

2009 NASCIO Awards Recognition

Digital Government: Government to Citizen (G to C) Nomination

State of Florida

Florida Offender Alert System



B. Executive Summary

Since 1997 Florida has maintained an online sex offender registry that displays up to date information on all registered persons. Citizens can access the site 24 hours a day/7 days a week and obtain listings of all offenders and predators in their area or any location of interest. While the system is one of the top rated sites of its kind, a key drawback was the fact that citizens had to initiate a search on their own to identify individuals who recently moved into their neighborhoods. Given that the information contained within the registry is constantly updated, individuals would have to continually conduct searches around the clock to truly ensure they were made aware of all changes occurring within a single day.

Additionally, per Florida law, local law enforcement officials are responsible for notifying the community, schools, and licensed daycares when a sexual predator moves into the area. The most common methods used to disseminate this information require citizens to be home at the time of the notification. Of further note, such notifications are not required to be conducted for sexual offenders or delivered to businesses. The responsibility was therefore placed on the community to stay informed by regularly checking the registry's website.

In 2007, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE) was tasked with closing the gaps in the existing system by developing a service that would allow citizens, businesses, schools, and other agencies to register for automated notifications of changes in offender addresses. Since Florida has over 51,000 sexual predator/offender registrants and a population of over eighteen million, FDLE opted to develop an e-mail based notification system.

The Offender Alert System, as it is named, was developed in early 2008 and allows users to register an unlimited number of addresses and/or offenders of interest. Whenever an offender moves into a specified area or a tracked subject changes locations, FDLE sends out an e-mail message reporting the updated information. To date, 67,816 users have subscribed to the Offender Alert System and 915,272 alert e-mails have been sent.

Though only in operation for just over a year, this unique project has become a vital safety tool and is highly relied upon by Florida citizens for tracking sexual offenders and predators. The Offender Alert System has proved extremely beneficial to law enforcement as well by increasing the level of public awareness and scrutiny placed on registered offender address information.

C. Description of the Business Problem and Solution

The Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act of 2006 requires states to immediately notify various entities, including the community, when modifications to sexual offender records take place. The Act gave states up to three years to comply with the new requirements. Florida already had a working online system that displayed the most up to date information for all registered persons. As changes occurred in the registry database the flyers made available to the public were instantly updated. One draw back to that system was the fact that citizens had to initiate a search on their own to identify such changes. There were no programs in place to automatically send out notifications. This meant dangerous individuals could move into neighborhoods without residents being made aware.

Under Florida law, local law enforcement officials are responsible for notifying the community and schools when a sexual predator moves into the area. The sexual predator designation is reserved for the most serious group of registered persons in Florida and typically signifies a crime of violence, a victim under 12, or repeat offender. The methods used to disseminate information about these subjects vary from agency to agency. The most common methods include traveling door to door delivering the news and conducting reverse 911 calls, whereby all residents in a designated area receive a pre-recorded telephone message regarding the predator. Though effective, both of the methods require citizens to be home at the time of the notification. In addition, such notifications are not required to be conducted for sexual offenders or delivered to businesses.

Florida had been considering developing an e-mail based notification system for some time. Such a program would allow FDLE to actively send out notifications to individuals who had subscribed to the service with very little delay, overcoming many of the shortcomings of a solely query based system. When the federal government highlighted the need for immediate notification to a broad range of recipients, Florida decided to proceed with such plans well in advance of the 2009 deadline, deploying the Florida Offender Alert System on March 27, 2008.

FDLE collaborated with local law enforcement and criminal justice officials throughout the state to garner their input on an e-mail notification system. Some agencies had already implemented such programs on their own, though on a much smaller scale. The Department also reached out to other state registries, especially those who had already developed varying e-mail notification systems or were in the process of implementing a program. These discussions highlighted the challenges that were likely to be faced as well as the success stories experienced around the nation.

In addition to collaboration on the function of the system a State-Local partnership was developed to help maximize public awareness and accessibility. The websites of local law enforcement agencies are frequently accessed by local residents, and as the established source for a variety of local crime and safety information it was a priority of the project to allow direct access and ownership of the system at that critical local level.

Therefore the system was designed to provide access points not only via FDLE's website but also directly from and on the websites of Florida's local law enforcement agencies. Florida Chiefs and Sheriffs have the option of customizing the front page of the Florida Offender Alert System and placing the portal directly on their agency's website to allow local agency ownership and presentation of the system. Through this design flexibility, local law enforcement agencies increase the services and information they make available to their own communities.

The primary objective of the Offender Alert System is to allow citizens, businesses, schools, and other agencies to sign up for a service that automatically sends notifications of changes in offender addresses. Though only focusing on residential addresses initially the system needed to be developed in such a way to one day handle expansion to include other registration information including employment and university addresses. The system also needed interact closely with the state sex offender registry and allow seamless transitioning between the two programs. Ensuring minimal downtime throughout the life of the system was an important goal as well.

The easiest solution to meet the required objectives was to develop a system that would allow citizens to identify specific offenders they wished to monitor. Each time a "flagged" subject updated their address information an e-mail message could be sent. Though beneficial, and something the state had never done before, FDLE recognized that such a system would only provide a partial service to the community. Of even greater importance to citizens, is the ability to know when a registered offender or predator moves into a specific neighborhood. The Alert system had to accomplish both tasks. As such, the Department opted to develop a service whereby users could insert addresses of interest and monitor specific registrants. When a registered offender or predator moves within a certain radius, chosen by the user, of a tracked address they receive a notification e-mail. Likewise, a message is sent whenever an offender being monitored changes residences regardless of where they are located.

