

TELEMASP BULLETIN

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Contemporary Applications for Police Department Internet Web Pages

As Internet web pages evolved for police agencies, they initially provided a nice public information tool. Almost exclusively consisting of text files with hyperlinks to other government departments or police agencies, the web site typically contained rudimentary information: Phone numbers, crime prevention tips, and public service announcements were the norm. The intent was to more broadly serve the community, even if that community was fairly narrowly defined by the web users of 1995.

In the move toward community policing, the process of organizational change is discussed widely as an obstacle to overcome. There is the need to reform attitudes, values and beliefs of officers in order to embrace the tenets of community policing, such as developing partnerships with the community, solving problems, and divesting the department of long-standing procedures in favor of new, innovative approaches to policing. There is a strong analogy in the change process when one speaks of embracing different technologies, such as developing a department's web site.

Discussions with police leaders about types of information which could be included on a web page met the same sort of dogmatism that is found in community policing. Phrases such as, "We can't do that" or "I'll need to check with our attorney" were common. In other cases, a proposal was simply met with "It won't work. End of story." Thus, the change process had two forms of obstacles to address. The first was to get police decision makers to understand and embrace the technology. The second was to change their view about the types of substantive information which could (and should) be posted on their web page

Embracing the technology was far easier with younger, educated officers than it was with police managers. Police

leaders were somewhat reluctant to create web pages for the police department for several reasons: They did not understand the Internet and had virtually no frame of reference to envision what the web was and how it could be used. As part of this reluctance—and relying on their own perspective—there was a general belief that this was a "passing fad"; that there would be no widespread demand or use for the Internet as related to the general public. In many cases, police department web pages were started by officers who were interested in computers as a hobby. Frequently these officers would develop a web site for the department which would educate police managers about the potential uses of this technology. Coupled with the commercial growth of the Internet, police administrators began accepting the web as a viable tool.

As police leaders began accepting the feasibility of using a web site as a tool, a concurrent obstacle focused on the types of information which should be placed on the site. Initially, police departments were very reluctant about placing information on the site which had any substance, opting for the mundane. With increased familiarity with the web—as an entertainment and commerce tool—police agencies began to explore different options for its use.

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Texas Regional Community Policing Institute*



This exploration has also been driven by other factors. One is an expectation by the public: As more people use the Internet, their expectation for information and services available via the web grow. Thus, public demand has influenced agencies to increase their networking capacity. Philosophically, the Internet is an important technological component of community policing. It provides an avenue of "connectivity" between the police and public for communicating, sharing information, and problem solving. Another factor forcing this change has simply been a mandate from the parent government. In many cases decision makers in the city, county, or state have decided that the governmental entity will have a web presence thereby requiring all government departments to develop web sites.

Planning the Web Site

An effective web page must be well planned. In this regard, a number of questions should be asked: What purpose is the web page to serve? Is it simply to provide information? Is it to be used for reporting information to the police, such as offense reports or complaints? Is it to be used as a form of electronic commerce, such as the means by which citizens can obtain copies of offense reports or obtain lawful criminal history checks?

The intent is critical and must be clearly planned. Once the purpose(s) of the web page is/are clearly defined, the design must be carefully developed. Menu options and activities on the web site must be intuitive and user-friendly. Jargon and over-technical words and phrases should be avoided, using more common terminology. Similarly, it must be logically- or intuitively-organized. If the user does not understand the terminology and/or if navigation of the web site is confusing, the site's goals are not being accomplished.

The nature and substantive content of the web page should be based upon the purpose(s) that site is/are intended to serve. The contents of the site and the complexity of the site should be the direct result of decisions made about the site's purpose(s). Content should be prepared specifically for the web, not simply taken from a brochure or document. Be concise and straightforward—if there is too much verbiage, the visitor to your site may leave. It is advisable to use monitoring software which documents the site's traffic: portions of the site most frequently visited; how long visitors stay; and other user behavior. Insights from these data can help in fine-tuning the site's design and capitalizing on users' favorite features.

