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Electronic Citation System and the Advantages to Small Police Departments

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ABSTRACT

Many cities are demanding more services from their local police department. Small police departments struggle to provide police services with few resources, no specialized divisions, and lack of officers. Patrol officers answer a wide range of calls for service along with enforcing traffic laws. It is a common practice that police agencies still issue time consuming handwritten citations that put officers on the roadway and in harm's way. The longer an officer is on a traffic stop, the greater chance they will be struck by a motorist.

Implementing the Electronic Citation System will benefit small police agencies and the municipal court division by alleviating some of the manual duties. Police officers will have this time along the roadside brought to a minimum. Officers can also issue criminal trespass warnings and prepare a crash report within minutes. The ECS can check for local and other surrounding agencies warrants, and automatically builds a database within the record management system of all vehicles and persons that are scanned by the ECS. Additionally, the State of Texas mandates police departments submit a Racial Profile Report annually, and the ECS has capabilities for producing the Racial Profile Report which will save shift supervisors numerous hours on researching traffic stops and calculating the numbers. The ECS automatically attaches the photograph of the violator with the citation. This is very instrumental during a warrant round-up, which will prevent an innocent person from being arrested. On the municipal court position, the court clerk has to decipher through violations to determine correct dates and other information on citations due to bad penmanship by officers.

The ECS saves significant time for the court in processing citations. When the ECS is downloaded, it automatically downloads all of the citation information into the record management system. The court clerk then accesses the record management system where the ECS has automatically transferred all the data to the court computer. The ECS can also assists the court clerk in preparing the court docket within minutes. The ECS will lessen misplaced or lost citations because all citations are electronically stored.

The implementation of the ECS, to any police department will show an enormous impact on officer productivity and the court clerk. There will be cost savings on paper, person-hours, minimize errors on citations, and staff can complete additional duties. One life saved during traffic contact surely justifies the cost of this product.

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INTRODUCTION

The Electronic Citation System (ECS) is a new technology that has been recently introduced to law enforcement agencies and the community. The following research on the ECS was based primarily on police magazines, news articles, police dash camera video, law enforcement and civilian websites, and brochures from companies that produce and sell the Electronic Citation System. The ECS is an electronic device that will enable the officer in the efficient and effective completion of traffic citations with few, if any, errors because it scans a driver's license and vehicle registration number within seconds. Handwritten citations have been the standard operational procedure for police officers since the introduction of modern policing. Unfortunately, this practice has many disadvantages, especially for smaller police agencies. In addition, officers' contact with civilians is maximized by the handwritten citation process, thus making them more susceptible to verbal and possible physical abuse by violators. Handwritten citations, which are entered manually, require a substantial amount of person-hours by court staff.

It is common among small police agencies to manage all divisions of their department without any specialized units found in large metropolitan cities, such as Traffic Divisions, Criminal Investigation Units, Gang Units, and Tactical Units. The smaller agency is tasked with managing all divisions of the department. Police officers can be subject to serious injury and/or fatalities by automobiles due to spending an increased amount of time along the roadside processing handwritten citations. As a result, time and officer safety can be compromised by an abundance of duties. For

example, there is increased risk of officers being involved in traffic accidents when they are pressed for time in responding to a call and may use much greater speed.

Some of the benefits a smaller police agency will gain from implementing the Electronic Citation System are officer safety, accuracy, and productivity. The ECS also has the capability of transferring all pertinent citation information to the courts. The ECS will import data to most record management systems, which would delete this duty from court staff. Therefore, the small police agency will benefit in the form of officer and court administration productivity and, most importantly, officer safety.

POSITION

The reason ECS is beneficial to any police department is because it is a tool officers will use daily, which promotes officer safety, time management, and easier citation filing. The ECS will automatically input all pertinent driver and automobile information accurately onto the citation. The ECS significantly reduces errors for the police agency, the courts, and the state. Currently, officers are receiving driver and vehicle information from dispatch centers or mobile data computers. The ECS will enhance officer safety by retrieving all of the driver and vehicle information from the handheld device.

The reduction in time for issuing handwritten citations enables the small police agency to utilize officers more efficiently and effectively for responding to urgent police calls. The ECS allows for traffic accidents to be processed efficiently. It is also capable of taking photographs, which are critical with respect to warrant round-ups and criminal investigations. In 2007, Policeone.com reported in an article titled “Electronic traffic Citations: How to deploy the right solution for your agency,” (Siney, 2007) their finding

that officers currently spend approximately 15 to 20 minutes handwriting a citation. On average, the ECS minimizes the officer's time to approximately four to five minutes. This means that the officer has completed issuing the citation within 10 minutes. The police officer is now readily available for other calls of service. The other reason is the longer the traffic stop, the more risk there is to agitation and frustration by the alleged violator. Therefore, the ECS enhances officer safety by minimizing traffic contact to approximately three to five minutes and getting the officer off the roadway. This also provides citizens with a more rapid response time upon their request for police assistance.

