the city of North Port Police Department, and the city of Venice Police Department. The SCSO also works closely with the State Attorney's Office. All four of these agencies are included in the information sharing initiative led by the SCSO.

The SCSO divided their jurisdiction into 4 sectors. Each of these sectors is divided into 5 smaller zones, except for one sector which contains 4 zones, creating a total of 19 zones. Sharing information among deputies and officer who work in these zones is paramount because these comprise the patrol areas where the vast majority of their time is spent. Additionally, administrative personnel, such as sergeants and lieutenants, who supervise deputies in many zones, have special needs for accessing and sharing information in each of these areas.

The implementation of an effective information sharing platform

Prior to the recent mission to enhance information sharing practices, SCSO deputies were largely practicing 'systematically decentralized' ways of data storage (Manning, 1992). Traditional data storage practices involved archiving personal interview notes, paper forms, activity log books, and other sources of information. Most officers engaged in individualized methods of cataloging their own notes and documents for their own personal use. Sharing these documents typically occurred when special requests were issued or if special incidents required notification of superior officers. This information was exceptionally difficult for anyone other than the officer who collected the information to access because of these personalized data storage practices (Manning, 1992).

Paper-based forms and notices also generated a significant number of other time-consuming practices, especially for officers who served court orders and eviction notices, for example. Officers would have to attempt to serve the papers to the

appropriate citizen, record the activity in a paper format, and return to the office to document the outcome during a given shift. Although this may seem like a fairly routine and acceptable process, returning to the office (especially if this was done several times during one shift) resulted in a loss of time, fuel, and general distraction from tasks-at-hand. Implementation of a computer-based system allows officers to electronically submit these forms and reduce the amount of time lost to travel while increasing productivity.

Office-wide email was another existing system that did not allow the SCSO to achieve the optimal level of information sharing. Although email has been recognized for its capacity to provide richly detailed and convenient information exchange (Markus, 1994), email generates limited and often onerous information sharing between other individual officers or small groups of officers. The main problem with this system is directly related to the size and scope of the agency. Messages being sent within an agency consisting of 1,000 officers and civilian support staff proved almost immediately to be overwhelming. Email messages covered a range from the most mundane issues to the most critical incident updates. It was not uncommon to inadvertently overlook the most important messages given the volume exchanged within the office.

These practices allowed the SCSO to meet their immediate obligations, but there was significant room for improvement of the agency. Supervisory personnel wished to enhance communication, efficiency, and inform officers better. Working toward this goal, the agency implemented Microsoft SharePoint®. Initially designed for the corporate work environment, SharePoint® is a computer software program that is designed for the expressed purpose of sharing information between groups of people. The program is a secure web-based platform that allows users to upload, edit, and manage files. SharePoint® is highly versatile with a range of customizable features that can be tailored to the specific needs of an organization.

SharePoint® is well suited to law enforcement agencies for a number of reasons. First and foremost, SharePoint® operates on a secure web-based network. Information related to ongoing investigations, for example, must be protected and SharePoint® offers the requisite levels of protection. The web-based format of the program also affords officers the opportunity to have immediate access to

information another officer has added to the database. Officers do not experience a significant time lag between when information is posted and when it becomes available. Second, SharePoint® is user-friendly. Officers usually move relatively quickly through a shallow learning curve because the program is no more difficult to use than other Microsoft® programs, such as Outlook®, which they are probably already familiar with. Third, agencies can tailor a SharePoint® platform to fit their size and scope. SCSO has configured their SharePoint® portal to meet the needs of all of the divisions within the agency. Finally, SharePoint® can be integrated fairly easily into a computer environment that already utilizes Microsoft® programs. The program works seamlessly with Microsoft Outlook®, for example, and calendar information can be immediately uploaded from one program to another.

SharePoint® gives officers a variety of tools to share primary information within the agency. One example is found through officers' new procedures for conducting daily briefings. At the end of each shift, officers can post critical information about incidents or investigations they just worked so officers starting on the next shift are immediately informed. Officers typically post this information in the site's area designated for their respective sector, but the information is accessible for all users. This is especially helpful if officers should be aware of potentially violent offenders who could be present in a number of sectors.