The web site should also be updated regularly to show it is current. If there is no new information provided to the user, there is less reason for the user to return to the site. Information on the web page should also be useful. Too many times an organization will place information on a web site which is of

interest to the agency, but not necessarily the target audience. Hyperlinks to other web sites is a good example. Some law enforcement agencies will have links to many other police web sites. Most targeted users (typically citizens in the community) have very limited interest in these links. However, links to consumer fraud sites, weather reports, and local media would be of interest. If the user knows that a web site will provide a rich resource of information they are interested in, they are much more likely to return.

Attention must also be given to the site's appearance. It should be both attractive and professional. As marketing specialists have repeatedly verified, people do "judge books by their covers." In research this is known as face validity: If it looks good, then people will assume that it is good. Thus, to ensure users return to the site, aesthetics must be considered. Design elements such as site structure, page layout, graphic content and multimedia presentations should be selected to successfully serve the purposes of the site, while avoiding features that do not serve those purposes. Photographs appear to be more desirable than graphic images. Use of animation on a police department web site is typically not important unless it serves an explicit purpose. While it is important to ensure a web site is attractive, balance that goal with a degree of simplicity. The reason: the more complex a web site is (i.e., the more colors, graphics, etc.) the longer it takes to load on the users' computers. If a web page takes too long to load, many people will be impatient and move on.

Developing a web page should not be taken lightly. To be effective it requires dedicated resources. For example, it is best to use a trained web page designer rather than someone in the police department who is a hobbyist. A professional designer will know what "tools" and techniques works best on a web page and will be able to incorporate the most current applications. A great deal is changing in web page design—such as use of active code, extensible mark-up language (XML), and multimedia. Having a professional who is current on these applications and protocols will serve your web-based goals far more productively. Having a professional designer is particularly important if any degree of complexity is involved in the site, such as an integrated database or e-commerce applications.

The Webmaster

Once the web site is designed, a person should be designated as the webmaster. This individual will be responsible for monitoring e-mails from the site, monitoring the site's operation, and working with designers to provide substantive information to regularly update the page. Administrators must recognize that being a webmaster is a labor-intensive responsibility, thus, it should not be just an "add-on" assignment to a person. Full consideration of the time

requirements needed to effectively manage the department's site should be given with other responsibilities being in balance. If the web site is important to the department, then appropriate resources must be allocated to it.

Web Site Uses

A web site can be used for a wide range of purposes depending on an agency's needs.

Public Information. A department's own "Home Page" which may have information on such items as...

- Values
- Mission
- Annual Report
- Command Personnel
- Complaint Procedures
- Crime Rates
- Safety Tips
- Special Programs or Alerts
- Crime Maps
- Program Descriptions (e.g., D.A.R.E., Neighborhood Watch)
- Citizen Police Academy Information
- News Releases
- Sex Offender Database
- Any Other Type of Information which the Public Should Know

Community Policing. A web site can provide useful support for a department's community policing initiative by serving as a tool to gain information on "best practices," to share information with the community, and to receive feedback on community problems. With respect to gaining information, there are a wide array of resources ranging from the National Criminal Justice Reference Service, to the Community Policing Consortium, to the Regional Community Policing Institutes which, through their web sites, provide information on programs, research results, training curricula, and many other sources to help implement and develop problem-solving activities.

An important part of community policing is sharing information with the public. The web site can be a very effective tool for this. Crime statistics, crime maps, crime analysis reports, information about new programs, and crime prevention information are all examples of information sharing. A department may also develop a "listserv" which will provide a newsletter and/or announcements via e-mail to citizens who subscribe. Conversely, a web page may contain a Bulletin Board Service (BBS) where online

discussions may take place between the police and public on crime and problem-solving issues. The web page may also be the vehicle where commendations, complaints, and general inquiries may be made by the public.

