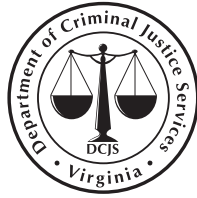


Blueprints for Change: Criminal Justice Policy Issues in Virginia



Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services
www.dcjs.virginia.gov

August 28-29, 2006
Charlottesville, Virginia



The Department of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS) is the state criminal justice planning agency in Virginia and is responsible for administering state and federal funds dedicated to improving state and local criminal justice practices, preventing crime and delinquency, and ensuring services to crime victims.

In its role as a planning agency, the Department convened six policy sessions over a two day period in August, 2006. The facilitated sessions explored six different leading edge criminal justice issues, chosen by the Department. Each three-hour session brought together a multidisciplinary group of executive-level participants who were selected because of their knowledge of the issue and their ability to advance the discussion of public policy related to the issue.

The discussions in these sessions, and the recommendations that emerged, are recorded in these policy papers.

In publishing these papers, DCJS hopes that they will stimulate further discussions by state and local decision makers and will provide useful guidance for making substantive statutory change where necessary, as well as for decisions on funding, and policy and program development.

The 2006 Blueprints for Change: Criminal Justice Policy Issues in Virginia documents are:

- **Disproportionate Minority Contact (DMC) with the Juvenile Justice System** •
- **Domestic Violence, Protective Orders, and Firearms** • **Drug Enforcement Status in Virginia** •
- **Enhancing Virginia's Campus Security and Safety** • **Mental Health Issues in Jails and Detention Centers** •
- **Regional Crime Information Sharing Networks** •

**For additional information on these documents, please visit the
Department of Criminal Justice Services website at: www.dcjs.virginia.gov/blueprints**

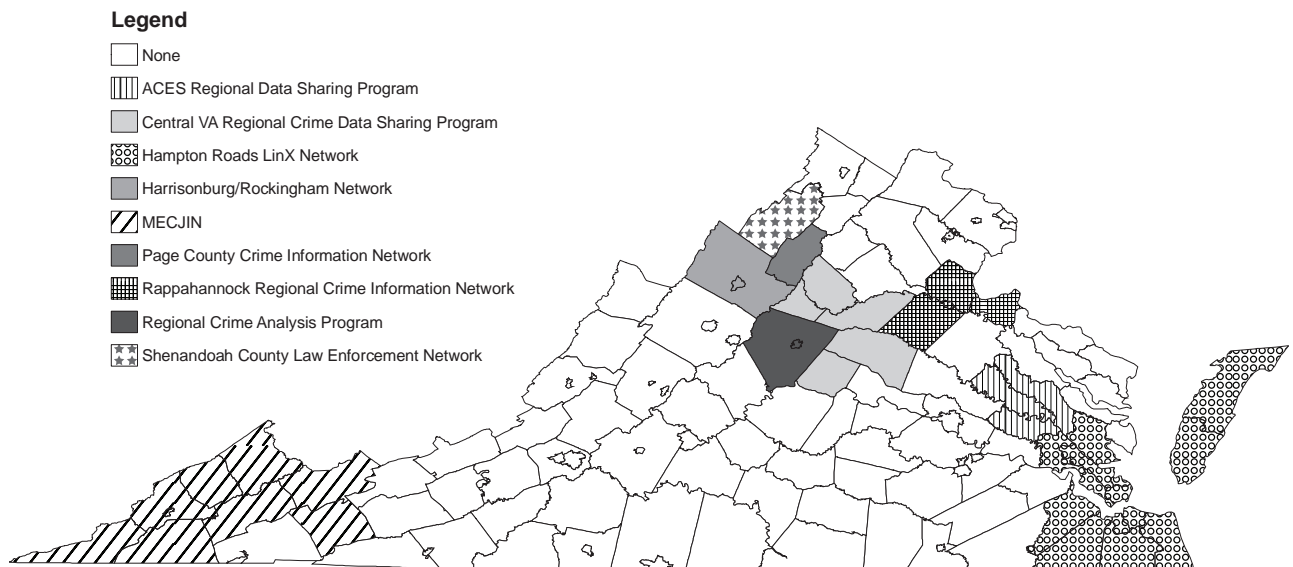
Regional Crime Information Sharing Networks



Local, state and federal officials frequently cite the need for criminal justice agencies in different jurisdictions to be able to share information on crimes and criminal investigations. Additionally, it is important for different agencies within single jurisdictions to be able to effectively share such information. Information sharing is important not only for investigating local crimes, but also for counterterrorism efforts. A 1998 needs assessment conducted by the National Institute of Justice identified information sharing as the number one need of law enforcement agencies in fighting terrorism.

