Connecticut Criminal Justice Information System Governing Board (CJIS-CT) Implementation of Automatic Erasures of Certain Cannabis Convictions

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Award Category: Cross-Boundary Collaboration and Partnerships

Executive Summary:

The implementation of a conviction erasure system for adult cannabis offenses holds numerous benefits for both individuals and society as a whole. Firstly, it promotes fairness and justice by rectifying the disproportionate impact of cannabis convictions, which have affected marginalized communities. By erasing these convictions, individuals are given a second chance to rebuild their lives and pursue opportunities that may have been hindered by their past records. Moreover, expunging cannabis convictions reduces the barriers to employment, housing, and education, enabling individuals to reintegrate into society more easily and contribute positively to their communities. Additionally, by eliminating unnecessary penalties associated with outdated cannabis laws, resources can be redirected towards more pressing matters, such as public safety and addressing serious crimes. Ultimately, implementing a conviction erasure system acknowledges the evolving societal views on cannabis and fosters a more equitable and compassionate justice system. The technology team responsible for implementing this system deserves recognition for their commitment to social justice and their contribution to creating a fairer and more equitable society.

Connecticut passed *An Act Concerning Responsible and Equitable Regulation of Adult Use Cannabis* (SB 1201, PA 21-1) that called for automatic erasure of certain possession convictions. The bill also provides for automatic erasure of the police, court, and prosecutor records for certain drug possession convictions from January 1, 2000, through September 30, 2015, as specified.

To achieve these goals the Connecticut Criminal Justice Information Systems Governing Board (CJIS GB) developed and implemented changes to the Connecticut Information Sharing System (CISS). CJIS GB also worked across branches of government to collaborate with the CT Judicial Branch and cross agency partners within the executive branch including Department of Administrative Services / Bureau of Information Technology Solutions (BITS), Department of Criminal Justice (DCJ), Department of Emergency Services and Public Protection (DESPP), and externally with multiple municipal police departments. CJIS GB also collaborated on legislative interpretation with the aforementioned agencies as well as the Office of Policy and Management (OPM) Criminal Justice Policy and Planning unit.

CISS is a comprehensive, State-wide system to facilitate the sharing of information between all Criminal Justice agencies. This system eliminates the physical transfer of paperwork from police to courts/prosecutors, as RMS (Record Management Systems) systems are integrated into CISS. CISS consists of CJ Search and Workflow functionality. The Search is designed to share information with authorized individuals in the Criminal Justice Community in the State of Connecticut. CISS will take data input from criminal justice databases and make it searchable to law enforcement and justice officials with the proper security clearance and credentials. The Workflow is designed to replace current paper-based workflows with electronic messages and documents. The current process of exchanging documents manually between law enforcement and criminal justice agencies as part of normal criminal justice information flow is prone to errors, delays and inefficiencies. CISS Workflow replaces manual exchanges with an electronic data exchange.

The project was successfully completed and over 40,000 records were erased in January 2023. Connecticut Governor Lamont said "Especially as Connecticut employers seek to fill hundreds of thousands of job openings, an old conviction for low-level cannabis possession should not hold someone back from pursuing their career, housing, professional, and educational aspirations."

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Idea

What problem or opportunity does the project address?

With the passage of Connecticut Senate Bill SB 1201, the State had a mandate to implement an erasure system "by operation of law", meaning erasures occurring via an automatic process. An opportunity existed to leverage the State's criminal justice information sharing system, known as CISS, to solve a business problem to act as the hub of the system to transmit and receive erasure messages. CJISGB staff, having relationships with all Connecticut criminal justice agencies and overseen by a governing board consisting of representatives from the States criminal justice agencies, was ideally suited to coordinate and manage the implementation. Developing another system for implementing automatic erasures would be duplicative and costly.

Why does it matter?

Automatic erasures are a way to reduce the burden on effected citizens. Almost all state agencies have laws in place that enable individual to petition for the sealing or expungement of their criminal records after a specific period of time. However, regrettably, the petitioning process to clear criminal records in the majority of states is intricate, onerous and, frequently expensive. Per statute, convictions for violations of Connecticut statutes for possession of under four ounces of a cannabis imposed between January 1, 2000, and September 30, 2015, were automatically erased on January 1, 2023. People included under this provision of the law needed not do anything to make these convictions eligible for erasure. In Connecticut approximately 44,000 constituents were eligible.

