

Officers praise new computer programs

Ashley Boyd (Staff Writer)

Long gone are the days when officers had to call dispatch to get information about the driver they just pulled over.

CAPS, the University of Alabama Center for Advanced Public Safety, has changed law enforcement capabilities through new computerized software programs.

For more than 10 years, CAPS has introduced several mobile law enforcement applications, such as LETS, the Law Enforcement Tactical System. LETS is a Google-like search engine that enables officers to retrieve vehicle information through a license plate search, which then gives the registration and any possible warrants. The program also displays photos to aid in identification.

LETS Go, the fourth and newest edition of LETS, was released early this year and provides law enforcement with added features including a built-in text-to-speech engine that produces a voice readout of critical summary information, commercial vehicle and carrier data and a larger search range capability.

“This is putting more databases all in the same portal. We’re trying to get more and more so they can check more and more databases with one simple search. They’d have to call dispatch before, and it took a lot of time. With this, they can do it all in the car,” said Rhonda Stricklin, an assistant research engineer with CAPS.

LETS Go enables officers to retrieve information from their patrol cars. After entering a vehicle number into the system, the speech feature reads detailed information about the vehicle and driver back to the officer. The new version can also be used to retrieve commercial vehicle data. The program is used by more than 850 agencies and 14,000 individual users across the U.S.

“This is something that they can use on the road and gives them access to information. It’s good for the officers to not have to take their eyes off the road,” Stricklin said.

Andy Norris, sergeant for the Tuscaloosa County Sheriff’s Office, said his officers rely on the system because it speeds the process of identifying potential criminals, the vehicles they drive and their home address.

“Before LETS, you’d have to do a lot of things at hand that you can now do on the go,” he said. “I would say that LETS Go and all the updates really gives deputies on the street the tools they need to effectively fight crime and find those persons that are wanted more speedily and rapidly track down persons that were committing (crimes).”

One of CAPS' more popular mobile data projects is the eCite. First used in 2003 at a trucking weight station in Alabama, the eCite allowed officers to issue tickets electronically. The program is being used by all Alabama state troopers. While the officer prints a paper ticket for the driver, the data is entered automatically and transmitted directly to the Administrative Office of Courts in Montgomery.

The eCrash program is CAPS' newest, replacing paper forms with electronic ones. The eCrash was released in June and eliminates the need for officers to mail paper crash forms. Instead, they enter crash data directly into a database. The program also allows victims of wrecks and insurance companies to obtain accident reports more speedily.

"It's faster, it's correct and it's complete data. You were looking at a several-month delay, but now as soon as the crash form is submitted, it goes into a database and provides a better analysis of where crashes are happening. Officers and engineers can use data to evaluate where patrolling is needed," Stricklin said.

Starting in 2010, all Alabama officers will be required to use eCrash.

Brian Kincaid, a traffic officer at the Northport Police Department, has been using eCrash since its release in June. One of the greatest benefits in using eCrash, he said, is that it prevents errors.

"It will not let you transfer the report if there are major errors on it. It can't catch all errors but it catches the big ones," he said.

The eCite, eCrash and LETS are all housed in the Mobile Officer Virtual Environment system, developed for officers to use on laptops in their cars. The system allows officers to search across multiple databases and access applications such as a driver's license scanning device, LETS, eCite, eCrash and ASPEN, software for federal electronic reporting of commercial vehicle violations.

"We do a lot here for law enforcement and developing software that helps officers and the whole state," Stricklin said. "It makes them more productive and more efficient."