Several challenges arose during the development of the e-mail notification system. First, since Florida law requires registrants to report all permanent and temporary residences many offenders have multiple addresses listed in the registry. The Alert system had to therefore keep track of multiple records per subject. Apartment changes represented another challenge needing to be addressed. Rather than focus solely on geographic movement the system also had to take into account modifications to address records that did not yield a new location on a map, a specific latitude or longitude, but did represent a new literal address.

Despite pre-deployment load testing and precautions, one of the largest issues faced during the actual implementation of this program was the overwhelming interest among Florida citizens. The system experienced such extremely high levels of traffic in the first few days of activity that additional servers had to be deployed. Programming changes also had to be made to the state registry website to ensure its' performance was not adversely affected. With these modifications implemented, the system handled the influx of users without complications.

Another challenge needing to be overcome was automated SPAM blocking running on e-mail servers. These systems out of necessity and design work to identify and prevent unwanted and unsolicited email from filling user accounts. Unfortunately these same systems can also prevent desired messages from being delivered. FDLE representatives made contact each of the major e-mail providers to inform them of the state's new system, its' purpose and function. Additionally the alert e-mail messages were specifically designed in such a way as to reduce the likelihood of being flagged as suspicious. The Department continues to actively monitor the conversion rate, the percentage of new accounts that are actually activated by the user, within the system to ensure that citizens are not having trouble receiving email alerts.

D. Significance of Project

Service is one of the FDLE's core agency values. The Offender Alert System represents a major enhancement to both the level and quality of service provided to the citizens of Florida.

One of the primary services offered by the Offender Alert System is improved tracking of sexual offenders and predators. Although Florida's sexual offender/predator registry has always allowed citizens to obtain up to date information regarding registered offenders, manual queries were required. The Offender Alert System allows citizens to sign up to receive electronic alert messages through e-mail so that they can be immediately notified when an offender moves into their area without having to remember to check the registry's website. With increased awareness comes a higher level of safety.

Though some local agencies had developed their own systems dealing with individuals residing in a limited geographic range, FDLE was the first agency in to implement a state-wide notification system for all registered offenders and predators. A handful of private businesses had also developed e-mail alert systems, but none of them use the statewide up to date data as accurate as that contained within the Offender Alert System. The Alert System receives nightly updates from the sex offender registry database. The Offender Alert System is also the first system in the state to link directly to the registry website. Such connectivity allows users to easily add offenders to their tracking list and view detailed maps of offender locations.

A few states had implemented e-mail alert system prior to development of the Offender Alert System; Florida has put together the most comprehensive service to date. Florida's system is the first to allow both the tracking of addresses and specific individuals. Users receive a notification e-mail when a registered offender or predator moves within a certain radius, chosen by the user, of a tracked address. Likewise, a message is sent whenever an offender being monitored changes residences regardless of where the registered address information is located. The Alert System is also the first to allow no restrictions on the number of locations/offenders that users can track.

E. Benefit of the Project

The citizens of Florida represent the primary beneficiary of the Offender Alert System. Community members can now receive automated updates regarding sexual offenders and predators without having to constantly access the public registry and conduct manual queries. This feature has resulted in a major reduction of the burden placed upon community members trying to stay up to date regarding offenders in their area. Approximately 915,000 e-mail alert messages have been sent to date eliminating the need for recipients to conduct manual queries in each case. In addition to the reduction of burden, the Alert System ensures that citizens receive updated information in a timely manner. Notices regarding offender address changes are sent to the public within 24-28 hours.

While the overall value for citizens, especially victims, stemming from this system is immeasurable, the FDLE has observed a 20% reduction in the number of hotline calls received from the field regarding information contained within the registry since the system was implemented. There were approximately 32,500 such calls received in 2007. Based on the average length of a hotline call, five minutes, it is estimated that the Department will realize an annual savings of approximately 418 analyst hours (\$6,200) and \$800 in toll charges.

The implementation of the Offender Alert System also significantly increased citizen awareness of the information listed in the sex offender registry. Addresses listed in the registry system are now under a greater level of scrutiny than ever before. This is beneficial to FDLE due to the sheer number of addresses the agency tracks and the multitude of sources through which information is received. Though the Department employs a number of quality control measures as part of its daily routine, having almost 68,000 extra sets of eyes looking at the data reduces the likelihood of errors going unnoticed.

Mapping accuracy within the registry represents another area that has been positively leveraged by the Alert system. Since alert e-mails are generated based on the geographic location of offenders, citizens are quick to notice when an address is incorrectly reported as being nearby. Based on the reports received from the field, the Department dramatically overhauled its mapping program and continues to enhance its functionality today. While some coordinate issues can be easily identified, such as a North Florida address being plotted in Miami (South Florida), most issues are not so easily seen. Since FDLE is responsible for listing offender addresses all over the state it is nearly impossible to tell whether a subject was placed at the incorrect end or side of a street. With the Alert System in place local community partners, who are in much better positions to identify physical locations in local areas, are able to identify issues and report them to the Department immediately.

Other state registries wishing to implement their own e-mail notification systems can undoubtedly benefit from Florida's experience. As one of the largest states in the union, in terms of both registered offender and citizen population, the Offender Alert System demonstrates that such a program can succeed. Additionally, experienced gained through this process can assist newly developing systems by discussing the challenges faced, factors to consider and the methods by which to overcome those challenges and address the needs.

In the end, sex offender registration is a constantly evolving field. The success of the Offender Alert System is a reminder of how important it is to develop new tools and expand programs to promote public safety. Sexual offenders represent a constant concern among the citizenry and it is up to all law enforcement agencies to make every effort to effectively track these individuals and keep the community informed.