What makes it different?

This project is different as it leverages existing criminal information sharing systems in a new way, to distribute conviction erasure messages via case update fields to all other systems connected to CISS. The scale of inter-agency coordination is also noteworthy, since 11 agencies and 94 municipal police departments and 11 Connecticut State Troops utilize CISS.

What makes it universal?

Automation for erasure of qualifying cannabis convictions supports two of the top 10 State CIO priorities: Digital Government/ Digital Services (No. 02) and Data and Information Management (No. 08)

Furthermore, automatic erasures of low-level cannabis convictions support state or federal mandates by aligning with their broader goals and priorities. Here are a few ways in which automatic erasures can support these mandates:

Criminal justice reform: Many states and the federal government have expressed a commitment to reforming the criminal justice system. Automatic erasure of low-level cannabis convictions reflects a shift towards more equitable and fair approaches to drug-related offenses. By expunging these convictions automatically, it reduces the burden on individuals to navigate a complex petition process, making the criminal justice system more efficient and accessible.

Racial equity: The enforcement of cannabis laws has disproportionately affected marginalized communities, particularly people of color. Automatic erasure of low-level cannabis convictions addresses the racial disparities in criminal justice outcomes and helps to mitigate the negative impacts of historical discrimination. It promotes a more just and equitable society by acknowledging and rectifying past injustices.

Economic opportunities: Cannabis-related convictions can create significant barriers to employment, education, housing, and other essential opportunities. Automatic erasure of these convictions enables

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individuals to have a fresh start and pursue meaningful livelihoods. By removing these barriers, states and the federal government can promote economic growth, reduce unemployment rates, and foster community development.

Public safety: Automatic erasure of low-level cannabis convictions allows law enforcement agencies to allocate their resources more effectively. By focusing on more serious crimes, they can prioritize public safety concerns and address higher-priority issues. This approach helps optimize the use of limited resources while ensuring that communities are protected from more significant threats.

Implementation:

<u>What was the roadmap?</u>

This projects fits well into the enterprise view, by using the prior CISS investment of over $60M to satisfy new use cases. August 2022 was the initiation of the cannabis erasure project, with a multi-agency project kickoff meeting. Standard artifacts were created, including a project charter, communications plan, Risk/Issues, Decisions, Actions (RAID) log, Gantt chart, and team roster. The project leveraged the existing governing board as the governance function, with monthly committee meetings. Weekly project team meetings were held to track risks, issues and progress. Within the software development team, daily huddles using an agile approach were held to triage key deliverables for the week.

<u>Who was involved?</u>

Key partners included the Judicial branch, with IT team members implementing case update fields tied to the erasures, including new flags. Judicial business personnel worked with legal functions to review legislation and provide implementation guidelines to the technical team. Since the erasure message impacted multiple agencies, other project team members include DESPP, who developed interface changes to receive erasure messages so Criminal History databases (aka RAP sheets) can be updated. In similar fashion, municipal police departments who also maintain criminal histories had to be coordinated with and through targeted change management, informed and made aware of the new erasure requirements. Connecticut OPM served in an oversight capacity along with the CJIS GB, to serve as policy experts to support any interpretation questions and also coordinate with the legislative bodies and governor's office around project timelines and progress.

