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UA Computer Scientists Develop New Law Enforcement Search Engine

By Deidre Stalnaker, Engineering Student Writer

TUSCALOOSA, Ala. – Arrests, routine traffic stops and other law enforcement daily duties can be dangerous for police officers, but now they are becoming a little safer, faster and accurate thanks to a new system developed by computer scientists at The University of Alabama.

Earlier this year, a 13-year-old in Florence, Ala., was raped. She did not know her rapist's name, but thought she might know part of his address. Florence Police Department Deputy Chief Pete Williford was able to search numerous state databases and download a driver's license photo of the suspect. The victim made a positive identification, and the suspect was arrested the next day.

Williford was able to do a fast and reliable search of existing databases using the Law Enforcement Tactical System, or LETS, developed by computer scientists at The University of Alabama with direct support of the Southwest Alabama Integrated Criminal-Justice System.

LETS is a secure Web-based search engine that allows law enforcement and criminal justice agencies to search numerous databases simultaneously, returning information in real time while it facilitates in-depth searches. Those searches can be done by person or vehicle characteristics. The system was developed by UA's CARE Research & Development Laboratory (CRDL) in 2002 and has grown rapidly.

"We wanted to develop a new way to produce and deliver criminal justice information directly to the point of use," explained Dr. David Brown, computer science professor and director of development of the CRDL. "Officers in the field can find out who is driving a car they are following and can make a positive identification of people who do not have their driver's license in their possession."

LETS also can check warrants and protection orders. Officers on the side of the road can gain access to these databases without having to radio the information in to a dispatcher, who then inputs it into one database at a time. Taking less time to look up information could save lives.

"When an officer has more immediate access to data, he or she can make more appropriate and timely decisions," Brown added.

Brown works with Dr. Allen Parrish, associate professor of computer science and director of the CRDL, and Dr. Brandon Dixon, assistant professor of computer science, on the growing LETS project. Currently, there are about 2,000 users of the system, and an average of one database a month is being added.

The UA team is working with several agencies throughout the state to continue the development and implementation of LETS, including the Alabama Office of Law Enforcement Systems Integration and Standards, Department of Public Safety, Administrative Office of Courts, Office of the Attorney General, Department of Economic and Community Affairs, and direct financial support has come from the Southwest Alabama Integrated Criminal Justice System.

In 1837, UA became the first university in the state to offer engineering classes and was one of the first five in the nation to do so. Today, the College of Engineering, with about 1,900 students and more than 90 faculty, is one of the three oldest continuously operating engineering programs in the country and has been fully accredited since accreditation standards were implemented in the 1930s.

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