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E-citations going statewide in Alabama

Application will simplify ticketing, strengthen law enforcement

By Dibya Sarkar

Alabama's law enforcement and court officials are ready to distribute an electronic citation application statewide, after two years of planning, design, development and testing.

The application allows state troopers or police officers to quickly and accurately fill out moving violation tickets on their computers using tabs and pull-down menus. They can print tickets and will eventually be able to upload data wirelessly to a case management system after officials build wireless hot spots around courthouses, said Jack Doane, information technology manager for Alabama's Administrative Office of Courts (AOC).

The state's system will also allow troopers to swipe a driver's license, equipped with a bar code or magnetic stripe, through a reader linked to a computer, which connects to a database called the Law Enforcement Tactical System. The motorist's driver and vehicle data, including any violations, pops up with the driver's picture. The system can then fill the e-citation with relevant data.

Troopers can easily issue multiple tickets during a single event. "Once they've done a citation, all they have to do is change the statute code and write another one in a couple of seconds," Doane said. "They can issue three, four, five citations very quickly, whereas before they had to write out five citations by hand."

Capt. Harry Kearley, whose Motor Carrier Safety Unit tested the software, said the application will serve as a statewide resource for enforcement efforts.

For example, if a motorist is given a speeding ticket in Mobile, Ala., and stopped for the same violation in Montgomery, Ala., two hours later, an officer would know by tapping into the system. "That's not something we were able to find out two years ago [or] ever been able to find out because we had no way of knowing that he's just been written a ticket," Kearley said.

Martin Pastula, partner and development manager with Microsoft's justice and public safety sector, said it shows the value of the application. Officers could tap into various sex offender, gang and parolee databases, and they could eventually find out if a driver owes child support in another state, he said.

"There's a huge extension here," he said. "There's a huge implication, right or wrong, good or bad." Although Alabama officials are joining only a handful of other government officials, including those in New Orleans and California, who have developed similar applications, Pastula said the potential for e-citations is wide open.

In collaboration with Alabama's Public Safety Department and AOC officials, the University of Alabama's CARE Research and Development Laboratory developed the e-citation software at a cost of about \$750,000. The lab's director, Allen Parrish, said officials initially considered commercial off-the-shelf software. However, they realized that substantial development effort would be needed to tailor existing software to Alabama's business rules, edit checks, forms and other processes.

Instead, the state's software was developed using Microsoft .Net technology so it would be interoperable with the court's Microsoft-based applications.

"We felt the custom solution ultimately met everybody's needs at lowest cost because, now that it's paid for and essentially done, it's available to any police agency in the state that wants to use it," Parrish said.

Although the application is available to the state's 67 jurisdictions for free, officials must buy their own hardware, such as computers and readers, and money is tight, Kearley said.

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