Regional information sharing networks have been developing in Virginia for more than a decade; and the Commonwealth is much further along in this area than many other states. The first operational regional network in Virginia, the Mountain Empire Criminal Justice Information Network, began development in 1994 and became fully operational in 1998. The network links 29 agencies/localities, and covers 2,780 square miles with a population of 241,824 people. By 2006, Virginia had nine regional networks, linking a total of 91 agencies/localities, and covering 13,560 square miles with a population of 2,753,387 people.

Regional Crime Sharing Networks, 2006



Virginia's regional information sharing networks are different in several respects from those in other states. First, most of the networks in Virginia serve mainly rural areas. In many other states, networks have been developed primarily in more urbanized areas. Second, all of Virginia's networks developed from the bottom up, through the efforts of individual local agencies and jurisdictions working together, rather than by following a top-down model created at the state level. Third, all of Virginia's regional networks developed slowly. Most of them grew incrementally, as the different players involved learned to work together, and as the technology issues were resolved.

Because Virginia's regional networks developed over time as separate local initiatives, there is no "guide-book" for localities that want to create a regional network. However, as interest in regional networks grows, there should be a source of information that localities can consult for information to guide their efforts. To help meet this need, the Blueprints Conference brought together representatives from various localities that have developed regional information sharing networks, and from localities considering doing so, to share information on what major issues must be considered in developing, operating and expanding networks.

The panel consisted of officials from cities, counties and towns, including police chiefs, sheriffs, information technology directors and other municipal officials.



POLICY/ RESEARCH ISSUES

The panel identified and discussed four key ingredients necessary to the successful development and implementation of regional information sharing networks:

1. **Consensus:** Agreement by participating localities on the need for a network, which agencies will participate in it, and how it will be developed and operated.
2. **Governance:** An established process for overseeing the administration of the network and ensuring that all participants are represented in the process.
3. **Standards:** Agreed upon technical and administrative guidelines that all participants will follow to maintain the operation and integrity of the network.
4. **Support:** A process through which participating users will equitably provide financial and administrative support to develop, operate and maintain the network.



PANEL DISCUSSION

The networks panel discussed each of these issues, contributing information gleaned from their experience working with regional networks, and responding to questions and ideas from panel members from jurisdictions that are still considering developing or joining regional networks. This section of the paper summarizes the discussions on each issue, and the following section summarizes the conclusions and recommendations the panel made based on these discussions.

Consensus

Consensus among the prospective participants is perhaps the most critical element to establishing a regional network. Without up-front mutual agreement and buy-in by participants, any further development steps are unlikely to succeed. Several participants noted that lack of early consensus among involved localities delayed and complicated their networks' development.

An important step in the consensus-building process is identifying the critical stakeholders in a proposed network, and getting them involved in the planning discussions. Stakeholders may be the police chief, sheriff, Commonwealth's Attorney, judges, and municipal officials. Each may have different information needs and priorities, and each will want them to be met by a regional network. The key is to identify and reconcile these differences, and then plan a process and system that will provide everyone with information that is valuable to them and meets their needs.

Achieving consensus often means resolving the 'turf' issues between agencies and localities. Some agencies may be uncomfortable sharing their data, feeling that they 'own' it and should keep it to themselves.

Other agencies may be reluctant to share sensitive information such as names of persons involved in narcotics cases, sexual assault cases, or investigations of public figures or government officials.

When there is reluctance to share data, panelists suggested that agencies start by sharing simple data such as names. Then, when investigators begin to see the advantages of doing that, their agencies could move to sharing additional types of data.

One factor that panel members cited as important for creating and maintaining project momentum and consensus is the existence of an influential “champion” for the network effort. Panel members offered examples from their own experiences in which a judge, sheriff or police chief who was a firm believer helped champion the plan to other potential participants. In the initial phase of several network development projects, staff from DCJS served as the “champion” until an official of one of the participating agencies assumed the role.

