

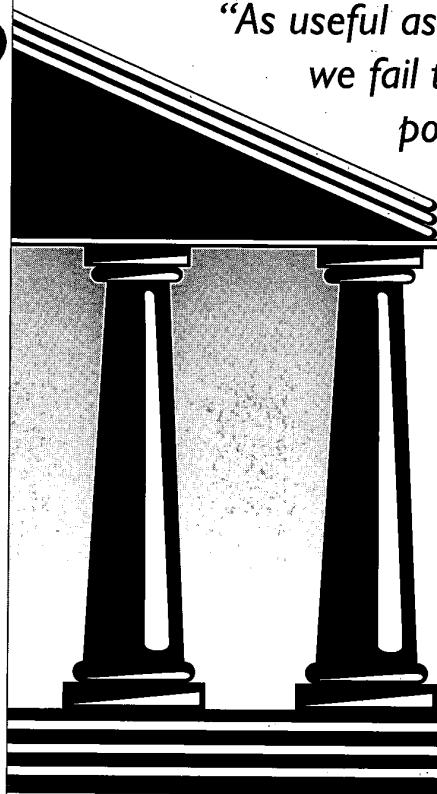
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*"As useful as computerized information may be,  
we fail to even scratch the surface of its  
potential if we don't move towards  
integration through strategic planning."*

— U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno



# **Justice and Technology in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

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**Findings and  
Recommended Strategies  
from the Report of the  
National Task Force on  
Court Automation and  
Integration**



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The age of integrated justice information systems is upon us. Information technology has evolved to such a degree that the complexities of the legal process can be effectively incorporated into information systems. Links also can be established between existing disparate legacy systems, thus allowing agencies to share information without having to fund expensive equipment purchases.

The numerous benefits of integrated information systems, such as elimination of redundant data entry, lower storage costs, the ease of information retrieval and sharing, and swifter, higher-quality justice, have motivated many courts and other justice agencies throughout the country to begin exploring the acquisition, implementation, and integration of automated

information systems. The National Task Force on Court Automation and Integration was established in 1997 to develop a strategic blueprint to guide these court agencies through the demanding but ultimately rewarding integration process.

## Task Force

The Task Force is comprised of 16 local and state justice practitioners — including judges, court administrators, officials from prosecutor and public defender offices, consultants, and representatives of national court associations who represent both users of and contributors to court information systems — who are at the forefront of court operations and integration issues.

The Task Force was formed in connection with the Court Information Systems Technical Assistance Project, a joint effort of SEARCH, The National Consortium for Justice Information and Statistics, and the Bureau of Justice Assistance, U.S. Department of Justice. Project participants include the National Center for State Courts, the National Association for Court Management, and the Conference of State Court Administrators.

The Task Force conducted extensive discussions and deliberations, augmented by a survey sent to more than 150 court administrators and information services managers, to determine the status and direction of court automation and integration throughout the country. From these activities, a list of findings and recommended strategies has been compiled in the forthcoming *Report of the National Task Force on Court Automation and Integration*, which court system administrators can use to guide automation and integration projects in their jurisdictions. For a copy of the report, contact SEARCH.

## Findings

The Task Force's findings, which include information on the status of state- and county-level integrated systems in 34 states, are as follows:

- **Benefits** such as cost savings, increased efficiencies, elimination of redundant data entry, improved decision-making quality, and increased public safety are among the chief reasons cited by court systems for undertaking automation and integration projects.
- **Driving forces** of integration include increased pressure to improve service with existing resources, legislative mandates to share information, demand for information not historically compiled by courts, and technological advances.

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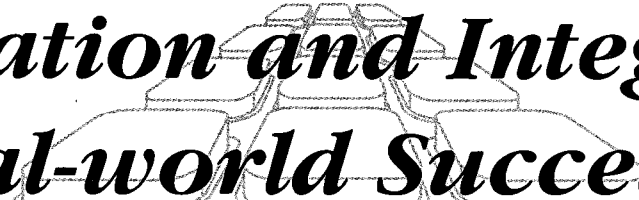
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# *Automation and Integration: Real-world Successes*



**T**he judge preparing to hear a case in the **Midtown Community Court in Manhattan** scans a 19-inch computer monitor as a defendant, arrested that day, enters the courtroom.

The screen provides access to police information on the defendant's arrest, the text of the prosecutor's complaint against the defendant, the defendant's criminal history maintained by the state Division of Criminal Justice Services, and information from the clerk's office on outstanding warrants. The integrated information system also provides up-to-date data on the availability of social service programs and alternate sentencing options so the court's resource coordinator can make effective recommendations to the judge.