Recruitment. Police agencies often lament the inability to attract the types of employees they want. Recruiting efforts are expensive, particularly to target diverse candidates with specific education or skills. While not a panacea, a web page is a tool which can help facilitate the recruitment function. In a recruitment section, basic information may include:

- Employment Requirements
- Application Process
- Salary and Benefits
- Tests, Physicals, and Other Selection Factors
- Hiring Schedule
- Training and Assignment Opportunities
- Unique and Relevant Job-related Information
- Persons to Contact for More Information

Providing applications and other forms online will help facilitate the process and establish an e-mail dialog between recruiters and applicants, and may help draw more people into the applicant pool. Effective recruiting includes establishing a "bond" between a candidate and an agency. An electronic bond—particularly from candidates who may be some distance away—may be one of the best recruitment investments as networking becomes an increasingly common means for communications.

E-Commerce. Electronic commerce is one of the fastest growing enterprises of the Internet. Given the creation of "off the shelf" e-commerce software, police agencies must explore how this can be used to provide better service to the public. For example, the purchase of criminal records' checks, supplying offense and traffic accident reports to victims, responding to Freedom of Information Act Requests, and issuing permits are all examples of "products" which could be purchased through a police internet web page. If entrepreneurs can sell cars over the Internet, surely police agencies can issue an offense report. Using electronic commerce will permit faster and more convenient service to the community while reducing costs for the agency.

Customer Service. Beyond availability for a response to calls, much of what the public wants from the police is information. The public wants to know everything from crime statistics, to safety tips, locations of sex offenders, status of high profile or heinous criminal cases; and answers to a plethora of questions. Making this information available on a web page is a significant public service, particularly if it is integrated with a database, illustration with mapping software, and/or tailored with web "robots."



Online Crime Reporting. Using protocols which are similar to electronic commerce, the Internet holds important potential to permit online reporting of criminal offenses by the victim. For example, the victim of a "destruction of property" could access the police department's web page and complete a NIBRS type report online. Once submitted, the report would be assigned a case number by the Records Management System (RMS) and generate an e-mail for the victim acknowledging receipt of the report and providing the case number. The RMS could then send the report to the appropriate units for crime reporting and follow-up. In many crimes against property, the victim is anxious to receive a copy of the offense report for insurance purposes. This system would not only process the report faster, hence making it available more quickly, a copy of the official report could be e-mailed to the victim and the insurance company in portable document format (pdf) thereby expediting the claim. Virtually all offenses reported online would require a follow-up to complete the report and prepare a narrative. Yet, this process would provide a significant amount of flexibility in staff time and, overall, be a more cost-effective process.

Investigations and Intelligence. The Internet has a wide range of information which can assist investigative and intelligence activities. In some cases, "target groups" have information which describes that group's philosophy providing insights into behaviors and motivations. In yet other cases, information is placed on the Internet from a wide range of sources which can provide insight about issues and problems (e.g., terrorism, organized crime, anarchy, computer crime, the black market, etc.). Reviewing these sources is one avenue to develop information on trends and, conceivably, suspects.

