Emergency Notification System Strengthens COOPs

The new judiciary COOP/Emergency Notification System (ENS) offers courts a custom-designed, easy-to-use contact notification system essential to any complete court continuity of operations plan.

Relying on staff entry of crucial contact information in the judiciary's Info Web system, the ENS manages emergency contact information, synchronizes it with Blackberry/PDA devices, manages phone tree hierarchies, and generates emergency notification to COOP members and court employees from the office or from a handheld device. The AO's Richard Seidel, who designed the program, collaborated closely with court and AO COOP managers, IT staff, human resources managers, and AO program offices to ensure that the application meets users' needs. Seidel is with the Information Technology Services Division, Office of Internal Services.

"This is really an asset for the courts," said John Bianco, IT director, Northern District of Ohio. "Like many courts, we considered purchasing a locally managed system. We now can avoid that expense." Bianco said that in the past, his court has used a manual phone tree calling system for emergency notifications, recorded voice mail messages on local phone systems and ARMA, and has posted notices to the court's public web site.

The new ENS is accessible to court managers any time, anywhere they have access to a Blackberry/PDA or computer.

Roy Kerekanich, systems manager, Western District of Pennsylvania Bankruptcy Court, helped Seidel test the ENS. "I tested it out a few times and produced results for him to review," Kerekanich said. "He modified the system based on this kind of feedback, really personalizing it to judiciary needs."

ENS Adds to COOP Toolbox

The ENS system builds on other emergency communication tools the AO has designed for court use: the COOP icon for Blackberries/PDAs and the phone tree. Combined with these tools, ENS takes emergency communication several steps further. Once court managers realized that their court emergency contact information already housed in InfoWeb offered the most logical source of contact information, they began requesting greater integration of it with judiciary-wide emergency planning.

Courts can use the ENS to define and quickly contact groups of employees — initial COOP responders, judges, all staff in a geographical area, and all staff throughout the district — immediately with important messages.

It's possible to add auxiliary members, key non-judiciary contacts from the U.S. Marshals Service, Bureau of Prisons, media, and other locally important organizations. In addition, court units within a district can grant rights across units to ensure district-wide information is accurate and accessible.

Requests from court managers for emergency notification support has increased as COOP development has grown more detailed and sophisticated. Once they could use emergency e-mail notifications, court managers requested text messaging capability. This form of messaging not only has become very common, it has proven reliable in some cases when cell lines were limited or clogged. To enable this feature, Seidel had to identify and incorporate each network provider's text protocol, much of which is not readily available or documented. After substantial testing in a short period of time, the system proved reliable.

Collaboration Leads to Practical Tool

As courts tested the system, Seidel expanded the available fields to allow courts to capture all the emergency information that they are currently tracking across the country. It is readily available, grants secure access to real-time information, and can be exported for master HR/COOP records, individual PDF files for callers, and stored on blackberry/PDA devices as well.

The ENS can replace manual maintenance of multiple contact lists, and can help avoid the need to purchase additional systems with similar features.

While many courts have added an emergency callout option to the automated jury information systems (AJIS) used in district courts, that has required complicated export scripts, and called for considerable maintenance.

In addition, AJIS phone lines, housed in courthouses, would be unavailable if an emergency affected telecommunication system. Backup options are possible, but at high cost.

Brian Tucek, systems technology division manager, District of Arizona, said, "With AJIS housed in our Phoenix courthouse, we couldn't meet the standard COOP requirement of an off-site remote server location. For emergency notification purposes we would need another off-site backup AJIS server and the additional phone lines to support it; however, ENS addresses that issue."

Recently, a few courts tested the ENS by calling all employees at their home, work, and personal cell numbers. One court user reported completing more than 400 calls in just over a half hour. By comparison, Melissa Muir, director of administrative services, Western District of Washington, said that a test of that court's AJIS system for emergency notification took nine hours.

System Features
The system replaces complicated internal systems and adds several helpful features:

- Data Integrity. Any invalid or out-of-service numbers are instantly identified. Frequent testing automatically reminds court units they must keep employee contact information up-to-date.
- Confirmation. If requested, the ENS confirms that messages have reached the intended recipient. If an answering machine is reached, the system re-tries over a set period of time.
- Speed. By leveraging more lines than a single court might be able to afford, calls are substantially faster.
- Backup. The ENS software resides on multiple servers in Washington, DC and Virginia, eliminating reliance on court phone systems and providing redundancy that offers courts great cost savings.
- Reporting. The ENS software provides instant reports and updates, identifying whether the call reached the intended recipient, an answering machine, or was not able to make contact. Designated staff can immediately use alternate methods to find those listed as unreachable.
- Available anywhere anytime. Calls can be initiated immediately, from a computer or a blackberry/PDA device. A designated person can initiate a call as simply as typing a message and hitting send. Callers can remotely test messages, verify recipients, and track the status throughout.

Kerekanich described the system his court has used to date: When announcements needed to be made because of an emergency, they have used their land-line phone system to distribute a message. "If the emergency occurred during off hours, for instance during inclement weather," he said, "I would call into our phone message and use its ability to send a voicemail to all court staff voicemail boxes. The staff members knew to check their voicemail by calling in during these times to see if the office was closed or delayed. This was effective with drawbacks — obviously it put the responsibility of checking in on the staff rather than being able to deliver the message directly to them. Plus there was no way to determine if everyone had received the message."

He added, "The ENS will change all that for us. Of course, first we need to make sure staff enter their own correct information in Info Web. Then, we need to develop procedures for use of the system. After we do that, I know it will be much more efficient than what we've had available in the past."