Armed with the information necessary for a quality decision, the judge issues a ruling. The defendant is sentenced to community service and begins serving his sentence two hours after the trial. Sixty-nine percent of those sentenced in Midtown Community Court, which hears cases related to low-level crimes such as prostitution, vandalism, shoplifting and graffiti, receive community-service sentences. Less than 2 percent are allowed to depart with only "time served" determinations. Seventy-five percent of those sentenced comply, the highest compliance rate in New York City. The system provides access at nearby police stations so beat officers can check to see who is meeting the terms of his or her sentence. It is credited with a dramatic drop in neighborhood street crime.

In **Los Angeles County**, which averages more than 500,000 arrests per year, an automated, integrated system allows officials to verify a suspect's identity and to access his or her criminal and case histories in less than 2.5 seconds, even though the county receives data from 50 law enforcement agencies, 62 additional authorities such as railroad and university patrols, 21 different city attorney/prosecutors' offices and 24 municipal courts districts, and

uses eight legacy criminal history computer systems that cannot communicate directly with each other.

**The Consolidated Criminal History Reporting System (CCHRS, nicknamed Cheers)** confirms suspects' identities with an accuracy rate of better than 98 percent. The system provides judges with pertinent information, such as a suspect's suicide or escape risk, prior to bail hearings, and can provide a list of possible suspects in cases where an investigator may have few clues to go on.

Los Angeles County is also one of many jurisdictions establishing an integrated information system to end miscommunications between sentencing agencies and jails that result in inmates remaining incarcerated after their sentences expire. Not only do these mix-ups cost money to house and feed over-detained inmates, but they also reduce the availability of jail space and can result in expensive settlements.

**I**n 1997, approximately 700 inmates in Los Angeles County jails were held an average of 6.9 days past their ordered release dates. One inmate was held 260 days too long; two others were held 90 days or longer. The sheriff's department's risk management unit paid nearly \$200,000 to 548 overdetained inmates who agreed not to sue in lieu of a settlement. Officials hope a computer system linking county courts with the Inmate Reception Center will eliminate the need to process thousands of pieces of paper daily and prevent over-detaining.

**Harris County, Texas**, maintains the nation's largest fully integrated, automated county-level justice information system. The Justice Information Management System (JIMS) serves 144 county-level courts and other agencies, 111 non-county agencies (including municipalities and school districts), 11 state agencies, 15 federal agencies and more than 800 subscriber-access companies. JIMS allows any Harris

*continued on next page*

## Real-world Successes, cont.

County law enforcement station to electronically file cases around the clock 7 days a week, resulting in a first court appearance within 24 hours for felony and misdemeanor suspects. The time suspects spend incarcerated prior to trial is dramatically reduced. Based on a daily incarceration cost of \$45 per inmate, the system saves Harris County more than \$6.5 million annually.

Justice agencies throughout the country that integrated portions of their operations — such as notice dissemination and calendar preparation — have enjoyed cost savings and improved performance, and have spurred interest and investment in further integration projects. For example, the **Brockton and Barnstable district courts in Massachusetts** report improved productivity and record-keeping, more efficient scheduling, increased public safety, reductions in paper generation and storage needs, better relations with outside agencies, and cost savings following the automation and integration of case processing for their clerks' offices and probation departments. Automating the preparation of forms used to assign public defenders to indigent defendants will save the public defender's office an estimated \$55,000 annually in printing costs and an

additional \$45,000 annually in data entry outsourcing and postage costs. The Brockton and Barnstable courts are serving as models for the automation and integration of the state's 67 other district courts.

In the Pacific Northwest, the **Washington State Courts Judicial Information System (JIS)** provides electronic docketing, case accounting, case tracking, notice generation, issue tracking, criminal warrants, and interagency information exchange for more than 12,000 users in 305 courts statewide. The system processes more than 800,000 on-line transactions per day.

JIS is being enhanced to serve as the basis for a planned Justice Information Network, which is intended to facilitate more efficient, secure, and broader data exchange between the state's justice agencies. JIS is also used to transfer domestic violence protection and no-contact orders from courts to local law enforcement agencies within one judicial day, as required by law.

Washington's Law Enforcement/Court Scheduling System, which determines the best dates for law enforcement officers to testify at ongoing trials, has scheduled officers to appear in court on scheduled work days 97 percent of the time. Overtime costs have been reduced 68 percent for an annual savings of \$2,000 per courtroom for misdemeanor cases.

## Technical Assistance

The Court Information Systems Technical Assistance Project provides expert technical assistance, practical advice and guidance to courts that are automating, upgrading, and integrating their information systems. The project offers two types of no-cost assistance:

- In-house assistance provided at SEARCH headquarters in Sacramento, California, or by the National Center for State Courts (NCSC) in either Williamsburg, Virginia, or at the NCSC's Court Services Division in Denver, Colorado, or via written correspondence, telephone consultations or electronic mail. Agencies are given immediate access to the specialized knowledge of professional staff, as well as referrals to technical resources.
- On-site technical assistance provided to individual courts helps agencies effectively plan for, design, develop, procure, and implement computerized information systems. Assistance ranges from such processes as needs assessments, system require-

ments, integration planning, technical proposal preparation, operational and policy consultations, and system transfer.

