

Case Study: Suffolk County Sheriff's Department Implements Professional and Robust Client Information Management System for Community Corrections

By William Saunders



"Our new data management system makes it much easier to get the critical information we need," says Stefan LoBuglio, deputy superintendent for community corrections at the Suffolk County Sheriff's Department. Recently he received an 11 p.m. call at home after a prisoner walked away from a halfway house. "In the future, the new software will quickly provide our Field Supervision Unit with important information, such as his recent attendance record and drug screening results, to help in his re-apprehension," he proudly notes.

The Suffolk County Sheriff's Department plays an important public safety role in the large urban area of Massachusetts that includes Boston, Winthrop, Chelsea and Revere. The Sheriff runs the 600-bed Suffolk County Jail and the 2000-bed House of Correction, as well as the county's intermediate sanctions and reentry programs. In partnership with probation and the Office of Community Corrections, the Department administers the Women's Resource Center, which serves female probationers, parolees and pre-release inmates, and the Suffolk County Community Correction Center, which serves male offenders.

"Supervised reentry programs and community corrections can deliver better client outcomes and improved public safety," says Suffolk County Sheriff Andrea J. Cabral. "We are dedicated to using modern technologies to fully achieve the promise of these programs while also reducing state expenditures."

"Accurate information is particularly important when you are managing at the margin, or the gray area between black and white," says LoBuglio. "Mandatory sentencing laws for serious crimes are easy to enforce because they are one-size fits all. Meanwhile, our community corrections clients don't fit into clear-cut definitions. Therefore, we need accurate, timely information so we can implement intermediate sanctions and maintain community safety by making the right decision in each case."

The core of the Sheriff Department's modernization efforts is a client information management solution from Sageful Corporation. Attendee Information Manager (AIM) software facilitates the tracking and analysis of all the information necessary to manage clients efficiently, including intake information, program schedules, class attendance, substance abuse screening, referring agency contacts and case management records.

"It's important to foster a sense of respect and professionalism by providing uniformed officers, probation staff, teachers and clinical treatment providers with the tools they need to do their jobs," says LoBuglio. "We realized that we needed a sophisticated data management system because our success as an organization depends upon handling and responding correctly to a wide variety of situations."

Suffolk County has installed the networked Enterprise Edition of AIM, which allows information to be shared among people within each community corrections center, as well as between the centers, social service providers, substance abuse screening vendors and management throughout the department. AIM software currently resides on a server in the House of Correction and is networked to the desks of employees and contractors in both the men's and women's centers.

The two community corrections centers handle approximately 800 Level 2, 3 and 4 offenders at any one time, including probation, parole and pre-release clients, as well as some incarcerated inmates. Each client is required to participate in an individually designed program that includes substance abuse testing, as well as appropriate community service and life skills programs, such as GED, conflict resolution and job training courses.

AIM has greatly simplified the management of community corrections by keeping track of each offender's specific progress towards fulfilling the requirements of their individualized programs. The database provides a single-source record of all relevant data about an offender, including identifying information, photographs, relevant documents, faxes, schedule information, substance abuse testing results, course attendance, case notes, and contact information for clients, employees and other agencies' personnel.

The software makes it easy for an authorized employee or contractor to immediately access the information they need to perform their jobs. In addition, the software automates the production of a wide range of reports, so that those workers can analyze and share information with different agencies and within the center's multi-disciplinary environment.

Although the software is available to nearly every employee or contractor, its customizable permissions-based security scheme provides the necessary safeguards to allow or restrict access to information as appropriate. For example, while supervisors and probation officers can access any part of a client's record, the drug testing vendors can only access the substance abuse records and the social service providers can only access class attendance and clinical information. Stringent safeguards exist to protect medical information and address the federal privacy concerns embodied in the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPPA).

Prior to installing AIM, the community corrections centers relied entirely on traditional paper forms that were faxed between the centers, referring agencies, courts and corrections officers. In addition, the centers had developed a variety of Excel spreadsheets to track individual items, such as drug testing results and class attendance.