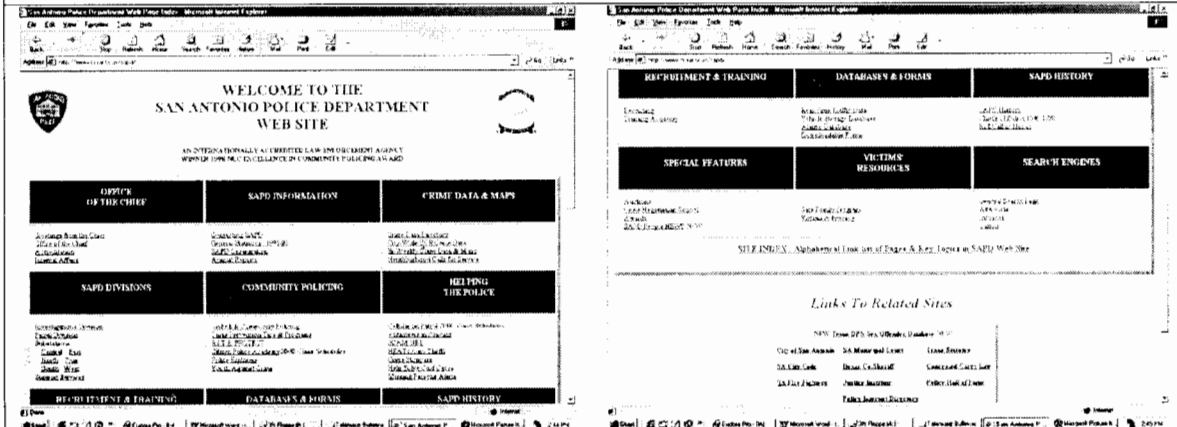
From another perspective, the vast amount of information being amassed in databases provides both a threat to privacy and a resource for investigators. Through both free and subscription services, investigators can easily begin tracking suspects and learning a great deal of information ranging from the vehicles they have been known to drive to their hobbies to addresses where they have lived to the names of friends and neighbors. Thus, a great deal of "foot work" can be saved in an investigation by first checking computerized databases on the Internet.

Planning and Research. Planning and research personnel are faced with gathering diverse information to anticipate future problems, resource needs, deployment decisions, and similar factors. The wide array of research reports, statistical data, and commentary on virtually any issue facing a police planner is available from web-based resources. While not providing all the answers, the Internet has a wide range of resources which can significantly enhance the research effort. As in the other cases, these resources can save time, hence money, as well as identify unique resources which may be otherwise missed in a traditional library search.

Examples of Creative Police Web Pages

Sources for the issues discussed above as well as examples of a wide range of law enforcement related web sites can easily be found at <http://www.officer.com>. Regardless of the reason a police agency creates a web page, the uses are increasingly creative. A sample of this creativity from police departments is provided below:

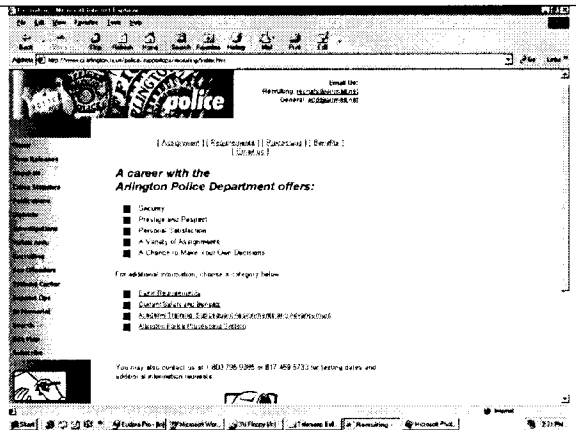
San Antonio Police Department: Comprehensive information can be obtained on all inmates including criminal history, physical descriptions, photographs, and even social security numbers. The screen shots below illustrate the wide range of resources that can be placed on a web site.





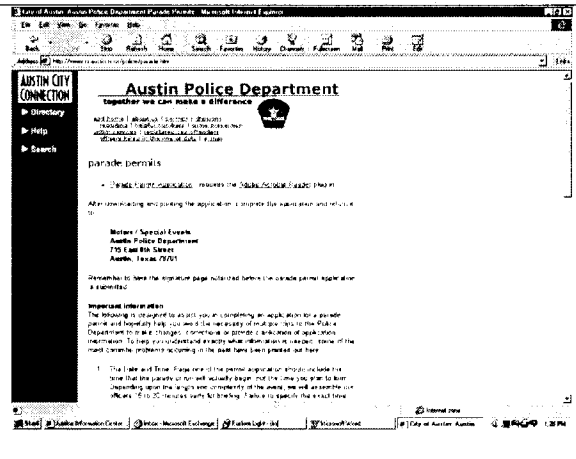
Arlington Police Department: Their web site is effectively used for recruiting. Not only is the recruitment process faster, by the very nature of the site the department is recruiting candidates who are at least reasonably computer literate.

