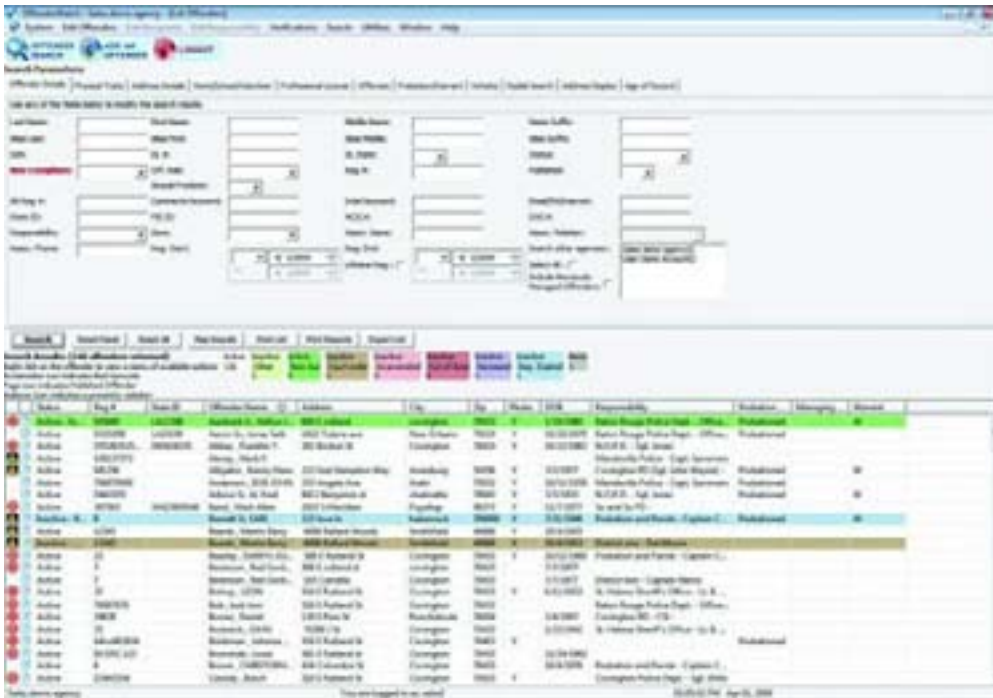


Conn. Agencies Use Appriss and Watch Systems to Track Sex Offenders

Case Study: Two Connecticut officers explain how sex offender tracking software can help law enforcement better monitor offenders.

January 26, 2011 | by Joe Biela and Sam Izzarelli



In October 2009, Governor M. Jodi Rell unveiled Connecticut’s enhanced Sex Offender Registry System. The state’s new service would build on the previous system’s initial goals: Help law enforcement monitor the state’s sex offender population and give citizens the opportunity to track registered sex offenders living in their neighborhoods. The Connecticut Department of Public Safety, a Division of the State Police, would implement and manage the new service.

Since then we have made tremendous improvements in the flow of information, level of communication between state agencies, and the support mechanism, which was absent before this implementation.

For law enforcement, the new tools will allow probation and parole officers and

police to better manage sex offenders and their movements in and out of a jurisdiction. Officials will be able to register offenders remotely from Department of Correction facilities and the system is linked with other state law enforcement databases.

The public can now access the state's upgraded system to track the whereabouts of registered sex offenders by street location, city or town, or by a radial area, a registrant's name, or by compliance status. In addition, parents can print fliers on child safety from their own computers, and they are provided tools to educate their children on how to protect themselves.

The enhanced sex offender registry has been a long time coming. Connecticut was one of the first states in the nation to launch a sex offender Web site. Established in 1998, it was named after seven-year-old Megan Kanka of New Jersey, who was killed four years earlier by a sex offender living near her home. The original site provided some information, but didn't go far enough to keep up with the available technology to give citizens or law enforcement the information they needed to protect families and communities.

Our job was to ensure sex offenders were compliant. If they weren't, we'd notify them by letter. For the first four-and-a-half years, we had limited resources and were unable to spend a great deal of time arresting violators that failed to respond to their 90-day letters.