While the spreadsheets tracked portions of the client record, they offered only partial glimpses that made it impossible to view and fully comprehend the entire picture of a client's successes or failures. In addition, there was no system for making regular backups of the data, which occur automatically now that the AIM server is located in the main data center.

Unfortunately, the accuracy and timeliness of each of the old spreadsheets was entirely dependent upon the individual at that desk who was tasked with many other duties. Because it was hard for any other person to access the information, it was very difficult to share information with all the people and agencies that had a role in an offender's rehabilitation.

"One of our challenges is to manage at the intersection of a number of different agencies," says Greg Haugh, assistant deputy superintendent

and program manager at the Community Corrections Center. "Formerly, some agencies saw community corrections as a black box where they knew who went in and who came out, but had little knowledge of what was going on during the program. AIM tracks all the intermediate steps, so we can actually provide these agencies with more information than they ever had before."

"Now we can provide multi-disciplinary reports that give a much clearer view of a client's progress," says Haugh. Particularly important are the utilization reports that ensure each client gets the services they need by comparing the drug testing and clinical programs they are receiving to the services that were mandated by the court.

"I currently spend 3 to 4 hours every week creating utilization reports that show each client's hours for work, classes and community service," says Daniela Lopes, treatment manager at the Community Corrections Center. "I will be able to create the same weekly reports in about 10 minutes once AIM is fully phased in." The clinical staff also uses AIM to take attendance, create client schedules and support their weekly multi-disciplinary meetings.

"AIM lets us synchronize different agencies and standardize information and reports," continues Haugh. "The officer who serves as our liaison to the courts and 60-70 probation officers currently spends 6 hours every week just preparing individual drug treatment reports. We estimate that he will be able to save 4 to 5 hours of that time with the reporting capability of AIM."

"At the touch of a button, AIM produces very useful, professional looking reports," says Haugh. "We're easily able to provide more usable information in a timely manner to the courts and probation officers, so that they can readily and comprehensively evaluate a client's progress. Best of all, the system makes us much more proactive, because we can quickly institute corrective actions that prevent little problems from turning into big problems."

One of the advantages of the networked system is that Deputy Superintendent LoBuglio can easily manage the activities of each center from his central location, without having to spend time and money traveling around Boston. The software has made his job easier by giving him up-to-the-minute views of the centers' operations, as well as historical data on each center's activity and each enrollee's progress.

Unlike information stored on paper at the centers, AIM lets LoBuglio easily view utilization statistics, census numbers by level and agency, program and testing schedules, drug-testing results, contractor compliance with required levels of service, and

employee performance and productivity. "Before we had AIM, it was so labor intensive to produce reports that we rarely had current information as we were managing the centers," says LoBuglio.

AIM provides the fine level of detail that lets the center enforce a continuum of sanctions from a mild program involving infrequent interactions with the Community Corrections Center to incarceration in the House of Correction. The software allows the center to speed up re-apprehension if someone violates the terms of their probation or parole. While this process currently involves a phone call, the center is planning to use AIM to automatically send alerts to parole and probation officers when one of their assigned offenders fails a drug test or fails to show up for a critical meeting.

AIM also happily coexists with other elements of the criminal justice system that are still paper-based. For example, courts and probation boards still fax over forms when they assign someone to community corrections. Instead of putting the form into a folder and forgetting it, the center will soon be able to enter the information into AIM along with a pending status flag. Then, a report can reveal referring agencies whose clients take too long to appear, which allows corrective action to be taken.

"AIM provides robust document management software," says LoBuglio. "We used to spend far too much time searching for

individual pieces of paper and records of who saw what. Now everything can be maintained in one place and accessed by anyone with the proper clearances."

Even basic aspects of the centers' operations have been improved with AIM. Each client receives a photo ID with a barcode when they first report to the center. This bar-coded ID is used to make sure that each interaction then becomes another entry in their permanent database.

