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Driver's License Photo-Sharing Demo a Success

By George Ake, Coordinator, National Institute of Justice

On March 27, 2007, state police commanders had an exclusive look at the next step in information sharing: instant access to interstate driver's license photos. At the International Association of Chiefs of Police State and Provincial Police Meeting, Nlets (National Law Enforcement Telecommunications System; the international justice and public safety information-sharing network) performed the first-ever live demonstration of interstate driver's license photo sharing over Nlets. For the first time in the history of law enforcement information sharing, an officer could send a query to another state and receive an actual Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) photo over Nlets within seconds.

Not surprisingly, the demo received rave reviews.

"The photo-sharing program is a significant step towards enhancing officer safety and efficiency on the road," said Col. Steve Flaherty, superintendent of the Virginia State Police. "Plus, the public will reap the benefits of officers being able to immediately confirm a violator's identity, thus helping detect and potentially reduce the prevalence of identity theft."

According to Steve Correll, executive director for Nlets, the goal of the program is to lead the way in giving officers at the side of the road all the information they need—when and where they need it. "When they only have a few seconds to make a decision about what to do, a positive ID from a photo can make a huge difference—sometimes a life-and-death difference," said Correll.

The one-year grant from the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Directorate for Science and Technology involves about 200 officers in each of the three pilot states: Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina. This grant enabled Nlets to team up with the three states, two vendors, and the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators (AAMVA) to pioneer interstate driver's license photo sharing.

The collaboration is what made this first phase of the grant such a resounding success. Without the solid commitment of Virginia, North and South Carolina, and AAMVA, this project would not have proved so successful, so quickly. In addition, the states' switch providers, Unisys and CPI, provided invaluable support for this project.

According to Col. Fletcher Clay, commander of the North Carolina State Highway Patrol, North Carolina was eager to be part of the pilot project. "This kind of technology is a

powerful tool in keeping both our citizens and our officers safe. We are proud to help lay the groundwork that will one day give every officer in America access to driver license photos.”

This pilot project enables states to exchange driver’s license photos for the sole purpose of positive identification. Nlets has an excellent track record of leveraging grants to create pilot projects that can then easily be replicated across the county. This is apparent by the fact that this team has only been working together since the first of the year.

During the remainder of the pilot, representatives of the three states will identify and resolve political, operational, and technical issues involved in sharing photos between states over the Nlets network. This pilot will open the door for additional types of photo sharing that will help officers, including booking, mug shots, and possibly fingerprints.

Nlets has a history of success. The organization is adept at developing the total process, including the establishment of a governance structure, an executive steering committee, and a technical and business group; drafting of policies and procedures; and the development of technical specifications using standards-based solutions. Grants are implemented under the authority of the Nlets Board of Directors.

During the development of this project, representatives from NIJ, DHS, Nlets, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Unisys, and CPI met routinely to ensure a standards-based approach to fulfilling the grant.

“The continuing support of NIJ and DHS for new technology and new uses of existing technology allows us to innovate solutions that are fundamental to the day-to-day task of protecting America and Americans,” said Bonnie Locke, Nlets’s director of program management and National Individual Security Program (NISP) project director. “We appreciate their ongoing support.”

During the remainder of the one-year grant, team members will address privacy issues. The team is also going to work closely with the SRFERS (State, Regional, and Federal Enterprise Retrieval System) project. “Have we worked out all the questions and concerns? No,” answered Locke. “We have a good start on a draft policy, but we still have a lot of questions to answer before we roll this out nationally.”

Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina were chosen to pilot the project because they met targeted criteria. They were technically and politically ready and had good interstate cooperation, working relationships, and vendor partners. In addition, there are no state laws against sharing driver’s license photos.

According to Locke, after the entire pilot is complete later this year, additional states can become involved. However, the availability of additional grant dollars to support additional states is uncertain at this time. She commented, “It’s possible that states that are ready to come on board might need to have some of their own resources to participate.” Locke added that together they can explore ways to assist their member states in broadening this critical driver’s license photo-sharing initiative.

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