Another way to build consensus for a network project is to clearly articulate the benefits that a regional system may provide to all potential members, and seek to develop agreement around these. Sharing “success stories” about how networks have helped to solve crimes is one example. One panel member noted that sharing information on the methods used by a rooftop burglar helped in his capture. The potential advantages of a network can be made more “real” when actual cases are cited as examples. Among the benefits noted by panel members were:

- Improving investigations and apprehensions by reducing the “turn over” time needed to translate leads and information into arrests. This is particularly useful in gang investigations and drug distribution investigations. These activities may span multiple jurisdictions, and criminals will take advantage of the fact that agencies are sometimes unaware of their identities or activities in different jurisdictions. This is more often a problem where communication between agencies is slowed by pencil and paper sharing of notes and telephone calls.
- Avoiding missed opportunities to solve cases. In some cases, if investigators request information from another agency, they have to ask someone in the other agency to find the information, then mail or fax it to the requestor, or sometimes physically deliver it. All of this takes time and manpower and investigators will sometimes avoid the hassle of doing it, thus perhaps losing important information. Electronic sharing of information is particularly helpful in rural areas where geography may mean that it takes half of a day to drive to a neighboring jurisdiction agency to compare notes and information.
- Reducing duplication of efforts. Administrative staff from different agencies often collect and store identical information on suspects. If this information could be shared, it would eliminate some of the duplication. Within a single locality, law enforcement may create a case file that could be electronically shared with the Commonwealth’s Attorney or court, rather than each entity having to create its own file. One member suggested that if regional networks allowed agencies to share recent mug shots, that could eliminate everyone having to produce them.

Panel members also cited several less obvious advantages of regional networks, not directly tied to the everyday work involved in solving cases.

- Improving public perceptions. Law enforcement agencies are sometimes under pressure to quickly solve high profile cases, and when critical information is not readily shared, officials and the public may question why not. Public officials and the general public often believe that electronic information sharing is more common than it really is. This is due in part to the so-called “CSI effect” in which public expectations are shaped by the fictitious stories of television dramas. One of the panel members noted that localities involved in the Sylva/Lisk kidnapping/murder cases in the 1990s were criticized for this reason. The use of data sharing networks can help reduce the time needed to solve cases.

- Recruitment and retention. The younger “Nintendo” generation that is starting to fill the ranks of law enforcement has grown up with expectation that information needed to perform a job is readily available due to computerization. For this reason, recruits may not be as good at the kind of hand note-taking that was often the main source of information on cases, and which was sometimes understandable (and locatable) only by the person who compiled the notes. Agencies must develop more automated information sharing or they will fall behind what recruits will expect to find in their work environment.

Governance

For different jurisdictions and criminal justice agencies to establish and operate a regional network, there must be agreement on how the system will be governed. Panel members noted that most of Virginia’s regional networks have rather informal governing processes. Most of them have minimal written contracts or memoranda of agreement between the participating agencies and localities, although some do have more extensive formal agreements. One panelist noted that the network serving his locality was guided by a network advisory board under the auspices of the local Community Criminal Justice Board.

Whether through formal or informal agreements, there are certain governance functions that need to be defined and agreed upon by the participants:

- What types of information will (and will not) be made available to network users.
- What personnel will be allowed access to information on the network.
- How resources for the network will be provided by participants.
- Where the network equipment (servers, routers, etc.) will be located, and procedures for changing these locations if necessary.
- Procedures for ensuring network security and integrity.
- Procedures for bringing new agencies or localities into the network, or for removing an agency or locality from the network.
- Procedures for making technological changes and upgrades.

Panelists noted that members of network governing bodies must have the authority to make decisions about the network on behalf of the agencies/localities they represent. Meetings of governing bodies will be ineffective if their members must constantly seek higher approval before making decisions.

Finally, the panelists noted that, while it is important to have a governing structure, it is equally important not to allow formal agreements or governance processes to become too complex or inflexible. Regional networks must be flexible enough to change as member needs change, new uses for the network information are identified, and technology changes. Participants cited the example of one regional network where the governing process became so complex that it became unworkable.

Standards

Although the statewide adoption of the Incident Based Reporting (IBR) system has standardized the basic crime incident and arrest data that law enforcement agencies collect, the system was designed for reporting IBR data to the Virginia State Police IBR repository. The system does not establish standards for sharing crime data between individual agencies and localities. Additionally, the IBR system uses only standard data

elements defined by the State Police. It does not encompass the much broader range of information that local agencies may wish to share among themselves.