<http://www.ci.arlington.tx.us/police/>



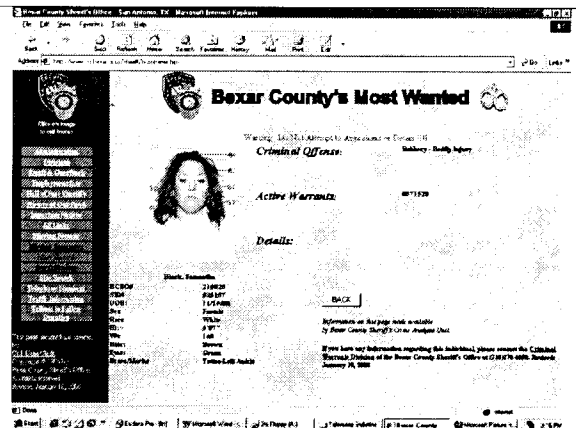
Austin Police Department: As a service to the community, parade permit applications and other documents can be downloaded from the department's web site.

<http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/police/>



Bexar County Sheriff's Department: The community can view their web site to obtain information about people who are WANTED in Bexar County.

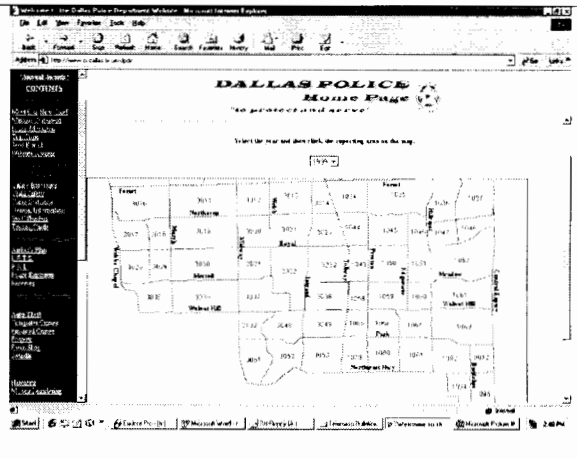
<http://www.co.bexar.tx.us/sheriff/>





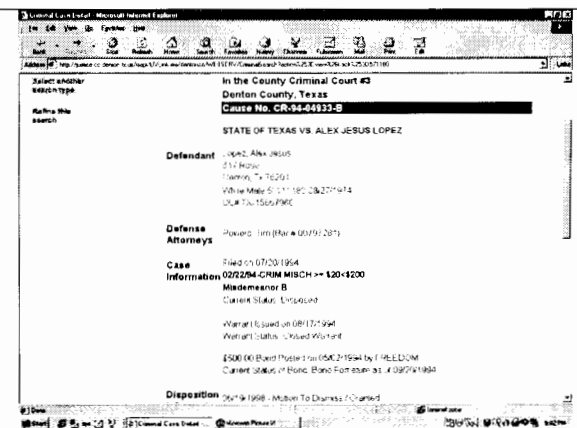
Dallas Police Department: Their site contains a page for each patrol beat area. Included are crime statistics, a map, and the ability to view statistics at various levels.

<http://www.ci.dallas.tx.us/dpd/>



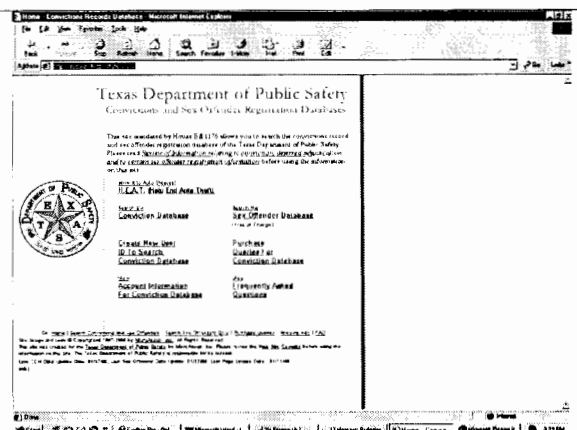
Denton County Sheriff's Department: Jail and court records may be searched to determine the facts, circumstances, and status of both criminal and civil court cases.

