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Designing and Selecting Automated Jail Management and Classification Information Systems

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General Jail Automation Guidelines and Issues

Counties seeking new correctional management information systems should proceed with the RFP/acquisition process as informed as possible of the latest automation approaches, applications and technologies. Automated management information systems (MIS) have traditionally been used to enter required offender data for basic record keeping and to facilitate basic inmate management routines. There has generally been limited demand on these systems to collect a broad range of data in suitable formats and provide adhoc reporting capabilities to support the informational correctional needs in a twenty-first century environment.

When considering jail automation, it is important to understand that the jail is the “hub” of the local criminal justice system. As such, the jails’ information needs (both inmate-specific and facility operations), and the needs of the local criminal justice system are dependent upon the adequacy of the jail MIS.

In order to address many of the problems facing jail management and local criminal justice systems and to more effectively and efficiently manage and plan local

corrections, you must first understand and quantify the problem(s) i.e. jail crowding, trends in population characteristics, lack of adequate staffing, increased budget, etc.

This requires comprehensive, reliable and accessible data.

Problems facing local criminal justice systems today include:

- Criminal Justice System Overload
- Overcrowded Jails
- Increased Competition for Limited State and Local Funds
- Inefficient Operations
- Lack of Inter-Agency Coordination - Fragmentation
- Inadequate or Non-Existent MIS Systems
- Lack of “Informed” Data Based Decision Making
- Poor Planning - Tendency to go for “Quick Fix”
- Increased Liability
- Increasing Trend of “Back Flushing” Low-Level Prison Inmates to Local Level to Ease Prison Crowding

Much of this information can, and should be, available through a well-designed, well-developed jail MIS and the data it collects and manipulates. There are several commercial software solutions which do a decent job of providing for the line-level

user's daily processing needs. However, few of these software solutions have been designed to adequately provide for the manager, administrator, or planner's needs.

We advocate and teach what we call a "top down" approach to MIS application design versus the traditional "bottom up" approach. The prevalent approach to designing criminal justice software is to focus on the needs of the line-level user with minimal attention to administrative needs - the "bottom up" approach. The more appropriate design approach (given today's issues, informational needs and applications) is to focus on the manager's, administrator's and planner's needs, and build down to the line-level user's needs - the "top down" approach.

In addition, with the automation technologies available today, it is imperative that the jail MIS have the capacity to easily interface (communicate/share information) with other criminal justice MIS systems. Generally in the past, any interfacing of local criminal justice MIS systems required sole-source contracting with a single provider offering an integrated criminal justice MIS solution, i.e. jail, courts, probation, prosecutor, records management, etc. This resulted in five particular problems:

- 1) The vendor usually specialized in one or two applications, i.e. courts or records, and offered a decent MIS solution, but other MIS applications, i.e. jail, were weak, inadequate or simply did not meet the needs of the jail. Since an "integrated"

system was required, some local agencies would get stuck with the module that came with the overall package.

- 2) The sheer size of implementing a sole-source vendor solution to multiple local criminal justice agencies meant the project implementation often stretched out over several years, leaving agencies lower on the implementation priority list in the lurch.
- 3) The cost of these systems was very expensive and inflexible in terms of relative ease in modifications, updates or changes in hardware platforms.
- 4) These systems, and the technology base they were developed in, do not easily allow for “interfacing” (communicating and sharing data) with other systems.
- 5) The enormity of the project - in terms of time, expense and politics - prevented upgrading various agency components of the system as technologies advanced and as better solutions became available. This resulted in a downward cycle of pouring more money and resources into an antiquated “technical dinosaur” to try and stay reasonably current with new technologies and information needs. This results in perpetuating an outdated system through a “Band-Aid” approach when, in fact, the system needs to be retired.

With today's "open systems" technologies, local criminal justice agencies should demand the ability to shop for the best solution for their agency, while providing for, and requiring, the easy interfacing of their software solution to other similarly selected MIS choices by other agencies. The benefits in capitalizing on today's technologies include:

- 1) Individual agency solutions (i.e. jail) which meet the needs of that agency versus being stuck with the sole source vendor's solution that comes with their comprehensive "packaged" (something for everyone) solution.

- 2) Systems that provide for and/or retain the ability to exchange relevant data between agencies through the "interfacing" of component driven solutions.

- 3) Systems that are more flexible. If an agency (i.e. jail) outgrows its MIS module or, more likely, the technology advances, the individual agency can "unplug" its MIS module from the overall collective of agency software modules and plug a new solution in at a fraction of the cost of replacing the entire integrated system. Politically and financially this is also much more practical.

Additional guidelines and issues which should be considered in overall jail management system selection include, in part, (some of these are reiterated in the automated classification specific features and functions):

1. Coded and configurable data fields to facilitate quality data entry, data management and usable data formats for reports and statistical outputs.
2. A true “open system” architectural design allowing for relative ease and low cost in interfacing or integrating the jail MIS to other agency MIS systems i.e. courts, probation, community corrections, NCIC, LEIN, etc., and “plugging and unplugging” in new technology upgrades and peripherals as desired, i.e. Classification, Photo Imaging, Live Scan, Bar Coding systems, etc.
3. Easy, consistent, user-friendly software navigation. New user interface technologies such as Graphical User Interface (GUI) allow for point-and-click access, context-sensitive help, drop-down menus, etc. Older technologies require more cumbersome procedures for navigating through the application software and peripheral applications (i.e. report generators, spreadsheets, word-processing, etc.,) often requiring navigating through several data entry screens or sub-menus to get to the desired point in the application.

