



Washington State

SAFE & Sound: Revolutionizing Firearm Background Checks through Centralized, Secure, and Scalable Technology

PROJECT: Centralized Firearms Background Check Program (SAFE System)

CATEGORY: Information & Communications Technology

PROJECT TIMELINE: June 2020 – February 2024

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The [Centralized Firearms Background Check \(CFBC\)](#) program addresses a fragmented, inefficient, and inconsistent background check process across Washington State. Previously, firearm dealers (FFLs) were required to navigate a hybrid model involving both the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and a patchwork of local law enforcement agencies (LEAs), each with varying resources, policies, and responsiveness. This approach often led to delays, confusion, and inconsistencies in firearm eligibility decisions.

The Secure Automated Firearms E-Check (SAFE) system resolves this by providing a single, centralized platform that FFLs statewide use to initiate and receive results for all firearm transfer background checks. It automates database queries across multiple state and federal partners, ensuring uniform application of laws and significantly reducing processing times.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

What problem or opportunity does the project address?

For years, Washington state relied on a fragmented and inconsistent hybrid model for conducting firearm background checks—splitting responsibility between the [FBI's National Instant Criminal Background Check System \(NICS\)](#) and a diverse array of local law enforcement agencies (LEAs). This disjointed approach created confusion among firearm dealers (FFLs), burdened LEAs with time-consuming manual processes, and introduced delays and inconsistencies that potentially compromised public safety.

LEAs across the state faced significant staffing and resource constraints, making it difficult to perform background checks in a timely and uniform manner. FFLs were often unsure which jurisdiction was responsible for a given check and had to rely on outdated methods like fax or email to communicate with authorities—sometimes resulting in lost or delayed paperwork. Additionally, different firearm types required different processes, further compounding confusion and inefficiencies for both dealers and prospective buyers.

The opportunity to centralize and automate this critical function emerged when the Washington State Legislature passed House Bill 2467, directing the Washington State Patrol (WSP) to implement a statewide system that would streamline, standardize, and modernize firearm background checks. The result was the development of the Secure Automated Firearms E-Check (SAFE) system - an innovative, cloud-based solution designed to deliver faster, more reliable background checks through a unified interface accessible to every FFL in the state.

By replacing a fractured and labor-intensive process with an automated, rules-based platform, SAFE not only enhanced public safety but also dramatically improved operational efficiency for government partners and private dealers alike.

Why does it matter?

Firearms background checks are a critical component of public safety and responsible gun ownership. Prior to SAFE, delays and procedural discrepancies undermined both safety and citizen trust. LEAs were burdened with labor-intensive tasks, risking errors and inconsistent enforcement of firearm laws.

Quantifiable benefits of the SAFE program include:

- A reduction in overall processing time for background checks. Electronic submission of background checks.
- Detection of stolen firearms.
- Elimination of fax/email-based LEA communications, enhancing security and reliability.
- Elimination of paper-based forms sent to the Department of Licensing
- Resiliency and scalability.

Without intervention, Washington risked continued inefficiencies, missed interdictions of unauthorized transfers, and increasing LEA resource strain.

Quantifiable benefits:

- A 3-minute average processing time for background checks (previously 3–5 days for mental health checks alone).
- 99.9% of FFLs now submit electronically, reducing manual errors.
- Identification of 65 stolen firearms in the first year—far exceeding the estimated 25.
- Elimination of fax/email-based LEA communications, enhancing security and reliability.
- Immediate electronic transfer of firearm application data to the Department of Licensing, reducing paperwork and errors.

What makes it different?

The SAFE system is uniquely innovative due to:

- **Interagency integration:** Automated, real-time database queries with the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC), Health Care Authority (HCA), Washington State Patrol (WSP), and Law Enforcement Information Exchange (Link) eliminate manual workflows and deliver timely decisions.
- **Cloud-first architecture:** Hosted in Amazon Web Services Government Cloud, SAFE is scalable, secure, and accessible from any device—critical given the outdated tech infrastructure of many FFLs.
- **Dealer-centric design:** Dealers can use a simple browser portal with minimal tech requirements. Transferees can even pre-submit information to reduce in-store wait times and data entry errors.
- **Automated appeals and denials:** Immediate email notifications and appeal forms support due process without human delay.
- **National Information Exchange Model (NIEM) -compliant interfaces:** Ensures data integrity and national compatibility, enhancing potential for cross-jurisdiction replication.

What makes it universal?

The project directly aligns with NASCIO's State CIO Top Ten Priorities, including:

- **Cybersecurity and Risk Management:** SAFE underwent WaTech's Office of Cybersecurity (OCS) security design review and adheres to statewide IT security policies.
- **Digital Government/Digital Services:** Transforms a manual, paper-based process into a fully digital service.
- **Cloud Services:** Uses secure, scalable AWS Government Cloud infrastructure.
- **Enterprise IT Governance:** Overseen by WaTech, the Office of Financial Management (OFM) and the Technology Services Board, ensuring alignment with state enterprise strategy.