<u>How did you do it?</u>

CISS is an information clearing house based on claims and privileges for authorized users for search of databases or transmittal of electronic data (workflow). The CISS system is an implementation of Microsoft Sharepoint and Software AG WebMethods, which serves as the integration engine. For security purposes this system is on-prem, running on over 700 servers both physical and virtual in the States' data center. Resources needed to implement this project include software developers, software quality assurance testers, project managers, internet security experts in federation and GFIPM.
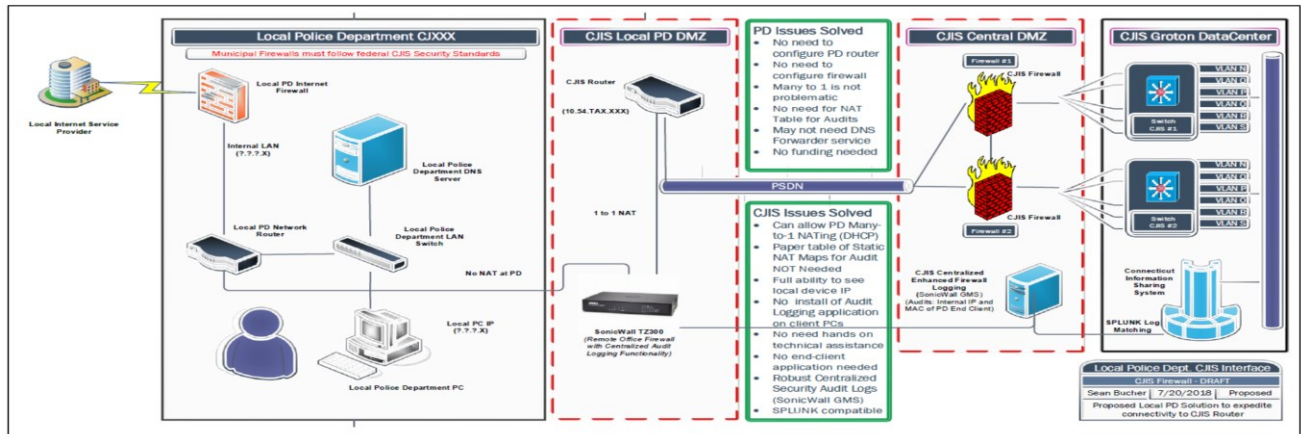
Figure 1.0 Graphic depicting path of CJI to CISS

The overall project management of CISS automated erasures development and ongoing operations was a workstream- driven model with a single project leader and team leads related to IT, Business Processes and security. Enterprise project management was tracked using a hybrid/agile/waterfall method. Microsoft Project Server was utilized for enterprise project management including resource demand and management. Software testing status and results were tracked via the Jazz platform. The close coordination streamlined technical development and change management by pulling together key stakeholders to coordinate business requirement prioritization, development, testing, documentation, tracking, and deployment of all changes.

Due to the critical need and urgency to deploy and to implement a timely solution, the initial timeline from software test to go live and implementation was four weeks (during the month of December), which is unprecedented for a standard SDLC cycle in the State of Connecticut.

The overall break down of the project spending was primarily focused on external IT consultants, including the developers, testers and project management functions of this team from the CJIS GB.

In addition to the changes made in CISS, an informational website was created to keep constituents informed about the project progress and how to go about checking on conviction erasure status. This was developed in a series of virtual standups working with OPM as well as the central DAS/BITS organization to create a public-facing website in 4 weeks.

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Impact:

How do you know?

Successful implementation of SB 1201 for eligible Cannabis Erasures benefited over 44,000 constituents of Connecticut. Using automated systems greatly simplified the workflow and the workload on state employees and constituents who benefit.

How do you know?

The automatic erasure of low-level cannabis convictions and the subsequent ability for individuals to find work bring several benefits to constituents. Firstly, it promotes social and economic justice by removing the barriers that previously hindered employment opportunities. With cleared records, individuals can pursue jobs without the burden of past convictions weighing them down. This leads to increased economic stability, reduced reliance on public assistance, and improved quality of life for those affected. Additionally, as more individuals find employment, communities benefit from the resulting economic growth and reduced strain on social support systems. Moreover, automatic erasure and subsequent employment opportunities contribute to the overall reduction of recidivism rates, as gainful employment plays a crucial role in reducing the likelihood of reoffending. By supporting constituents in finding work after low-level cannabis erasures, communities experience positive social, economic, and rehabilitative outcomes.

What now?

