



Paper warrants be gone

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In September 2000, Benjamin Mills strangled his estranged girlfriend Rebecca Caldwell in the bedroom of her Louisville, Kentucky, apartment. Though he has since been brought to justice and is serving a life sentence, this crime could have been prevented.

Court records show a complaint for Mills' arrest on domestic violence charges was issued before the murder but, by the time the warrant was approved — six days later — it was too late for Rebecca Caldwell.

These types of tragedies have become far less likely today, Kentucky's eWarrants system now includes 72 counties.

Consider this: On April 1, 2008, a detective filed a complaint to secure an arrest warrant for Kenneth Gatewood for murder, robbery first, and tampering with physical evidence. The detective searched the eWarrants system and found Gatewood listed as a witness in another case and learned his address and cell phone number. Then the following transpired:

At 13:15 hours: The detective filed a criminal complaint

At 13:35 hours: A city attorney issued the complaint

At 13:45 hours: A judge approved the warrant

At 14:00 hours: The judge entered the warrant into the Law Enforcement Information Network of Kentucky (LINK)

The next day, at 6:57 a.m., police took Gatewood into custody.

"It was that fast," says Mary Halmhuber, CIO in the Kentucky Office of Homeland Security. "It all happened because the detective ran names as a query and came across Gatewood's name in another criminal complaint."

An electronic, interlinked system called eWarrants has revolutionized the way law enforcement and criminal justice professionals across Kentucky access and serve warrants, summonses, and other related documents.

Since the first rollout of eWarrants in 2008 and subsequent rollouts to date, 250,000 warrants have either been served or recalled. "Service rates for warrants rose from as low as 10 percent under the paper-

based system to roughly 50 percent immediately after implementation of eWarrants, and now hold steady as high as 80 percent,” says Halmhuber.

This system allows justice to be served and improves the safety of officers and the public at large, reports the Kentucky Governor’s Office.

“[The electronic warrants] are modernizing our criminal justice system by enabling 24/7, real-time access to critical law enforcement information, improving accountability and timeliness of warrant processing and serving, and ultimately enhancing the safety and security of our communities,” says Steven Beshear, governor of the state of Kentucky since 2007.

The problem with paper

“The effectiveness of Kentucky’s eWarrants system has not only met, but exceeded our expectations,” says Beshear. “This system is an example of using technology to improve the way we do business and enhance services to our citizens.”

But to fully appreciate what technology has accomplished, it’s important to know where Kentucky’s warrants system has been.

In 2008, when the first counties entered the eWarrants pilot, the state had 300,000 outstanding paper warrants, which were housed in decentralized locations across 120 counties. The warrants were slow to be issued as well as served. And just 6 percent made their way into Kentucky’s LINK system and only 3 percent were ever entered into NCIC. And since warrants have no expiration date or statute of limitations, they remained active in the system until served or recalled. Warrants were remaining in the system an average of 3.9 years, reports the Commonwealth Office of Technology in its nomination for the 2010 NASCIO Recognition Awards.

The process was inherently slow and had many steps, adds Jennifer Miller, public information officer at Fayette County Sheriff’s Department. With the paper-based system, an officer filed a criminal complaint requesting a warrant, which went to a county attorney for review. If the attorney approved the complaint, he sent it to a county judge for consideration. If the judge signed the document, a warrant was issued and sent to the requesting law enforcement agency. This agency then attempted to locate the subject to serve the warrant.

“Because there were so many steps before it could be signed by a judge and become a warrant, it would take several days for a warrant to go through,” she says.

The need for judges to physically sign the documents created more than a few headaches. Officers had to travel to the judge’s location to get these signatures. “Sometimes it would be difficult to track somebody down because they were busy doing other court-related things,” emphasizes Campbell County Judge Karen Thomas. “It was a strain and stress on the system. If you need a warrant right away, you need a warrant right away.”

The process was also inaccurate. “There were warrants that were lost or people who were double-served because of a lost piece of paper, photocopy or handout that said the individual had been picked up,” says Halmhuber. “Now that’s a lawsuit.”

And there were warrants out there that should have been recalled, Thomas adds. “There were lots of steps, and lots of chances for human error,” she says. “Nobody is perfect. Everyone wants to do a good job but mistakes happen.”

The lack of centralization also meant officers were often unaware warrants existed for subjects in other counties. “Officers may not know a suspect was wanted on a warrant in a county just five miles away,” Thomas says. “That’s a real issue.”

“If a warrant was issued after 5 p.m., no one would know if Jefferson County officials were looking for someone that night,” adds Halmhuber. Jefferson County has 24/7 staff and had to hand search for records, but other counties had no way to know to contact Jefferson County because such a limited number of warrants were in LINK. “And if they did learn about it, there were 60,000 warrants sitting in a back room filing cabinet, and it would take 15 minutes to an hour to find the one you needed, if you found it at all.”

The electronic solution

To combat the issues plaguing the paper-based warrant system, the Kentucky State Police, Office of Homeland Security, Attorney General’s Office and the Administrative Office of the Courts banded together to develop and implement the Kentucky eWarrants system.