Officers, for instance, can update one another about recently escaped prison inmates. A post on the daily briefing site can offer a physical description of an escapee, the license tag to the car the escapee was believed to be driving and the last known whereabouts when officers had made contact with them. The SharePoint® program has the capability to attach supplementary digital files (i.e. .pdf, .jpeg, etc.) containing mug shots, for example, to provide the most comprehensive information related to a given incident. Officers can also read safety bulletins issued for special circumstances, such as when a known gang member with an extensive and violent criminal history had contact with a deputy in a certain zone. Utilization of these tremendously helpful forms of primary information can help prepare deputies for future situations if they receive a call

for service to a particular residence or nearby location where a potentially dangerous suspect may be.

SharePoint® also increases the efficiency of SCSO deputies who enforce sex offender registry laws. Deputies are required by law to monitor sex offenders' residences. If a convicted sex offender changes their address, the new address must be registered and confirmed by a deputy. The SharePoint® site contains a feature allowing deputies to maintain a centrally located and easily accessible record of which addresses have been confirmed and which have not. This real-time assessment, which can be immediately updated from the field, is designed to decrease the likelihood of a sex offender intentionally avoiding the required reporting mandated by their conviction.

A similar system has been established to improve efficiency for those deputies whose duties include serving court orders. Deputies can access the SharePoint® system to provide immediate updates of their efforts to serve a court order through a discussion-board type forum about a certain case. Instead of having multiple deputies trying unsuccessfully to serve an order, this function of the site provides documentation of the attempted service such as what the outcome was and how to best proceed to complete the task.

The SharePoint® platform has also allowed SCSO to support inter-agency sharing of primary information with the city of Sarasota Police Department (SPD) and the city of North Port Police Department. Each of these two agencies has designated an administrative position to provide information and retrieve information from the SharePoint® site. Sarasota Police Department has a Police Officer 1st Class who performs these tasks while the North Port Police Department has a Professional Standards Commander who does the same. The information sharing system has basically been integrated into other agencies in the manner their organizational structure can support it (Manning, 1992).

The primary information provided in the SharePoint® portal has improved the responses of the collaborating agencies. For example, a Sarasota Police Department communications staff member reported the following sequence of events to the IT technician who manages the SharePoint® system, "I also would like to tell you in recent weeks one of my supervisors has helped me while

dispatching on PD1 3 times with information she read on SharePoint®. The information helped the SPD officers x15 a subject with a pca at SSO front desk. It also helped Officer Frank with a subject that was listed in SharePoint® as having a violent history with LEO and also another person of interest listed for a burglary” (email correspondence dated January 15, 2012). The SharePoint® platform informed officers of an individual who was the suspect in a robbery investigation. When SPD officers recognized the suspect from the announcement on the site, they were able to immediately take the individual into custody.

In addition to other law enforcement agencies, SCSO has also granted access to their information in the SharePoint® site to the State Attorney’s Office of the 12th Circuit of Florida. The State Attorney’s Office uses the system primarily to track the cases of prolific (i.e. repeat) offenders. Prosecutors responsible for these prolific offender cases are granted access to Sharepoint® and they input the status of each of these high-risk offenders. This information is available to Sheriff’s deputies who, for example, can visit the site and determine who has been issued a pre-trial release. Deputies can follow-up with investigations on these offenders and provide relevant information to assist prosecutors as they continue to prepare a case. All the information deputies have recorded in SharePoint® can be exported into Excel® spreadsheets or other formats to be used as official court documents, if necessary. For those cases that have been adjudicated, deputies can also check what type of outcome their investigations resulted in (e.g. conviction, acquittal, etc.). Deputies can also use the SharePoint® site to learn which offenders have been incarcerated and which have not, informing them of which at-risk offenders may have re-entered the community.