CISS benefits to the Connecticut criminal justice agencies is shown in Figure 2.0. CISS will continue to be used as the preeminent information sharing system for CJI in Connecticut
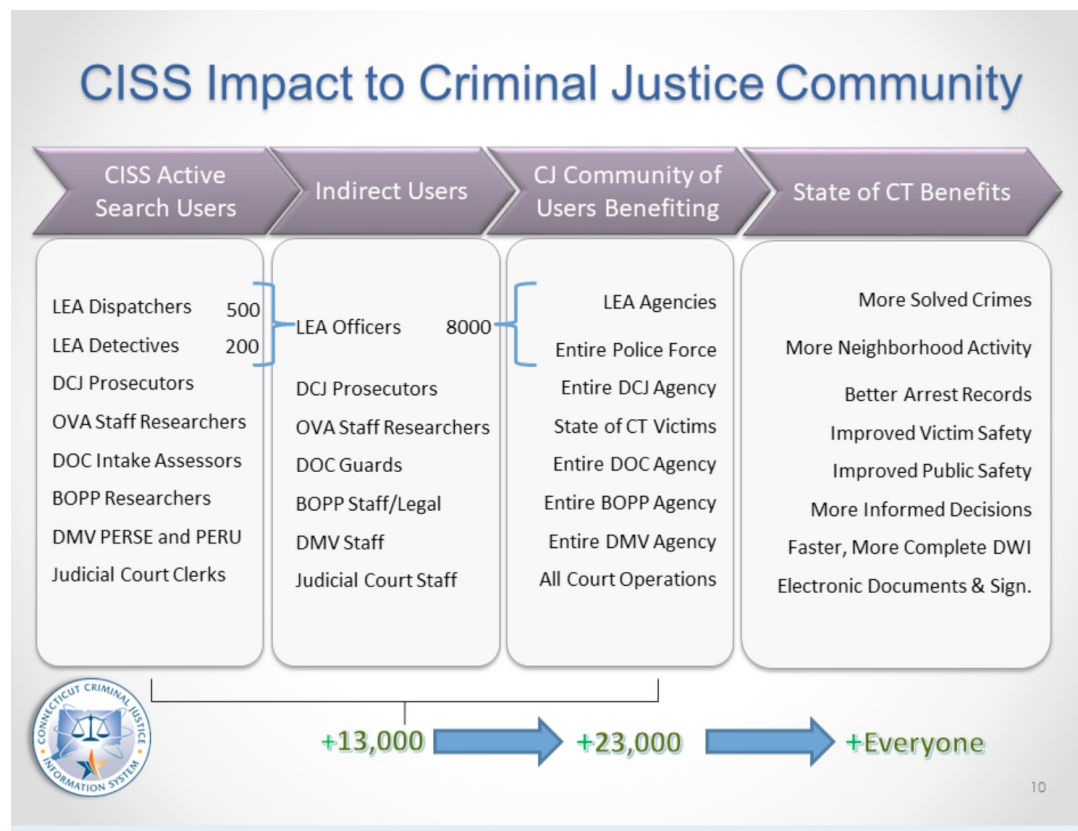

Figure 2.0 CISS Impact to State of Connecticut

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Building on the changes implemented in the Cannabis Erasures projects, the CJIS GB will be partnering with other agencies in implementing the Connecticut Clean Slate initiative. Clean Slate is a much larger initiative which mandates record erasure by operation of law of a number of misdemeanors and (the first in nation) certain low-level felonies. Approximately 440,000 constituents will be eligible. Lessons learned from the Cannabis Erasure project are instrumental in 'seeding the soil' for success in the Clean Slate initiative. Important lessons around stakeholder communication, including the last mile communication to all municipal police departments, will be leveraged in this much larger effort. Aside from the deployment of Cannabis erasures, an ongoing architectural framework of CISS was improved and the invaluable experience was gained in the use of system tools which will be leveraged for future development efforts not only within CJIS GB but benefiting other agencies statewide.

Additional Resources:

1. Connecticut Criminal Justice Information Systems Governing Board: Governing Board (ct.gov):
2. CT Governor Lamont Press Release : Governor Lamont Announces Thousands of Low-Level Cannabis Possession Convictions To Be Cleared for Connecticut Residents
3. Clean Slate and Cannabis Erasure Informational Website: Clean Slate Connecticut

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