The new system provides us with a series of auto-generated reports, not only for 90-day violations but for photo and educational institution violations.

Passage of the Adam Walsh Act in 2006 called for major improvements to sex offender registries across the country. It expanded the scope of sex offender registrations by including a wider range of offenses. Offenders are required under the law to make periodic, personal appearances to authorities to update their information.

When the Connecticut Department of Public Safety began looking to expand registry criteria, it released a request for proposal and after an extensive process, selected Appriss and their partner, Watch Systems, two technology companies with an extensive background in criminal justice data sharing.

Appriss is widely known for its automated victim information and notification service called VINE. The Kentucky-based company is linked with jails and state prisons across the country and provides offender information in real time to both law enforcement and the general public. Appriss has also developed a notification tool to keep residences, schools, and businesses informed when registered sex offenders moved into neighborhoods.

Louisiana-based Watch Systems is best known for OffenderWatch, a leading sex offender registry management and community notification tool. Criminal justice agencies across the country use OffenderWatch to manage and monitor a sex

offender's whereabouts as well as their conduct and compliance status.

OffenderWatch also provides the public with direct access to agency-personalized local offender information. Citizens can receive e-mail notifications when a registered sex offender moves into their neighborhood. They can also track individual offenders through its mapping tool.

Both Appriss and Watch Systems have partnered to provide their solutions to criminal justice agencies and communities nationwide. Together, the two cover over 100,000 sex offenders, approximately 25 percent of the registered sex offender population in the United States.

Using this technology, we have seen our business practice change 180 degrees. Every day we find new solutions within the application that we have not looked into before. We will receive calls or requests from agencies looking for information pertaining to a particular topic. In the past we would have to do a hand search through case files to get the information requested. Now, that information can be efficiently searched in the updated registry.

When we launched our first registry site in 1998, we could not notify other law enforcement agencies, from an automated standpoint, the sex offenders, who were in their jurisdiction. We couldn't answer that question because our system was not developed to support the management of registered sex offenders.

We would essentially look at several sex offender lists, often with different identification numbers and then compare to get the needed information. Even with this level of work, we couldn't speak with a great deal of confidence that all of the information was correct. Agencies can now go online and find answers to 99 percent of their questions.

In its first year, the new Connecticut Sex Offender Registry has greatly enhanced communication between law enforcement agencies across the state. We have more than doubled our output of investigations on a monthly basis. The more information we provide to police departments, the more requests we are getting from them because they realize the system is capable of doing more.

Police investigators approach us regarding specific physical characteristics, asking us to provide a list of registered sex offenders matching a particular description. We can respond to these requests in minutes.

We believe an integral part of the business that we do is to communicate across state lines. We feel very strongly about this in that states must learn to communicate effectively, or we fail to keep citizens accurately informed and protected. If the net has a hole in it, the fish will get through it. We work closely with about a half a dozen states. The biggest challenge is the understanding that we all have different criteria for classifying sex offenders. We have to be able to speak the same language, or we risk losing a registrant

Another advantage to this new registry is the support that comes with the service. Previous to this, we didn't have a point person or organization to call for IT support or simply to answer questions. Having a live person to walk through the service and answer our questions is something we weren't used to.

The other half of this new and improved registry is the public component. The enhancement has empowered citizens across our state to become more proactive in learning about offenders living near their homes. Change is some times difficult for people.

Initially we were getting a flurry of inquiries as to the inability to find specific information. Users were a bit overwhelmed by all of the features and abilities. Now we average one or two questions a week. We've received a lot of positive feedback from the general public.

Our department will receive requests from the general public to add a feature that is already available, they simply don't know its there. We will secure an e-mail address and send them the quick tips currently posted on the Web site.

We generally see an increase in public use of the registry during Halloween or other holidays. Otherwise, the use is generally consistent. We are giving the citizens of Connecticut a functionality they've never had before. We provide to the citizens of this state, the most up to date information on over 5,200 registered sex offenders. We encourage them to rely on the public website more frequently and to take advantage of all the features which are now available to them.

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