With the new process, a police officer or intake person enters the eWarrants Web site to complete a complaint, which is sent electronically to the county attorney for review. The county attorney can approve, reject or pend the complaint, which if approved gets electronically submitted to a judge. The judge enters the Web site to either authorize the warrant, send it to mediation, reject or pend it. If they create a warrant, it is dispatched to all law enforcement agencies within the system. The eWarrant system also seamlessly interfaces with LINK within 15 minutes after the judge signs the warrant and information automatically links to NCIC. Each person on the eWarrants system has an inbox so they can see what’s pending or what he or she needs to address.

Authorized users enter a username and password to enter their inbox, and each has varying administration levels. “Only a judge can sign the warrant to create an active warrant or recall a warrant,” Miller says. “Officers couldn’t do either of these things, but they have the ability to search for a warrant and serve a warrant.”

Access to the system via the Internet with a smartphone, laptop, in-car computer or mobile data terminal greatly enhances efficiency, says Thomas, who points out she has even approved warrants while on vacation. “When judges are on call, they are obligated to go into the general inbox and take care of any warrants in there,” she says. “When I was stuck in Morocco because of the Icelandic volcanic eruption last year, I issued warrants from Morocco. My work got done and the ball kept rolling forward.”

If everything falls together correctly, warrants can be issued very, very fast. “If all the players are in place, and everyone is online at the same time, you can get a warrant through within an hour, in minutes versus hours or days,” Halmhuber says. “It’s definitely a time saver, which enables officers to arrest a lot faster.”

When officers start their shifts, they can search the active warrants in their territory and serve them between calls. “The system allows me to put a warrant into a specific inbox, say for all officers working a specific ZIP code,” says Thomas. “They can check their inbox to see active warrants within their territory, and that’s why they get served so quickly.”

Officers also can search the system for an individual, for instance at a traffic stop. There are multiple search capabilities, so officers can search by full name, partial name, date of birth and other identifiers to find warrants in the system. “Before if there was a typo somewhere down the line, it was very hard to find the information,” Miller says.

The speed of the system enables officers to arrest suspects before they flee. Campbell County is situated along the Ohio River with Cincinnati on the other side. Criminals who commit crimes in the county often flee to Ohio to avoid detection, but Thomas recalls a case where eWarrants’ speed prevented that. “We had

a situation with a potential homicide and had to get a warrant out right away. Officers called me at 3 a.m. and said they had put a warrant in my inbox. I checked it and we were able to hold that person,” Thomas recalls.

Not only that but it’s possible for officers and judges as well to address backlogged warrants. When Campbell County went online in 2008, judges sifted through old warrants, recalled some and entered others into the system. Now that these warrants are centrally located, Thomas says officers are arresting individuals on warrants that go back many years.

“We recently arrested a guy on a warrant from 1996,” Thomas says. “I looked at his record and he’s had cases in 2002, 2003 and 2005, but they were all out of the county. Once we had the eWarrants system, we were finally able to pick him up.”

There’s also an audit trail because the system keeps a “fingerprint” of everyone who looked at a warrant, according to Miller. Officers can note when they attempted to serve the warrant, at what address, and whether or not they were successful, so “there is a historical record of what’s been done with the warrant,” says Miller.

If an attempt is unsuccessful, the warrant remains active. When a warrant has been served, the system automatically updates to show that it’s been served. It documents the date and time it happened, and the officer who did it.

The statewide push

Kentucky’s eWarrants system was originally funded through a \$4.5 million General Fund appropriation and implemented through the Kentucky Office of Homeland Security. Extending the program statewide is expected to cost approximately \$900,000. Rural counties are being funded with a federal grant to the Attorney General’s Office.

“We have identified funding for all 120 counties,” says Halmhuber. “We do need some additional funds [to get all counties on the system], but it’s doubtful that we will have that funding by the end of the year. We will have up to 115 out of 120 counties online by December 2011, and that’s a lot.”

There is a need for more money to get every county on the system, Thomas agrees. Finances are an issue. The Kentucky State Police carries the financial burden of administering the system and maintaining it. “None of us have any money and that’s a problem,” she says. “How we run it and how we pay for it in the long-term is an issue. In the long run it pays for itself by saving man hours, but that’s hard to see.

“But every county needs to be on this system to take full advantage of it. We are a transitory people and this kind of information network is just so necessary for us to keep doing a good job.”

But it will happen, agree those in charge of getting the other counties onboard.

The system is also a prime example of what can be accomplished when all agencies in the criminal justice system work together toward a common goal.

“This is an excellent example of cross-agency collaboration because it crosses state and local departments, the judicial and executive branches of government the attorney general’s office, state and local police,” Halmhuber says. “This system brought all of these parties together and it shows that doing the right thing can be a good thing.”

While it may be too late for Rebecca Caldwell, the eWarrants system means others may not suffer the same fate while police wait for a warrant.