Sophisticated System Tracks Repeat Offenders

In Niagara County, N.Y., some habitual criminals are ROTIN. That’s not a typo. ROTIN stands for Repeat Offender Tracking In Niagara, which tracks individual bookings and provides alerts related to individuals who have been booked more than five times in a three-year period.

“The idea was to have a good awareness of offenders in the community,” says Capt. Todd Ostrowski of the Niagara County Sheriff’s Office, a participant in the Spring 2012 National Institute of Justice (NIJ) Technology Institute for Law Enforcement. Ostrowski explains that he came up with the concept in 2008 while working as an intelligence officer with the sheriff’s office. After his promotion to captain and with support from Sheriff James R. Voutour, he used criminal justice and IT interns from a nearby college to help create a more sophisticated system.

“Sheriff Voutour tasked me to expand our intelligence capabilities,” Ostrowski says. “He wanted to give law enforcement members the ability to not only predict crime, but also track offenders’ movement within the community.”

Based on Microsoft® platforms such as Excel and Visual Studio, ROTIN helps communicate pertinent information about chronic offenders to officers to help them with their investigations. ROTIN pulls from computer-aided dispatch, jail records and field reports.

“It’s an officer-awareness tool aimed at promoting intelligence development and officer safety,” Ostrowski says. “The idea came from the knowledge that a small percentage of individuals commit the majority of crimes; usually something along the lines of 6 percent of criminals commit 60 percent of crimes. If we could keep them locked up, we might reduce crime rates by as much as 6 percent. It also makes us aware that these individuals shouldn’t be housed with the rest of the population when they are incarcerated.”

Crime Intelligence System

From its beginning as a manual count by Ostrowski, ROTIN has grown to become part of a more complex Crime Intelligence System that includes information on calls for service (broken down to the past 24 hours and older), currently housed inmates, recent inmate releases, active warrants, and more. Ostrowski says anyone working in the agency can now query various types of information related to crimes and offenders.

“The system aims to allow officers to check certain information and to share information throughout the agency,” he says. “Each of its tabs allows a user to go to a specific area and develop a query. Our records management system automatically pushes a text file for upload three times a day. I can search the big picture for a 90-day period, or I can narrow it down to just burglaries over a specific time and place. Officers can search for patterns or see something as specific as whether an arrest has been made related to a specific call. It also includes templates to help generate standardized intelligence bulletins.”

The dispatch center, which falls under Ostrowski’s supervision, dispatches all public safety agencies in the county except the police and fire agencies in the cities of Lockport and Niagara Falls. The New York State Police also assist in responding to calls within the Niagara County jurisdiction, so the dispatch center can use the system templates to send out timely bulletins throughout the county. Ostrowski says the dispatch center has at least four staff members on duty round the clock, and it can access the Crime Intelligence System, complemented by GPS tracking of available resources, to better allocate those resources.

Crime Tracker

A desire to expand on that capability led to the development of the next upgrade to the system, a near real-time crime mapping application called Crime Tracker. Niagara County plans to add a twist to the way agencies usually implement crime mapping, which is making it available to the public in hopes of soliciting tips.

“We’ll be able to use it to generate information on what has happened in the past eight to 16 hours to brief staff,” Ostrowski says.
Crime Tracker is a Web-based portal that has used GIS to put all the county’s infrastructure on a map that will receive hourly updates and be kept on constant display in the sheriff’s office patrol room. Electronic pushpins will make crimes committed within the past 24 hours flash at varying rates, while older crimes (up to two weeks) remain static. The plan is that supervisors will be able to use this information to deploy resources to areas of greatest need.

“A lot of agencies provide this type of information to the public in a very generic sense, but they don’t use it for their own tactical planning and response. Crime Tracker will let us do just that,” Ostrowski says.

The law-enforcement-sensitive Web portal has been developed by a consulting company and went live in late 2012.

Future Plans

What’s the next upgrade? Ostrowski would like to see other agencies in his area share their data for use in the system, and he would like to make the intern-developed portion of the system a software package that is available for other agencies to adapt to meet their needs.

“We want to share it. We want other law enforcement agencies to have this same ability that we have,” he says. “Providing data in flat text files sidesteps the need for agencies to switch things around and be on the same system. Everyone could stay on their unique system and still share whatever information they choose to share.”

For more information on ROTIN and Niagara County’s Crime Intelligence System, contact Capt. Todd Ostrowski at (716) 438-3138 or todd.ostrowski@niagaracounty.com. For information on NIJ’s Technology Institutes for Law Enforcement, contact NIJ Law Enforcement Program Manager Michael O’Shea at michael.oshea@usdoj.gov.