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Niche Technology and DOI software deal connects more than 6,000 officers across the U.S.

Written by Candy Phelps

In one of the largest geographic law enforcement data-sharing deployments in the world, the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) went live in November with Niche Technology Inc.'s Records Management System (RMS) in the implementation of its Incident Management Analysis & Reporting System (IMARS).

The system will eventually support operational policing and data sharing for 6,615 users in the DOI's Office of Law Enforcement and Security, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Reclamation, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the National Park Service. Overall, the DOI has the federal executive branch's third largest police force with responsibility for protecting people, natural and cultural resources, and facilities, on more than 500 million acres of DOI-managed lands, which represents one-fifth of the USA's land mass.

"People are really excited," said Faisal Ahmed, assistant director, Technology Division, Office of Law Enforcement and Security for the DOI. "We gave training to about 500 users to date. Everybody who took the training was highly excited about the software and ready for the roll-out."

Niche RMS is the most widely used operational policing system worldwide and offers users many benefits, including helping to eliminate inefficiencies, introduce new ways of doing business, and ensure that processes already working become even more effective. Niche customers use a single, unified operational policing information system for storing and processing information, allowing them to achieve end-to-end management of incidents and crimes from the initial report through investigation and crime management to prisoner booking and criminal case files. Niche RMS is scalable, functionally rich and highly configurable. "It has huge implications," Ahmed said. "A lot of the people were using paper-based systems or really antiquated systems, so this will make their jobs much easier."

RMS is a single unified system, rather than a collection of modules, and it manages information around an event—from an arrest to an accident. There are core pieces of information about an event, so the system will link any of those pieces together.

"The information-sharing potential of IMARS will greatly enhance the safety of law enforcement officers and the people and lands they protect," said Kim Thorsen, acting deputy assistant secretary for Law Enforcement, Security and Emergency Management, in a press release.

DOI agency members will also benefit from Niche RMS's support for accessing information in a mobile environment. John James, director of operations and business development for Niche Technology, said the database can be accessed from a laptop, touchscreen in a squad car, a PDA or BlackBerry device. "The application is designed to operate in a mobile environment," James said. "Our fundamental system design had that in mind."

One of the reasons Niche's RMS solution was a good fit for the DOI is because of its capabilities in places like national parks and rural areas that have poor connectivity in many areas of the state, James said. "In states like Alaska, there are significant geographical challenges," he said. In many areas, bandwidth is highly limited and unreliable, and officers must be able to conduct incident reporting work on standalone, disconnected computers in remote locations. For example: "Park rangers may be out of connectivity, but they still want them to be able to collect information and be able to upload that information." Niche's software offers that capability, which is one of the reasons they were selected, Ahmed said.

"They are the one who stood up to our very rigorous selection process," which started with 138 commercial vendors and 40 government systems, Ahmed said. The DOI looked very closely at each vendor and software system and narrowed it down by functionality, mandates and various federal requirements.

James said an additional benefit to the Niche software is that the agencies can opt to share information with other Niche customers. In other words, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife officer in Alaska will have the option to share information with the Alaska Department of

Public Safety, which is also a Niche client.

RMS Overview

Niche RMS is a single, unified, operational policing system that manages information in relation to the core policing entities—people, locations, vehicles, organizations (businesses or other groups), incidents (or occurrences) and property/evidence.

Niche RMS is an incident-based system. The main functional areas in Niche RMS are crime management; intelligence management; general incident management; property management; custody/prisoner management; and court case preparation. Even though the data revolves around incidents, Ahmed said, the system can also index information by individual, property and vehicle, which makes it very easy to search for information and connect the dots. There are common information requirements in relation to the location, people involved, vehicles involved or property relevant to the incident—for example, a stolen television, a damaged car or a weapon.

Tasking and workflow functions support the management of an incident in the system: tasking an officer to take a statement, submit a report, etc. An overview of tasks being undertaken in relation to any particular incident, by an individual or a team, offers various options for understanding and reviewing progress on specific investigations or individual workloads. Workflow functions automate the movement of information within the application, creating tasks, changing data security, and performing other actions.

Niche RMS features a sophisticated security model that controls access to information at the domain level (typically a geographical policing area or a single police force in a multi-jurisdictional system) and at the role level (police positions such as patrol officer, supervisor, etc.). Additionally, Access Control Lists (ACLs) can be applied to individual records or groups of records to exercise granular control over who can access what in the system.

James said the role-based security takes into account the “right to know versus a need to know.” For example, an officer has a right to know that an individual he is interacting with has access to a firearm, but he doesn’t need to know where that information came from, James said. When a system is restricted by security clearance, the data will simply not show up in the interface.

Looking Forward

Ahmed said the DOI intends to connect with the FBI eGuardian system in order to keep a closer watch on individuals who may have links to terrorism, which is especially important when protecting some of the nation’s most important monuments and buildings. People who are of interest will be flagged in the system so officers will know how to handle any new interactions with the individuals and take the appropriate action.

The DOI will also explore the option of using the system to help predict and analyze crime trends based on the data collected. But for now, the users and administrators are just excited to get the program set up as a case management system and convert the legacy data as resources are available, Ahmed said. “Once it’s fully functional, it should be one of the top law enforcement reporting systems in the federal government,” Ahmed stated. “I believe it will be a phenomenal system.”

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