For information sharing networks to function, all participants must agree on a minimal set of technical standards that will allow users to properly send, receive and interpret information. These standards should be identified and agreed upon by the network's governing body.

The panel did not attempt to define specific technical standards for a network. Instead, the panel identified general issues concerning standards that must be considered by any localities interested in developing a network.

The panel noted that it is important to avoid "scope creep" when developing a network and setting standards for it. Scope creep occurs when the group designing a network initially defines the system to meet a limited number of goals, but then begins to expand the goals, often to the point where it becomes difficult to achieve the original goals of the project. Scope creep can be avoided by defining what types of information are to be shared via the network, and keeping the focus on developing the system to support this goal. Ensure that these initial goals are successfully met before working on additional "bells and whistles."

Additionally, although not a "standard" per se, localities considering development of a regional network must consider the infrastructure they have (or will need to develop) for moving information between participants. Are the localities linked with dial-up lines or broadband cables? Although dial-up lines will support limited information exchange, they are very slow. Broadband can carry much more information much faster. This is an important consideration if photographs, maps or other complex documents will be exchanged between network participants.

When developing networks, agencies often turn to information technology professionals for assistance with technical issues such as data standards, software and hardware. These professionals may be in-house staff or contractors. In either case, the panelists noted, it is important to ensure that the professionals have a clear understanding of what the network must actually do for the people who will use it. The "real world" needs of the system's users can sometimes get lost in the translation to technical standards and system requirements. Without close collaboration between the network developers and its users, the result may be a network that is technically sophisticated but does not provide the information needed.

Participants noted that establishing data sharing standards is often easier if a common vendor has provided the various Records Management Systems in the localities that are attempting to network. Having a single vendor may make technical implementation of the data sharing go smoother and faster as well.

Network standards and processes must also take into account standards established by outside bodies. For example, networks may need to comply with the federal CFR 28 and with Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requirements. State and federal standards regarding expungements and records retention schedules must be recognized. If the network provides links to external systems, such as the Virginia Central Criminal Records Exchange (CCRE) or the FBI's Interstate Identification Index (III), it must adhere to standards established for the information sources.

The panelists noted further that network administrators need to stay abreast of other technological systems that require standards. For example, participants noted that future state funding for local E-911 systems may require localities to share platforms rather than all using their own. DCJS participants noted that early IBR grants to localities required that systems be able to share data as condition of receiving the grant.

Network participants should avoid developing standards that would force some potential users to change their current information systems to conform to the standards used by the network. If an agency is confronted with the difficulty and expense of having to change its existing records system to conform to the standards, the agency may decide not to participate in the network.

The panel noted that Global Justice XML (GJXML), an information exchange standard developed by the US Department of Justice, is rapidly becoming the standard for criminal justice information sharing. GJXML is designed specifically for criminal justice users such as law enforcement, public safety agencies, prosecutors, public defenders, and the judicial branch. It is designed to be independent of vendors, operating systems, storage media and applications. With GJXML, agencies do not have to independently create their own exchange standards. Federal grant guidelines, and DCJS grant guidelines, now require the use of GJXML for information exchange projects funded through these grants. The panel recommended that GJXML be adopted as the standard for Virginia's criminal justice information sharing networks.

Support

A regional network requires regional economic, technical and administrative support. Network participants must agree on how they will share the costs of creating a network, and for its operation, maintenance and upgrading.

Panel members noted that, in many cases, early state funding in the form of grants was vital to getting projects started, particularly in rural areas where local funding or technical expertise was very limited. However, they also noted that network participants must develop a system for long-term self-funding once the network is operational. Ongoing commitment by the network localities is critical.

Regional network governing organizations have developed several different methods for calculating cost sharing among participants. Some allocate costs based on the size of the population in each participating locality. Others allocate costs based on the crime rate levels among the participating localities. Still others have used the same formula that the localities use for allocating costs to support their regional jail. The panel members agreed that the specific components of the cost sharing formula can vary, and that they need to be tailored to each network's unique situation, but that participating agencies' agreement on the formula is essential.