<http://sheriff.co.denton.tx.us/>



Texas Department of Public Safety: Permits a statewide search for criminal histories (convictions) and sexual offenders. Search parameters include name and location.

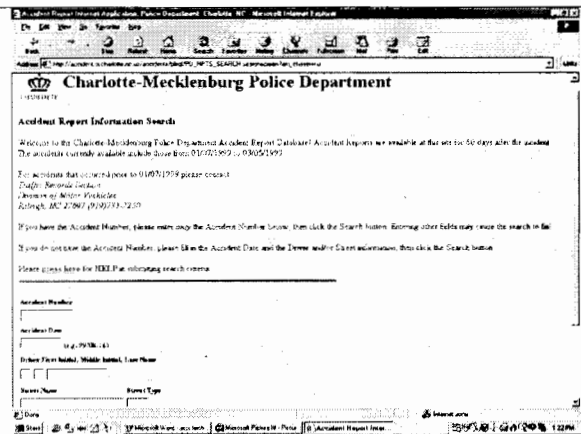
http://www.fdle.state.fl.us/Sexual_Predators/index.asp





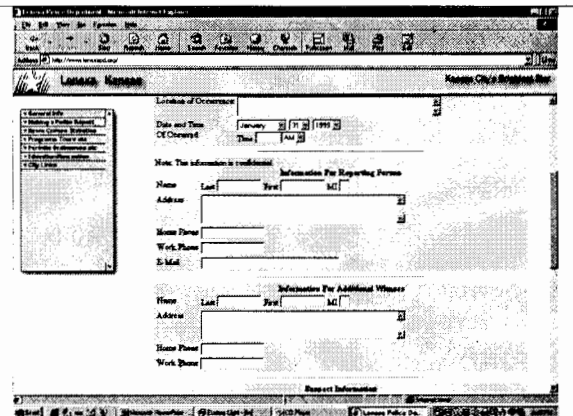
Charlotte-Mecklenberg, NC Police Department: From this site citizens may search for traffic accident reports, purchase, and download them on-line.

<http://accident.ci.charlotte.nc.us/>



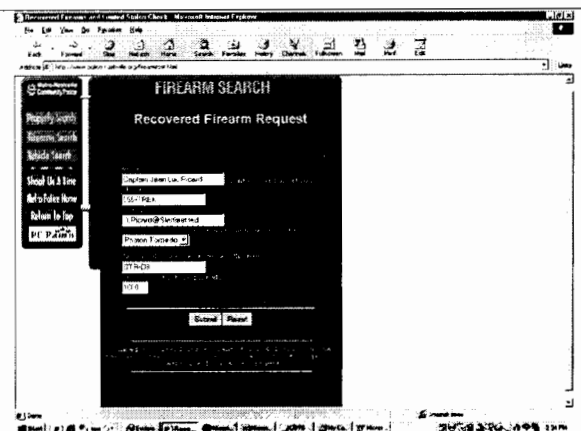
Lenexa, KS Police Department: Citizens may report suspicious parties, traffic complaints or animal complaints on-line.

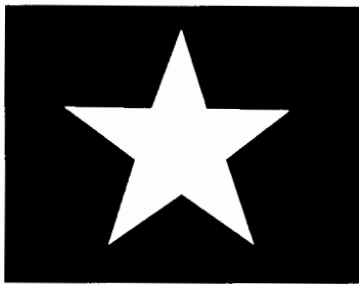
<http://www.lenexapd.org/>



Metro Nashville, TN Police Department: Citizens may check their web site for the presence and status of recovered property.

<http://www.police.nashville.org/>





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