There are several local and out of state police agencies of various sizes that have seen a marked improvement in police officer productivity, accuracy, and court expediency since implementing the ECS. Zebra Technologies Corporation reported the following: the "implementation of the ECS will reduce personnel hours and prevent errors by eliminating the task of manually entering citations into the database system by court staff" ("Electronic citation system", 2010, p. 8). For example, the Maryland State Police have implemented the Electronic Citation System, and traffic contacts reduced from an eight-minute stop to a three-minute stop, the officers were able to quickly check automobiles for being stolen and violators for any criminal warrants (Lackey, 2008). In 2010, Motorola Solutions reported in "The ROI of eCitation: Just the Ticket to higher Revenues", which provides various technological support equipment for law enforcement, that the ECS will assist by inputting all the required information for the officer within two or three minutes ("The ROI of eCitation," 2004). Brazos Technology, another technological law enforcement provider, found that one of the benefits was the

ability of the ECS to input all the required information for the officer by simply scanning the driver's license through the ECS. This resulted in less contact between the officer and the alleged violator (Brazos Technology, n.d). In Florida, the Miami Dade County Police reduced a standard traffic contact from ten minutes to just two minutes (Lackey, 2008). The benefits of time management and any reduction in time also allowed officers to be more readily available to respond to calls for service.

The ECS also extends its benefits to court staff. For example, the ECS deletes the task of entering citations manually, allowing court staff to perform and complete other duties. According to research conducted by Motorola, between 10% and 15% of traffic citations are dismissed because of bad handwriting and wrong violations. In addition, Motorola stated that the ECS would reduce errors by both the officer and court clerks. Since the officer scans the driver's license through Electronic Citation System, correct information will be imported to the courts as well ("The ROI of eCitation," 2004). Therefore, the implementation of the ECS will enhance work productivity and minimize errors not only to police agencies but to supporting agencies as well. The ECS will reduce the personnel hours needed to input citations manually by court clerks and allow the clerks to accomplish other duties in a timely manner. The ECS will also negate penmanship errors.

Since the modern policing era began, it has been standard operating procedure for an officer to position himself outside of the patrol vehicle and issue a handwritten citation, better known to the public as a "ticket." This practice puts both the officer and the violator at risk, as the officer is handwriting a citation. The ECS minimizes an officer's presence along the roadside while issuing citations, which has a direct

correlation with officer safety. The direct correlation of the ECS and officer safety alone is reason enough to adapt the system into police practice. When an officer is injured or killed in the line of duty, the officer's family is devastated by the loss. The United States Department of Labor Occupational Safety and Health Administration stated the following: "With every one of these fatalities, the lives of a worker's family members were shattered and forever changed. We can't forget that fact" (as cited in Solis, 2009, Worker Fatalities). The issuance of citations along the roadside is the cause of many serious injuries and fatalities to police officers. For example, on January 2006, a police officer was struck and killed by a motorist near Monahan, Texas while issuing a traffic citation (Fulhart, n.d.).

Morison (2010) reported an increase in officer fatalities when the officer is outside of their patrol vehicles. There were 150 officers that were killed in the line of duty from 2000 to 2009 while they were outside of their patrol vehicles. In fact, the 2000s has been recorded as the only decade in which more officers were killed by traffic related incidents than gunfire (Morison, 2010). Trooper Calvin Taylor of the North Carolina Highway Patrol, on October 3, 2001, had been providing assistance to a motorist on I-40 west of Asheville, when a tractor-trailer crashed into both automobiles and killed both the motorist and state trooper (Morison, 2010). The National Law Enforcement Officer Memorial Fund (NLEOMF) (2009) compared the causes of law enforcement officer fatalities between 2008 and 2009. The comparison indicated that six more officers were struck outside their patrol vehicle in 2008 than in 2009. The total officers struck while outside their vehicles in 2008 was 18. In a video posted on Youtube.com, it showed that on February 27, 2010, adverse weather conditions caused icy roads and resulted in

near fatalities as two officers stood outside of their patrol vehicle, a vehicle traveling at an accelerated speed in the same direction veered out of control, striking both officers and the parked vehicle (Associated Press, 2010).

Another officer safety issue is the verbal attacks and/or abusive language an officer may endure during traffic contact. Police in car camera systems have recorded videos of officers being verbally abused while issuing citations. Featured in an eBaumsWORLD video is a Maine state trooper being verbally abused by an irate violator during a traffic contact. As the traffic stop progresses, so does the violator's temper. The violator continues to use abusive language and proceeds to tear up the citation and throw it in the officer's direction (Nuck_4_Life, 2009). In a video posted on eBaumsWORLD it provides footage of a police officer making a traffic contact on an alleged violator. The officer begins to explain to the violator that she has already received a warning citation for the same traffic infraction; therefore, she must be taken into custody. At this moment, the situation escalates. The alleged violator becomes combative with the officer. The altercation lasted approximately four minutes until the officer gains control of the violator. However, the ECS will minimize the contact between the alleged violator and the officer, which, as a result, reduces the risk and time for a violator becoming agitated (Falthor, 2011).

The ECS will also enhance safety, with respect to roadside accidents, by reducing contact time along the roadside. In another video featured on YouTube, there is a clear example of the risk officers take when issuing traffic citations. A Texas state trooper and alleged violator are positioned outside of their vehicles, and the officer is explaining to the violator the importance of safety while standing along the

roadside. Unexpectedly, another vehicle, traveling in the same direction, strikes the alleged violator's vehicle, causing severe damage and near fatalities (Brycejoystick, 2006).

