

## Low-Cost Records Access

by Kevin Gordon

Many police departments use in-car mobile computers to connect to departmental records management systems or computer aided dispatch. Many methods, software and hardware solutions exist to make the connection. But what if your department budget doesn't allow the purchase of a ready-made vendor provided solution but you still need the benefit of the connections? Alton, IL Police Department found itself asking that question.

About 20 miles north of St. Louis, the Alton department consists of 70 officers and serves a community of 31,000 residents. Information Technology Officer Mike Bazzell (bazzell@altonpolice.com) explored low-cost options to create connections to the RMS and CAD.

As with most departments, the budget continues to shrink, just as more and more technology becomes available. Under Bazzell's direction, the department implemented a plan that permits all mobile workstations access to all in-house records as if there were a workstation in the station house. This is currently in a test phase, and so far, no problems have been encountered.

The solution used by Alton is certainly not recommended for larger departments. But for smaller agencies that may have only a few units connecting to the server at a time, this solution might be worth looking into. Since the department was already paying for the wireless mobile connections, there is currently no further expense. In brief, Alton is using the connections already in place provided by Verizon for the IWIN system.

IWIN is the Illinois Wireless Information Network. (Other states may have similar systems.) IWIN presently has more than 8,000 users with 222 state and local agencies online. Operational in February 2000, IWIN was a partnership between Motorola, the state of Illinois and Verizon Wireless. It is a fast, reliable network for state and local wireless users. The Illinois Department of Central Management Services presently operates it, and tech support staff is available 24/7.

IWIN uses CDMA modem and Motorola's Premier MDC mobile data communications software. It transmits and receives data by standard Internet protocol (TCP/IP) and has a 19.2 KB per second connectivity. It is connected to LEADS, SOS, NCIC, provides car-to-car and workstation-to-car messaging, in-vehicle printing, in-vehicle paging, in-vehicle GPS and mapping and barcode and image capture.

Alton currently has 13 MDTs installed in patrol cars. Officers use Panasonic Toughbooks, Model CF-29 and are using the IWIN system to retrieve information through LEADS / NCIC.

Bazzell points out that businesses have been using virtual private networks (VPN) for years as a way to remotely access their systems. "The Alton system is just a do-it-yourself style that allows a smaller department to access the data remotely without spending money on a turnkey software/hardware solution," Bazzell said.

The present MDT units have a CDMA wireless connection through Verizon Wireless, which offers Internet access. It also possesses the ability to create a virtual private network (VPN) that can connect directly to a server already in place at the department.

The VPN is quite simple to set up on each machine and is created through the Windows environment. The connection goes through the main router at the station, and the router then forwards the connection to the main server. Once the connection is made, the officer can use the Remote Desktop Connection software through Windows. Once established, the officer can execute any program as if he were sitting directly in front of the server. This allows the officer to control a session of Windows on the server but view and control everything from the mobile.

The department anticipates the benefits of accessing the records management system from the street as huge and the possibilities of this connection endless. The officers also now have access to mug shots while talking to a subject on the street, the ability to retrieve prior incident reports, the advantage of typing in a report directly from the scene, and even sending messages to the dispatcher or other patrol units that may not be suitable for broadcast over the radio.

In addition to RMS, officers can access departmental phone directories, rosters, after-hour business contacts, inmate listings, and source data, such as the uniform complaint book. In short, anything an officer can do at a workstation in house can be done on the street.

Once the testing phase is over and the system is up and running in full force, the agency plans to buy a separate server to handle the additional traffic. The existing server was obviously bought with a limited number of in-house workstations in mind.

As with any agency, security is a large concern. Alton is addressing this by setting up a different login for each vehicle, as well as a unique password for the VPN. Once the VPN is established, the records management system will load, and it will also require a username and password that is unique for each officer. This will allow a method of monitoring any abuse by personnel, as well as ensuring the system is not accessed by unauthorized people. Additionally, the server will verify by IP address that only authorized devices are accessing the system. This will stop an outsider from connecting and trying to guess a password.

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