

System streamlines accident reporting

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It wasn't that long ago when Alabama state troopers and tri-county police officers had to write out traffic accident reports by hand and crash victims had to wait weeks to get a copy of a report.

Nowadays, troopers and officers use an electronic crash form to file reports, and they are available to the public the next day in some cases.

The state highway patrol in 2009 began using an electronic system known as eCrash, which can be accessed from mobile units within a trooper's vehicle. A docking station for the system draws power from the vehicle's battery. Motorcycle officers can use it as well.

"It's very much a timesaver," said Sgt. Jason Black, traffic homicide unit coordinator with the highway patrol.

Using eCrash, all a trooper needs to access a driver's information is a driver's license number. The license can be swiped into the mobile unit or the number can be entered manually.

The backbone of the eCrash software is the Mobile Officer Virtual Environment. MOVE integrates the different applications that are used, such as the scanning of a driver's license.

Montgomery Cpl. P.T. Reaves said as officers enter accident information into the MOVE system, each section turns from red to green. A report can't be submitted with any sections in red so the system has "tremendously" cut down on errors, Reaves said.

Using previous systems, an officer would have to turn in a handwritten report and a supervisor might send it back several times for revisions if errors were found. It was a process that could take weeks and in some cases months.

Using the eCrash system to submit reports means they can be approved and made available quickly.

When the eCrash system was implemented, troopers asked other agencies to begin using it as well. The Montgomery, Prattville, Wetumpka and Millbrook police departments all made the switch.

"The technology has been user friendly," Prattville Lt. Patrick Kowalczyk said. "It cuts down on time, and we are all connected."

Kowalczyk said one of the main benefits of the system is that the computers at headquarters are integrated with the mobile units, meaning crash reports can be worked on in the car or the office.

Reaves, who works five to 15 wrecks a day, said the software allows him to start a report at the scene but finish it later if he's called to another wreck.

Reaves said he became familiar with the eCrash system in 2008 when he and five other MPD officers went to Tuscaloosa to learn how to use the software. The eCrash software was developed at the Center for Advanced Public Safety at the University of Alabama. The Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs sponsored the project.

The six MPD officers later taught others in the department.

"It's 90 percent better, if not more, than what we had," Reaves said.

Reaves said some of the advantages of the electronic system includes a more professional look, more options available on the form and a decrease in the amount of time it takes to complete a report.

Reaves said he can fill out a report in about 10 minutes or less.

He said one of the most notable improvements using the electronic form involves multivehicle accidents. With eCrash, officers can add information on as many cars as there were involved in a wreck. The paper reports only contained space for information on two vehicles.

The eCrash system also allows more detail to be added to crash reports. For example, while there used to be only 19 options for a vehicle description, the list now includes 31. Black added that with a computerized system, they can easily add options that might be needed in the future.