

XML in Justice Information Sharing: An Executive Summary

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The ability to share information in a secure and timely fashion is crucial to the justice and public safety communities. Extensible markup language (XML) – a standard issued in 1998 – is one emerging technology that shows great promise in helping to attain this goal. The ability to represent structured data, such as that found in a department's record management system, using XML specifications creates an opportunity to share data among disparate systems. Unbeknownst to many law enforcement information managers, XML is a readily available solution to connect the largest and smallest agencies' disparate data files. Agencies may easily and automatically share incident, intelligence, suspect, and hot file data without having to rebuild existing systems.

To further this concept of information sharing, an innovative XML project is being championed by the Global Justice Information Sharing Advisory Committee (GAC).¹ The GAC advises the federal government – specifically through the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs, and the U.S. attorney general – in facilitating standards-based electronic information exchange throughout the justice and public safety communities. GAC members represent all justice and public safety agencies concerned with information sharing, representing all levels of government as well as practitioners and, perhaps most importantly, end users.

The XML project began as a simple reconciliation of data definitions (referred to as "tags") common to several XML applications – the objective being to develop common definitions of criminal justice data to support information sharing among law enforcement, prosecutors, courts, the corrections profession, and

ancillary private and public entities. In less than two years, the work has evolved into a broad effort to develop a general framework organized around objects and relationships.

In March 2001 the Joint Task Force on Rap Sheet Standardization, Regional Information Sharing Systems (RISS), and LegalXML (now part of the Organization for the Advancement of Structured Information Standards) combined to discuss each of their XML efforts and how to consolidate those efforts. Although each group had already embarked upon its respective XML initiative, it became obvious that consolidating those efforts would benefit all three groups' individual constituencies, thereby paying large dividends.

In December 2001 the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators (AAMVA) joined the effort because criminal justice officials often use driver and vehicle information to identify and locate persons. DMV data is also of tremendous intelligence value to law enforcement authorities.

During the initial data reconciliation effort, these organizations documented their decision-making processes. The resulting product is the Justice Reconciled Data Dictionary (RDD 1.0), which contains approximately 300 standard terms for data elements. The RDD is now being used in several live implementations, as well as in other efforts nearing the final stages of development. As other associations and organizations looked toward developing applications using the RDD, it was determined that the dictionary was useful, but insufficient to harness the full potential of XML. The RDD has since evolved into a more robust dictionary known as the Justice XML Data Dictionary Schema (JXDDS). This evolution has facilitated document transmission and information sharing across the Internet.

Although all of this may sound extremely technical, the implementation of standards-based data labels simply creates a bridge between disparate information systems. Agencies that implement standards in their records management and intelligence systems can lower the cost and technical difficulty of connecting systems. These standards do not

inhibit a department's ownership or control of its data. They simply formalize the process by which the labels for critical data elements are agreed upon.

Although many citizens believe that their local police departments can communicate with one another and share automated information, this is often not the case. Numerous industry and government groups, as well as law enforcement executive membership associations are committed to delivering the technical solutions that law enforcement needs now. The Justice Standards Registry (JSR), created by the Office of Justice Programs, lists standards associated with those solutions used by federal, state, tribal, and local agencies for review and comment by other justice practitioners.²

The Law Enforcement Information Standards Council (LEITSC) recognizes that XML is a very promising solution that will bridge information-sharing gaps between agencies without threatening the autonomy and security of individual information systems.³ Law enforcement executives should be considering the role of XML-based standards as they purchase and upgrade their information systems.

For more information, go to the IACP Technology Clearinghouse Web site at www.IACPtechnology.org or contact Jennifer Hicks, LEITSC project director, at hicksj@theiacp.org.

1. More information is available at <http://www.it.ojp.gov/global>.
2. The Justice Standards Registry may be found at www.it.ojp.gov/jsr.
3. More information on the Law Enforcement Information Standards Council may be found at <http://www.iacptechnology.org/>