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Info Sharing Comes in from the Cold

Law enforcement and corrections practitioners in the continental United States might think they have little in common with their northern counterparts in Alaska, a State twice the size of Texas with a population of just over one-half-million, many of whom are clustered in isolated locations accessible only by boat or airplane. Yet they share the same type of technology-related communications issues: incompatible radio systems, databases with differing structure and content, and lack of information-sharing channels.

In Alaska, law enforcement agencies have come up with a solution: a consortium of law enforcement agencies called the Alaska Law Enforcement Information Sharing System, or ALEISS (pronounced *alias*). Sponsored by the Office of Justice Programs' National Institute of Justice (NIJ) and its National Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Center (NLECTC)-Northwest in Anchorage for its first 3 years of operation, ALEISS can serve as a model for other States.

"Even though this project is in Alaska, it has potential for use as a template in other regions," says Bruce Richter, deputy director of the Northwest Center. He notes other agencies could use commercially available software programs that are the same as or similar to those used by the almost 30 agencies that currently constitute ALEISS. According to Richter, NLECTC-Northwest and ALEISS are considering tying the software program used by ALEISS to separate regional information sharing projects already serving major law enforcement agencies along the West Coast to investigate drug trafficking and other criminal activity across regional boundaries.

ALEISS employs an off-the-shelf software, called CopLink, the prototypes of which were developed by the Artificial Intelligence Laboratory at the University of Arizona and the Tucson Police Department with funding from NIJ and the National Science Foundation. The software collects, consolidates, and shares information from existing law enforcement records management systems. Officers enter data into their own records management systems. These data are then uploaded daily employing a secure, Internet-based platform to link databases that otherwise could not communicate and allows authorized

users to use various search strategies to look for links between ongoing investigations.

"It can save days or even weeks over tracking down leads by hand. It can search the interconnected databases in a matter of minutes and find connections between suspects and investigations that might not otherwise be apparent," Richter says.

Maxine Andrews, project manager for ALEISS at NLECTC-Northwest, says the software program provides an easy-to-use, intuitive Web-based interface that presents information in clearly labeled columns and tables and provides hypertext links to underlying data and documents. "Special features include the ability to flag an individual so that if new data are added, an alert (either an e-mail or a text message) goes out to interested parties," Andrews says. "If a police department is looking for a particular individual who has had prior police contact, the interested officer will be alerted. The program also has advanced firewalls, encrypted transmission, and secure dual-user access authentication."

These features, and the enthusiasm shown by the participating agencies, contributed to ALEISS winning the 2005 Excellence in Technology Award for Regional and Collaborative Systems from the International Association of Chiefs of Police. This award, which is open to local, tribal, State, provincial, Federal, and multijurisdictional efforts, recognizes superior achievement and innovation in the field of communication and information technology.

The Alaska Association of Chiefs of Police annually invites users to submit their ALEISS success stories and selects submissions for an award. The 2006 winners, Investigator Pearl Holston of the Fairbanks Police Department and Detective Kelly J. Turney of the Palmer Police Department, used ALEISS to help a task force break up a large multijurisdictional fraud and identity theft ring. As a result, 10 suspects who were responsible for between \$300,000 and \$500,000 in fraudulent charges and forged checks were indicted in 2 jurisdictions on charges such as forgery, theft, fraudulent use of an access device, and criminal impersonation. As a result of the investigation,

Turney petitioned the Palmer Police Department and its chief to join ALEISS. In turn, all department officers and dispatchers received program training.

“It’s been great for us,” Fairbanks Deputy Chief Brad Johnson says, noting his officers are using the software program more extensively in the wake of the fraud/identity theft success. “It’s relatively easy to use yet it’s a very powerful tool. The more practice you have on it, the more benefit you receive from the power it has. You can use some very basic tools in it or you can get very advanced. We have a records management system with its own analytic tools, but it doesn’t compare to the analytical abilities of the software that ALEISS uses.”

Juneau Police Chief Greg Browning, who chairs the ALEISS consortium, agrees the software program seems more intuitive and user friendly than his department’s records management system. “When I look for information, it’s always easier to find,” he says. “Plus, if this person also happens to be wanted in, say, Anchorage and Kenai, I would miss that if I just used our system. It gives us a complete picture, not just a local one.”

Browning, who relocated to Alaska from Texas almost 7 years ago, immediately noticed the strong cooperative spirit among Alaska law enforcement agencies and their openness toward sharing information with other agencies. The State’s isolation demands cooperation between agencies, he says, and the software program was the perfect technological solution. “They call it, ‘Google™ for Cops.’”

The Alaska State Troopers back up the high opinion of the software program given by the Fairbanks and Juneau departments. Research Analyst Sue Davis says that all five members of her unit use the program daily, noting “it is one of the first places we all go to when a request for research comes in.”

Davis says the Alaska State Troopers Criminal Intelligence Unit has used the software since it came online.

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“For an investigator it could mean an immediate lead; for the analysts, it could provide the answer they’ve been searching for to make a connection,” she says. One such connection allowed her to link a name to a phone number and ultimately help an investigator identify a suspect in a death threat case.

The ALEISS project originally was supported by seven agencies: the Alaska Department of Public Safety, Division of Alaska State Troopers; and the Anchorage, Homer, Juneau, Kenai, Seward, and Soldotna police departments. Almost 30 participating agencies now have access to the network, although not all of them contribute data. Plans call for expanding the network to cover the entire State, as funding permits. NLECTC–Northwest is providing ongoing training and support.

In addition, plans call for the ALEISS system to connect with the NIJ-funded State, Regional, and Federal Enterprise Retrieval System, or SRFERS (surfers), a seamless interstate information sharing application currently under development.

For more information about ALEISS, including original governance documents and other resources and detailed project background information, visit www.aleiss.org or contact NLECTC–Northwest, 866-569-2969 or nlectc_nw@ctsc.net.



This article was reprinted from the Fall 2006 edition of *TechBeat*, the award-winning quarterly newsmagazine of the National Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Center system, a program of the National Institute of Justice under Cooperative Agreement #2005–MU–CX–K077, awarded by the U.S. Department of Justice.

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