The ECS also comes equipped with an application that will automatically retrieve data from the alleged violators' driver's license and motor vehicle registration through the Texas Crime Information Center and National Crime Information Center. This feature of the ECS is vital to officer safety, and will alert the officer to any outstanding warrants, stolen vehicles, criminal history, and whether the alleged violator is licensed to carry a concealed handgun. In 2007, Policeone.com reported that traffic contact is the "second deadliest event" an office can encounter on the job (Siney, 2007). One of the reasons for the high fatality rate is the long exposure being outside of their patrol vehicles. In fact, Zebra Technologies Corporation reported that 70% of officers killed in the line of duty occurred while the officer was positioned outside of the patrol vehicles. The ECS will improve officer safety by getting them off the roadway quicker ("Electronic citation system", 2010).

COUNTER POSITION

Recently, police departments across the United States have had to cut back on their budgets due to an economic recession. One of the factors that departments will encounter is the cost of the electronic citation system. Each individual ECS has a starting price of $4,500 (Lackey, 2008). Further, Cable News Network reported that in March 2010, some police agencies were adversely affected by budget cutbacks: the Plano Police Department in Texas will be leaving 13 police officer positions vacant, and Montgomery County, Maryland is leaving 11 police officer positions vacant (Bohn,

2008). Police departments across the country are cutting back on officers, equipment, vehicles, and training (O'Brien, 2010). The San Antonio Police Department, also facing budget cuts, will be phasing out 74 patrol vehicles within the next two years, and officers will be assigned in pairs to vehicles ("San Antonio Pairs Up," 2010).

Police departments are faced with the challenge of funding the ECS. However, there are some avenues a police agency may explore without directly affecting their budget. For example, the Midland Police Department purchased ECS's, costing $40,000, and they used the department's drug seizure money (Lopez, 2009). In addition, Howard County Police Department in Maryland received a grant for $48,000 from the State Governors Office, Crime Control and Prevention Division, to purchase the Electronic Citation System (Dixon, 2010). Furthermore, the Charles County Sheriff' Department in Maryland received $54,774 from a law enforcement technology grant that was funded by the State of Maryland to assist with ECS purchase. The Calvert County Sheriff's Department in Maryland also received $39,727 from the same grant ("Charles County ready to start writing electronic traffic tickets," 2008). Police departments in need of ECS funding have the opportunity to apply for federal assisted grants and utilize assets seized through criminal activities to help fund the much-needed ECS. The benefits clearly outweigh the costs.

In today's society, there is great concern and fear of identity theft. The crime entails the theft of an individual's personal information such as a social security number or driver's license. As a result, citizens have become more reluctant to offer personal identifiers to law enforcement officers. According to Central Florida News, the Ormond Beach Police Department, who are currently using the Electronic Citation System, has

received several complaints from citizens in regards to being photographed during a traffic stop (Central Florida News, 2008).

On Monday, February 22, 2010, a Texas husband expressed his concern over a Selma police officer taking a picture of his wife during a traffic contact. The husband was upset because the officer never notified the driver that the photograph was being taken. The husband feels the photograph was an invasion of privacy and not required information for the citation (Grace, 2010). With the use of ECS, police officers no longer have to operate using old methods of collecting data. Instead, the information they need will be available in a hand held device. For example, ECS is being used in McAllen, Texas by the McAllen Police Department. The ECS takes a picture of the alleged violator, and as explained in the news report, the picture can be used for evidence collection. This will prevent a person from being arrested or denying they ever received a ticket. When a person disputes a citation that process can sometimes take months or years to reach the courts. The ECS can assist the officer in recalling the information as well as a photograph of the violator for their testimony (Taylor, 2010). The ECS will automatically attach the photo of the alleged violator to the citation issued by the officer. Officers may also use the picture program during a criminal investigation or a severe motor vehicle crash. This picture program can be a useful resource to the everyday duties of police officers on patrol.

CONCLUSION

The many benefits to the ECS counter the argument for police departments not to invest in this effective device. It is evident that the ECS provides officers safety, and it also provides safety to the alleged violator as well. In addition, the productivity and

efficiency of the ECS benefits the police, the courts, and the state. The accuracy and time reduction the ECS provides will enable employees to complete additional duties and minimize errors on citations. Police departments and courts will benefit by implementing the ECS for efficient citation issuance and processing. It will also eliminate having to decipher through names on poorly written citations. The picture program the ECS provides will prevent cases of mistaken identities and allows the possible apprehension of wanted fugitives. Furthermore, officers will spend less time on the side of the roadway and less time in adverse weather conditions. Most importantly, violators will be released quicker and will be in less danger of other motorists driving by and possibly striking their vehicle, which could cause injury or possible fatalities to both the drivers and passengers. One life saved during a traffic contact surely justifies the cost of this product. Although there is still some apprehension from the public in regards to the ECS, the benefits clearly outweigh any arguments against the implementation of the ECS in all police departments.

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