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Regional Pawn Database Sharing System: A Lesson in Collaboration

By Mitch Cunningham, Bob Moseley, and Stephen Dickstein

It wasn't just the 1,300 cases solved in the first six months of operation or the recovery of several million dollars' worth of stolen property that led to the selection of the Washington (D.C.) Regional Pawn Data Sharing System as one of the 2006 IACP Excellence in Technology award winners. It was also the unprecedented collaboration among 19 local law enforcement agencies in two states and the District of Columbia. This column describes the collaborative effort and the building processes that led to the implementation of such a valuable law enforcement tool.

Despite the prominence of the Washington, D.C., area, local law enforcement agencies found themselves lagging behind the technology curve in many respects. In 1998 the Washington-area police chiefs, through the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (MWCOC) Police Chiefs Committee, established a subcommittee on police technology. Composed of law enforcement officers and technologists from around the region, the subcommittee met monthly to address technology issues. Of special concern was the lack of regional data sharing.

Many unsuccessful attempts had been made at regional data sharing. There were varying contributing factors leading to the downfall of these prior projects: limited funding, lack of planning, and inadequate governance.

A working group in the COG Police Technology Subcommittee explored the sharing of pawn transaction data throughout the region. Enlisting the expertise of local pawn investigators, the working group, now consisting of technologists and property crime investigators, set out to define the functional requirements of the ideal regional pawn system. Meeting regularly, this working group hammered out the details of desired features and began working through procedures that would be required should their dream system ever become reality.

The investigators identified 231 key features of such a system, including the following:

- Electronic import of transaction data from the pawnshops
- Automated serial number checking against the NCIC stolen article files and smart matching so typographical errors could be identified
- Sophisticated query capabilities on persons and property
- Notifications to their cell phones or e-mail accounts based on stored queries that they could set
- Built-in processes to detect and warn of possible criminal activity
- Web interface for easy, low-cost access
- Secure law enforcement access only

In 2002 the investigators' dreams moved one step closer to reality when a grant was awarded by Congressman Jim Moran (D-Virginia) to fund the development of the regional system.

The first step in what would become a phased implementation was to develop a formal needs assessment and requirements document based on the work that the investigators had done. For this phase of development, the pawn working group partnered with Mitretek's Center for Criminal Justice Technology (CCJT). The preparation began with an exhaustive study of the local police departments with respect to their pawn and data processing operations. Every department participated in the study and helped refine the requirements. The end result of this phase was a formal comprehensive document defining the technical, functional, and operational requirements of the system. This phase took six months to complete.

The next step was to incorporate the formal requirements into a request for proposals (RFP). In all, 10 vendors bid on the project. In the first round the number of viable candidates was reduced to four. The winning bidder, Business Watch International (BWI), developed the system with the participation of the working group.

The innovative system provides regional information sharing and enables investigators to solve tough cases. Victims are now reunited with their property, much of which has sentimental value to the owners, because of this system.

Investigators have used RPDSS to close the following cases, to name just a few:

- Grand larceny and attempted malicious wounding of a police officer
- Theft of new computers and InFocus projectors before they were reported stolen
- Nighttime thefts from automobiles
- Major fraud cases amounting to hundreds of thousands of dollars

Throughout the process, from the humble beginnings to the present, there has been collaboration and partnering among everyone involved in the project. This has truly been a project that was designed by investigators for investigators from the bottom up.

This project succeeded where others have failed, because of unprecedented cooperation between dozens of federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies throughout the diverse region of our nation's capital.

Residents and visitors to our region are better served and safer by modern law enforcement information sharing technology. In brief, the Regional Pawn Database Sharing System demonstrates the success law enforcement can experience when agencies work together as a collaborative and are provided the technological tools necessary to fight crime across geographical boundaries.

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