For example, their ID is scanned to create an attendance record that is automatically date stamped whenever they enter or leave the center. Instead of spending minutes waiting in line, the center's clients can now complete the process in a matter of seconds. Even brief "smoking break" excursions to the parking lot can be tracked without increasing employee workload since scanning the clients' cards takes only seconds. In addition to creating time stamped records for every client at the center, the software also allows officers to immediately locate their clients, view a list of everyone at the center, see reports of those who have not shown up and take attendance in class.

Prior to using AIM, scheduling substance abuse testing proved to be a lengthy and challenging



ordeal. All of the centers' clients are required to undergo substance abuse testing on a regular, randomized basis. With a simple click of the mouse, AIM can automatically schedule each client's testing based upon their mandated requirements.

When a client comes in for collection, their photo ID is scanned, their identity confirmed and a unique barcode label attached to their specimen cup for chain of custody use by the drug-testing vendor. Throughout the process, AIM maintains an electronic chain of custody record that ensures its admissibility as evidence, including tamper-proof, electronic signatures for each step of the chain.

There were inadequate safeguards before the central database was implemented, because there was no method for actually confirming that the person taking the test was the person who was required to be tested. Now, the identity of someone showing up for drug testing can be confirmed both from their photo ID card and from the picture within the AIM database. This is particularly important because the drug-testing collectors have very limited contact with the clients.

The center is currently automating the interaction between AIM and the drug-testing laboratory. Automatically receiving electronic results from the drug-testing lab is speeding up the process and eliminating the need for human intervention and thus one of the main sources of error and confusion in the old manual system. "AIM is so critical to our operations that I can't imagine choosing any drug-testing vendor who could not integrate with AIM," says LoBuglio.

AIM even helps community corrections centers save money by ensuring that they are testing at the proper levels — both as ordered by probation or parole and by moving people into more or less frequent testing groups based on the history of their substance abuse tests. By using AIM to analyze client test results, a center can implement more efficient drug testing for less money. For example, if someone has tested positive for THC multiple times, but has never tested positive for cocaine, the center may recommend to a judge that they stop testing for cocaine and use those savings to increase the frequency of THC testing. These efficiencies are particularly important because drug testing is one of the single biggest expenses of community corrections.

"I've been involved in other MIS projects for corrections facilities, and most of them have failed because they were too complex or didn't perform

as advertised," says LoBuglio. "AIM has been the exception to this rule. Partially that's because it's specifically designed for corrections departments and thus meets 98% of our requirements, but equally important is the support we've received from Sageful. They've provided the training and support people need to fully integrate the solution into their daily routines."

LoBuglio has some important suggestions for other community corrections departments that are looking to modernize their operations. He strongly recommends purchasing a flexible solution that allows a phased implementation of the features required to meet all of a department's current and future needs. This allows a center to start with the most critical features and then phase in additional capabilities as needs and budgets allow.

However, he also believes that the implementation of the system in any one phase should be staged carefully, so that it provides immediate benefits to staff at each step in the process. Once staff members see the

benefits in one area, they will be more accepting of further aspects of the system. This kind of step-by-step implementation plan helps overcome any potential objections to automating procedures or to doing things differently.

For example, the community corrections centers began by automating the intake process, then the center sign in and out procedure, then class attendance, and now they are automating drug testing. In the future, the department expects to implement the computerized alert system and then extend the software to desks within the county's halfway houses, apprehension unit and courts.

"People are recognizing that AIM is the wave of the future, and a far better way to handle their jobs," says LoBuglio. "We've already received significant benefits from AIM, even though we've only implemented some of its powerful features. Now that the system has been fully accepted by our staff, we are ready to extend its utilization and integrate other performance enhancing features into our operations."

"A key benefit will be the ability to use AIM to automatically create the numerous reports required by various agencies," continues LoBuglio. "Our employees have spent far too much time performing the clerical duties required to satisfy these reporting requirements. Now our talented staff can spend more of their time providing the clinical and educational services our clients need, so we can produce better outcomes while reducing costs."

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