In addition to the dissemination of primary and secondary information, SharePoint® also contributes to the development and dissemination of tertiary information in several ways. Deputies serving in administrative roles, such as lieutenants, utilize and transform secondary information into a format that can be used to intelligently address crime. For example, a lieutenant may observe patrol deputies’ records of a series of burglaries in a certain zone. The lieutenant might respond by asking a crime analysis manager to develop a report with relevant information related to each of the observed incidents such as the day and time of when these occurred, suspect descriptions, stolen property lists, and prolific

offenders who may be in the area. The lieutenant can then review the crime analyses and respond with a data-driven decision on the best possible strategy to reduce future burglaries in the area.

Beyond the sharing of primary, secondary, and tertiary information, SharePoint® also provides the SCSO with several managerial functions that enhance day-to-day operations. Outlook® calendars can be synchronized with the program. For example, users can review when air support (i.e. helicopter surveillance and aerial back-up) is available. If the air crew is in training, not working a certain shift, or performing maintenance on the machine, users will know this immediately by checking the “air support” calendar linked in SharePoint®. Calendars are also linked for traffic enforcement, detectives, and other administrative support personnel whose schedules need to be available.

Conclusion

Police organizations have traditionally operated according to a compartmentalized organizational scheme recognized for its self-limiting information sharing capabilities. However, this major shortcoming has been realized and a collective mindset is evolving as police administrators are becoming more open to the advantages of interagency collaborative efforts (Luen & Al-Hawamdeh, 2001). Perhaps information sharing technology can move away from decentralized data management practices and work toward the ultimate goal of creating a completely integrated criminal justice system (Harris, 2007). The Sarasota County Sheriff’s Office, in their collaboration with other local criminal justice agencies, has taken a significant step in this direction.

Many police agencies unfortunately suffer from being, “awash with facts and starved for information” (Manning, 2005, p. 231.) Officers and deputies observe and record many pertinent facts whenever they initiate an investigation, but these may not be used to inform the agency’s future practices. The absence of a properly functioning central repository for this information leaves an agency uninformed and still less than optimally effective in their mission to reduce crime. The SharePoint® platform allows SCSO to instrumentally organize and utilize its facts, which subsequently reduces the agency’s information starvation.

Administrative deputies can now use aggregated facts to inform the agency's approach to crime control.

The SharePoint® system also eliminates inconsistent information storage practices. No longer are written reports physically shuffled from one office to another. Instead, critical information is electronically uploaded, stored, and constantly reviewed. Deputies provide updated information in a single location. A single topic thread can now organize information that would otherwise be dispersed in several difficult-to-access locations, which, for example, is most likely to happen with preliminary investigations that did not result in an arrest. Deputies now have easy access to information that can increase their efficiency, protect them from previously unforeseen danger, and help make informed administrative decisions.

The SharePoint® system is most useful in providing “timely and actionable” information. The goal is to move toward information-based proactive policing practices. These practices are usually based on ‘retrospective intelligence’ (Manning, 1992) that is recorded after a crime has occurred, but this information is crucial in developing better strategies to prevent similar crimes from happening again. This is especially true for prolific offenders that have extensive criminal records and are continually crime suspects.

All of the functions provided by the SharePoint® system are still in development by the SCSO. The agency has several specially trained full-time IT technical support staff whose duties include maintaining the SharePoint® system. These personnel accept recommendations from administrators and adjust the functions of SharePoint® accordingly. It would be nearly impossible to implement this type of information sharing system without the dedication of highly trained full-time technical support staff.

The SharePoint® system is not a widely implemented information sharing platform in a great number of police agencies, but it is growing in popularity. Its technical features are well-suited to the law enforcement environment and it can be adapted to fit the organizational structure of a particular agency. The use of this software program has given SCSO the ability to tap into its information to strategically determine the best ways to address crime, support other law

enforcement agencies, and carry out other mission specific functions that would otherwise consume many more resources.

Acknowledgements

The authors want to thank Kurt Hoffman, John Jernigan, Charlie Thorpe, and Bill Forrest for the significant contributions they made to this paper.

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