Furthermore, the issue of firearm background checks is universal among states, and SAFE's modular, rules-based design makes it easily adaptable to other jurisdictions.

IMPLEMENTATION

What was the roadmap?

Following the 2020 legislation, WSP developed an implementation plan based on:

- Statutory analysis
- Interagency interviews
- National benchmarking
- FFL focus groups

A hybrid agile project management methodology ensured modular, testable component rollouts. The project followed Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) standards and was subject to oversight by WaTech, OFM and an independent quality consultant. Pilot phases with varying FFL types enabled a smooth, accelerated statewide rollout ahead of the 2023 holiday season.

Who was involved?

Key contributors included:

- **WSP Firearms Background Division** – Operational leadership, subject matter expert (SME) testing, system validation.
- **WaTech, OFM and TSB** – Governance and compliance.
- **AOC, HCA, Department of Licensing (DOL), LInX-NW** – Data partners and interface providers.
- **Federal Firearms Licensees (FFLs)** – User insight and pilot testing.
- **Advisory Board** – Public, law enforcement, and industry representatives ensuring accountability and transparency.

A comprehensive Organizational Change Management (OCM) plan drove stakeholder engagement, early user interface feedback and training.

How did you do it?

Resources:

- **Financial:** Gated funding with clear milestones and vendor request for proposal (RFP).
- **Human:** Full staffing of new WSP Firearms Background Division (FBD) and SAFE IT units.
- **Technical:** Integration via asynchronous web services and NIEM-compliant endpoints.

The technical architecture prioritized interoperability, scalability, and data stewardship, enabling automation while preserving agency data ownership.

IMPACT

What did the project make better?

SAFE has transformed firearm background checks from a decentralized, manual, inconsistent process into a centralized, automated, and standardized system.



- **Reduces LEA workload**
 - Elimination of fax/email-based LEA communications, enhancing security and reliability.
 - Immediate electronic transfer of firearm application data to the Department of Licensing, reducing paperwork and errors.
- **Accelerates decision-making**
 - A 20-minute average processing time for background checks (previously 3–5 days for mental health checks alone).
 - 55% of all checks submitted are adjudicated by SAFE using rules-based algorithms, without any human intervention. Some 'Proceeds' are now completed

in less than 1 hour; most within 2 to 3 hours. Automatic denials can happen in as little as 2 minutes.

- **Identifies stolen firearms more effectively**
 - Identification of 65 stolen firearms in the first year—far exceeding the estimated 25 predicted. This increased to 126 in 2024, and 69 year to date in 2025. Nearly 500,000 firearms checked for stolen since ‘Go-Live’ August 8, 2023.
- **Ensures consistent enforcement of gun laws**
- **Enhances dealer and citizen experience**
 - 99.9% of FFLs now submit electronically, reducing manual errors.
 - In November 2024, the Administrative Office of the Courts systems went completely down for two weeks. At the end of the outage, SAFE had 13,000 background checks pending, but it processed through the entire backlog within 4 hours and auto adjudicated over 50% of the checks.

How do you know?

Performance Metrics:

Metric	Baseline	Target	Achieved
% No manual interaction	20%	34%	55%
% No research (auto denials from NICS)	10%	1%	<0.01%
% Electronic submissions vs. phone calls	N/A	95%	99.9%

Testimonials:

“SAFE is intuitive, easy to use and shows each step of the process... eliminates several steps we used to have to do by law.”

– Tina Browning, Compliance Officer, Farwest Sports

“SAFE eradicated our concern that only a portion of denials were being reported.”

– Jamie Weimer, Projects & Programs Manager, WASPC

What now?

SAFE is actively being expanded to:

- Integrate Prosecuting Attorney Record Checks (PARC) for Restoration of Firearm Rights, as required by RCW 9.41.041, to allow for a nearly identical background check to be completed, and for the record of that check to be retained and available for review.

- Allow over 100 non-WSP LEAs now submitting Disposition of Firearm (DOF) checks (release of a firearm from evidence or safekeeping) for processing through SAFE, by WSP FBD employees.
- Potentially process Concealed Pistol License background checks.
- Enable future updates to prohibitor detection rules and logic without code changes
- Integration with the Permit to Purchase (E2SHB 1163) program signed into law May 20, 2025.

SAFE's scalable design and successful execution make it a strong candidate for replication across other states—demonstrating exceptional return on investment, risk reduction, and public service impact.

CONCLUSION

The Centralized Firearms Background Check Project, powered by the SAFE system, stands as a benchmark for what is possible when innovation, collaboration, and public service align. By replacing an outdated, decentralized process with a secure, automated platform, Washington state has strengthened public safety, reduced burdens on law enforcement, and delivered an intuitive experience for firearm dealers and citizens alike.

SAFE has proven to be more than just a technology solution—it is a transformative shift in how states can manage high-stakes, high-volume background checks with precision, equity, and transparency. With proven outcomes, overwhelming adoption, and a future-ready architecture, the SAFE system not only meets the urgent needs of today but also lays the groundwork for broader applications tomorrow. It is a model of modern governance and worthy of national recognition.