4. Flexible system design allowing for “user-configurable” tables which customize the system’s input options to the needs of the local jail. This flexible design approach, plus other new design features such as comprehensive adhoc report capabilities, supports self sufficiency and cuts the traditional “umbilical cord” to the vendor. This minimizes the costly and inefficient dependence on the vendor in making system modifications, supplying custom reports, etc.

5. The consideration of purchasing “off-the-shelf”, “pre-developed and pre-tested” jail management (and other software applications) modules versus custom-designed, one-of-a-kind solutions. What is meant here, is that it is still common for local MIS planners, or their consultants, to develop extensive MIS specifications, i.e. jail, that are unique (and often unnecessarily complex) to that jurisdiction, containing a variety of “nice-to-have” custom features, summarily requiring custom-designed and developed software.
 - a. This generally causes several problems including:

 - b. Jeopardizing the ability of the vendor to realistically deliver the product in a timely and functionally satisfactory manner;

- c. Implementing a newly developed or highly customized system which puts the agency in the position of being the system's guinea pig and only user;
- d. Significantly increasing initial software licensing, modifications and on-going software maintenance costs;
- e. Less customer satisfaction with the end product.

The converse is to specify and shop for a well-developed, designed and reliable jail management solution which includes all of the core functional features, i.e. inmate processing, objective classification (initial, primary and reclassification), cell management, property, disciplinary, commissary/inmate accounts, scheduling, inmate programs, adhoc report generators, etc. This approach has proven to be cheaper, more cost-effective, significantly reduces implementation time, yields higher user satisfaction with the software, and is often more politically expedient.

Automated Objective Jail Classification

It has been our experience that, in general, jail management system vendors have little understanding of objective classification. Most purport to have classification in their packages, but very few actually offer well-designed, validated instruments. Fewer still

understand the data elements necessary to support a well-designed classification system, or how the software should assist the user in retrieving this information and effectively implementing classification procedures. While most vendors have latched on to the objective classification “buzz word” and claim to offer it, when one actually explores the detail of what most vendors offer in classification, they will likely find a bare bones system designed in a rather cavalier fashion because of the general lack of any appreciation for the importance, application and validity by the vendor.

In automating classification, it is important that the primary uses of classification are understood so that these objectives can be designed into the functionality. These primary uses are:

1. The ability to identify (correctly classify) the high risk and predatory inmates and keep them separate from the general population.
2. Drive the inmate housing decision consistent with the goals of classification, facility policy and housing plan.
3. Drive eligibility for inmate programs (assessed needs) and privileges.

4. The ability to identify (isolate) offender sub-populations for early release, community corrections screening (facilitate crowding control).
5. Collect, store and easily retrieve appropriate and relevant classification related inmate specific data for management, planning and policy applications.

With the primary uses of classification as the corner stone in the automation design approach, other critical “features and functions” of automated classification should then be demanded in the automated functionality. This should promote efficiency and accountability in implementing the day-to-day classification tasks by line and management staff. These include:

1. Managing the classification procedure: The system should facilitate the identification of inmates due for the various stages of classification, identify those overdue for classification, print inmate classification notices, generate hard-copy of all classifications, etc. It is critical that the classification and related functions, on an inmate specific basis, be well documented (stored on-line and easily retrieved) to minimize potential liability.
2. Accessing, retrieving and organizing the data: Good classification demands a large amount of quality data, accessed in a timely fashion. This includes relevant

information from previous incarcerations, current offense and legal status, prior criminal and disciplinary history, court sentencing information, medical/mental health summaries, etc. Automation should facilitate the timely retrieval of all relevant, available data in a well organized, easy to access format. The ability to interface with other criminal justice management information systems would also be very helpful.

3. Managing cell assignments and inmate movement: Classification automation should assist the classification/housing officer in inventorying available and appropriate beds to properly house the classified inmate consistent with the facility's housing and classification policy. Mis-housed inmates should be tracked and documented for proper notification, monitoring and housing adjustment when appropriate beds become available.

4. Post implementation feedback: Well designed automated classification should provide for a variety of "canned" and adhoc reporting and statistical capabilities detailing the various classification related monitoring indices. These would include such indices as: aggregate security and custody level profiles; classification staff workloads; override rates and reasons; mis-housed inmates summaries; classifications performed late summaries; etc. This data is critical to management

and line staff for the on-going monitoring and evaluation of the classification procedures implemented in the facility.

Conclusion

The information provided in this “automation overview” paper is intended to assist in developing a county’s automated jail management and classification RFP specifications, be used by project monitoring personnel to review the integrity of these systems, and assist in making “informed” software selection decisions.

If all of these issues described above are understood by all including county management information selection personnel, you have a much better chance of describing in your RFPs’ and selecting a well designed, technologically advanced automated jail management and objective classification management information system.

About the authors:

Dave Wells and Tim Brennan, Ph.D. are the principals of Northpointe Institute for Public Management. Mr. Wells and Dr. Brennan are perhaps best known nationally for their work in developing and implementing objective jail classification and offender risk assessment systems. They have also worked with numerous counties in the design, development and evaluation of correctional management information systems including jails and automated classification to support local criminal justice planning and policy development. They may be reached at Northpointe Institute for Public Management, P.O. Box 309 Traverse City, MI 49685, 231-938-5959.