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Sheriff's officers say software notifies them when suspects detained

By BriAnne Dopart, The Herald-Sun
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DURHAM -- The Durham County Sheriff's office is spreading the good news.

After a successful test-run in Durham County, Justice Xchange software -- which allows law enforcement to access up-to-the-minute information about the incarceration status of suspected criminals -- will soon be available to law enforcement in four other North Carolina counties.

Justice Xchange, according to a county grant application, links users to a nationwide database containing information about who is in or has been in jail in over 1,500 facilities nationally. The system updates itself every 15 minutes, according to Teresa McKinney, the Durham Sheriff's Office division manager for development, and reports approximately 65 percent of the offenders in county jails and state prisons nationally.

McKinney said Durham's pilot program began in May 2005. After a very favorable response from officers and deputies who used the resource, the Sheriff's Office applied for and won a grant from the state to expand the test program to Wake, Granville, Chatham and Orange counties.

According to McKinney, for law enforcement in those counties without the program, finding up-to-date, valid information on a suspect often depended on chance.

"The way life runs right now, if somebody has been arrested [in the counties without Justice Xchange], unless you call all the other agencies or correctional institutions, there's no way [law enforcement] would know if the person is in custody," said Teresa McKinney.

"Often suspects ... released under conditions of probation are being detained in a facility without our knowledge, therefore evading detection ...," the grant application states. "Valuable historical offender data and photographs are on file but inaccessible."

The pilot program yielded immediate results, McKinney said. During the first year there were 169 users representing eight criminal justice agencies in Durham, including the Durham Police Department and the District Attorney's Office.

Over 1,000 searches were performed on the system per month and more than 6,300 criminal records were added to the nationwide database, McKinney said. Typically, a user will log into the system about three times a day, she said.

Currently, there are over 1,400 "active watches" posted by Durham law enforcement. The watches allow agencies to receive e-mails when an individual under a watch is taken into custody outside of Durham County.

The information provided by the system is essential to criminal investigations, McKinney said, and includes biographical information as well as photographs.

Some Durham law enforcement officers have actually been able to get in touch with officers in other

jurisdictions who have arrested subjects wanted by Durham authorities, she said.

"I've been told by child support enforcement that they've seen a 10 percent increase in their ability to serve warrants," she said.

McKinney said one Community Corrections officer told her that he was having a 100 percent success rate in using the program to capture individuals who absconded from probation.

Law enforcement in Durham has been so happy with the software, that the news of its availability spread via word of mouth, according to McKinney, leading law enforcement in Wake and Orange counties to inquire about getting Justice Xchange in their respective areas.

"When we go [to other jurisdictions] and explain what an impact it's made here, they look at it and are amazed," McKinney said.

Nineteen agencies will benefit from the expansion of the program, McKinney said.

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