The same principal applies to providing technical and administrative support for the network. Participating agencies and localities must agree on where network hardware, especially the hub, will be located and how it will be maintained. Whichever agency or locality maintains the hub must have adequate technical support and maintenance capabilities. Maintenance costs can vary over time. Virginia's experience with regional networks has shown that a high level of technical support may be needed when the network is installed and is getting started, and the support level may then decrease as the network becomes more established. At the same time, the needed level of support may increase again when additional participants are added, or the network is upgraded. The criteria for where the hub will be located can vary, as long as appropriate resources for hub maintenance are available at the selected site. Consensus on the site location is essential.

Panelists suggested that some agencies with colleges or universities in their localities might consider approaching them about providing technical support. One panel member noted that a nearby college with a technical program was glad to give its students the chance to provide technical support as a learning experience.



CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the panel's discussions, the following general conclusions and recommendations were developed to help state and local officials formulate policy concerning regional crime information sharing networks.

- 1. Virginia state government should take a leadership role in the development of regional crime information sharing networks.** As regional networks continue to develop across the Commonwealth, state government should help to establish and disseminate information, guidelines or best practices for network development and operations. State government is in the best position to gather information about network development efforts across Virginia, and make it available to interested localities for use in their own network efforts.

Most participants agreed that a next logical step in the growth of regional networks is to move toward network-to-network communications and information sharing. This step would eventually move Virginia localities toward true statewide data sharing, rather than just sharing data within defined regions of the state. Some state-level guidance would be useful to ensure that this is done in a coordinated manner.

The panel noted that DCJS, which has provided technical assistance and grant funding for regional network projects, is best situated to act as a state-level information coordinator and resource for the development of new networks and the linking of different networks.

- 2. Develop a network “Start-Up” kit for localities planning or considering a regional network.** One of the most common questions confronting agencies or localities interested in developing or joining a regional network is “Where do I begin?” The experiences of agencies and localities that already have a network can provide many of the answers. Information gleaned from these experiences should be combined to produce a network start-up kit containing step-by-step directions. The kit could address basic issues such as determining if a network is needed, identifying key participants, developing requirements and specifications, operational practices and procedures, and governance and funding issues.
- 3. Adopt Global Justice XML (GJXML) as the information exchange standard for Virginia’s regional crime information sharing networks.** GJXML is rapidly becoming the standard for public safety data sharing in the US. Virginia, other states and the federal government are now requiring that GJXML be used in new information sharing projects that are funded through state and federal grants. Although some of the first regional networks developed in Virginia do not use GJXML, the standard can be adopted incrementally as these networks are upgraded and revised in the future.
- 4. All parties involved in developing regional networks should stay aware of other state and federal information sharing efforts.** As state and local officials work to foster and develop regional networks, they must remain aware of other information sharing efforts that may effect their planning. For example, the Virginia State Police are examining plans for statewide information sharing tied to an upgraded IBR system as part of the federal National Data Exchange (NDEx) effort. Virginia’s regional information sharing systems may eventually need to comply with the requirements of broader systems such as this. Therefore, the development of new regional systems, or the expansion or upgrading of existing systems, should include a review of any such potential requirements.



Mr. Greg Call

Network Administrator
Rappahannock Regional Jail
Stafford, Virginia

Chief Atlas “Joe” Gaskins

Roanoke City Police Department
Roanoke, Virginia

Mr. Butch Johnstone (Workshop Facilitator)

Senior Programmer/
Analyst, Technical Services Unit
Virginia Department of
Criminal Justice Services
Richmond, Virginia

Lieutenant Roger Kelly

Fairfax County Police Department
Fairfax, Virginia

Mr. Roy Mentkow

Director of Technology
City of Roanoke
Roanoke, Virginia

Mr. Frank O’Byrne

Director of Information Systems
Rockingham County
Harrisonburg, Virginia

Chief William Puckett

Richlands Police Department
Richlands, Virginia

Chief G. Mitchell Reed

South Boston Police Department
South Boston, Virginia

Lieutenant Michael Taylor

Pittsylvania County Sheriff’s Office
Chatham, Virginia

Mr. Timothy Taylor

Town Manager
Town of Richlands
Richlands, Virginia

The Honorable Ryant Washington

Sheriff
Fluvanna County
Palmyra, Virginia

Mr. Ben Wood (Workshop Expert)

Chief, Technical Service Unit
Virginia Department of Criminal
Justice Services
Richmond, Virginia

DCJS Staff

Mr. Jim McDonough

Ms. Debbie Roberts

Mr. Chuck Ruble



Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services
202 North Ninth Street, Richmond, VA 23229

www.dcjs.virginia.gov