Local or state court officials interested in obtaining technical assistance for their agencies must formally submit a Technical Assistance Request Form, which can be obtained by contacting Mr. Francis Bremson, Manager of SEARCH's Court Program, by telephone at (916) 392-2550 or by email at [francis.bremson@search.org](mailto:francis.bremson@search.org). The form helps SEARCH determine the specific type and scope of assistance an agency needs.

Courts with an immediate need for information technology assistance, and/or that are ready to integrate their systems, will be given priority assistance. For more information regarding this project, including how to obtain court information systems technical assistance, contact Mr. Bremson at the telephone number or email address listed above or visit the project's World Wide Web site at [www.courts.search.org](http://www.courts.search.org).

- **Barriers** to integration include limited resources, resistance to change, justice process complexity, fear of reduced service, distrust, hesitancy to rely on outside staff, current system incompatibility, disagreements over data ownership, and a lack of resources — such as data standards, a peer network, documentation of successful systems, and off-the-shelf solutions — to assist development.
- **Strategic planning** that is intense, comprehensive, and ongoing, and that takes into account the acquisition, long-term operation, and maintenance and eventual upgrade of information systems, is vital to the success of integration projects.
- **Day-to-day information sharing** between courts and other justice agencies typify successful projects. Statistical and disposition data for state and federal agencies are generated as byproducts of the operational systems.
- **State-level agencies** take the lead in developing the framework for successful integration projects, while local agencies focus on developing operational systems.

- **Security measures** ensure that confidential information is available only to authorized users. It is up to participating agencies to determine the confidentiality of the data they provide.
- **Coordinated funding** efforts yield greater returns than projects in which resources are splintered among various disconnected efforts. Successful planning involves application of life-cycle costing methods to account for downstream operations, maintenance, upgrades, and training expenses.
- **Information-sharing standards** must be identified and developed in order to facilitate integration efforts.

## Recommended Integration Strategies

The Task Force developed these recommended strategies for agencies considering or currently administering court automation and/or integration projects:

### 1. Organization

- Successful integration requires strategic planning, a commitment to maintain top-level technical staff, and acquisition approaches that account for system life cycles.
- One of the first steps is to establish appropriate governance bodies to provide vision, strategy, policy direction, and implementation oversight.

- Each project needs an executive sponsor to deal with priority and funding issues and to remove barriers.
- States should be responsible for developing strategic plans, architectures, and standards or guidelines for statewide implementation.

### 2. Standards

- Development of standards and communications protocols to ensure the collection, transmission, and exchange of data needs to remain a high priority of state and national court and justice system management organizations.

### 3. Funding

- Justice agencies face significant challenges in funding integrated information systems. Agencies may have significant investments in legacy systems with limited long-term utility. Purse-string holders must adjust funding approaches to accommodate technology's explosive growth and accelerated evolution.
- National initiatives and incentives are necessary to encourage courts to transfer existing technology and to pilot test innovative solutions. National and state funding to develop standards is needed as well. Cost benefits need to be highlighted to justify investments in integrated systems.
- As the life cycles of systems continue to compress, the costs of integrated information systems become ongoing rather than periodic, requiring creative funding alternatives.

### 4. Resources

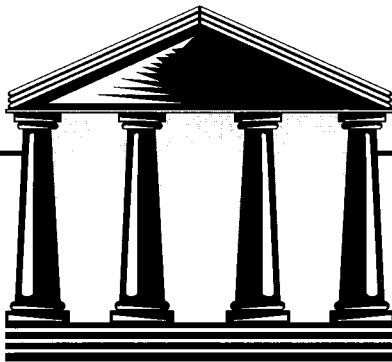
- Practical resources, including planning guides and easily accessible standards clearinghouses, are needed to help courts develop integrated information systems.
- A national integration information exchange should be established to share information and resources.
- Technical assistance must be available to help courts design, develop, and manage integrated systems.
- Best practices should be documented to highlight successful systems.
- Training should be made available to users of integrated systems to maximize benefits and ensure user satisfaction.



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**A Partnership of:**

SEARCH, The National Consortium  
for Justice Information and Statistics  
and

National Center for State Courts  
National Association for Court Management  
Conference of State Court Administrators

**An Effort Funded by:**

Bureau of Justice Assistance,  
U.S. Department of Justice

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Published Fall 1998 by SEARCH, The National Consortium for Justice Information and Statistics, with funding from the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), U.S. Department of Justice.

This document was prepared under BJA Grant Number 95-DD-BX-0017 by the National Task Force on Court Automation and Integration in connection with the Court Information Systems Technical Assistance Project, a joint effort of SEARCH and BJA. Project participants include the National Center for State Courts, the National Association for Court Management, and the Conference of State Court Administrators. The points of view or opinions stated in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

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