

WHY POLICE DEPARTMENTS NEED SMART REPORTING TOOLS

REPORTING IS A TIME CONSUMING, YET NECESSARY PART OF AN OFFICER'S WORK SHIFT. A VETERAN POLICE CHIEF DISCUSSES HOW REPORTING TECHNOLOGY HAS EVOLVED TO PROTECT THE PUBLIC.



PHOTO: NUANCE

While TV shows and movies glamorize policing—making it appear as if officers spend entire shifts chasing down bad guys and busting up crime rings—real officers know that's far from reality.

After spending 38 years policing in Massachusetts, retired Chief Richard Stanley has seen and done it all. While he may have spent part of his days arresting perpetrators and interacting with the community, he dedicated just as much time to completing routine paperwork.

“The bane of every officer's life is paperwork,” he says, citing research that confirms officers can spend about half their shifts on incident reporting and administrative work.

Stanley further explains how reporting demands are growing as mandates, like the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS), require greater detail and more specificity. The good news is agencies are applying technology to make the reporting process more efficient and less burdensome,

particularly when compared to methods used before the digital age.

Stanley recalls how police officers once typed or handwritten reports before moving to rudimentary records management systems (RMS)—which, in his experience, were sometimes even less efficient. “Those early systems were frustrating. We would [often] wind up losing everything when we pressed ‘save’ due to user or early equipment errors,” he says.

Today, officers can submit reports directly from their squad car's MDC,

which eliminates time-consuming trips to the station to file reports. However, these patrol-vehicle-based reporting systems create new health and safety issues, including back problems from non-ergonomic vehicular workstations and limited situational awareness while typing into laptops.

Stanley describes this as a lose-lose situation, given how officers already feel about reporting. “Officers don’t become officers to spend half their shifts typing reports. They want to patrol the community and make a difference.”

As the volume of required paperwork grows, Stanley emphasizes the need for police managers to apply technology to make the process more efficient: “I remember how frustrating it was to miss calls for service or activity on the street because I was doing paperwork. I can only imagine that it’s getting worse.”

“Police officers deserve the best tools available to make them successful and keep them safe,” he says. “Additionally, given the fiduciary responsibility to use appropriated funds responsibly and effectively, police managers should focus on keeping officers on the street doing the work they were hired to do.”

PROMOTING AWARENESS AND SAFETY

To police effectively, it’s just as important to see as to be seen. Yet spending up to half their shifts writing reports and the other half dealing with crime can limit officers’ perspectives. They become less aware of their broader surroundings and less visible in the community, and, worse, when they are seen it’s often associated with an adverse event.

“When we overburden officers with piles of paperwork, they become frustrated, less effective, and burned out,” says Stanley.

In-car reporting technology may increase officers’ omnipresence—but it comes at a price. The “vehicular office” can lead to citizen complaints as well as back problems and other safety concerns for officers. It is not uncommon for a citizen to [incorrectly] assume when they see an officer “heads down” typing a report that they are surfing the web or, worse, dozing on the job. Additionally, “When officers are typing reports, they are not paying attention to their surroundings—

making them more vulnerable,” Stanley explains.

ENSURING REPORT QUALITY

The role of police officers in the criminal justice system extends beyond their response to an initial incident. Prosecution teams rely on officer reports to move proceedings forward—and tight deadlines require officers to file timely incident reports.

“But when duty calls, officers have to leave the station—and their half-finished report—to respond.”

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According to Stanley, “Anytime they’re pulled away, report quality suffers.”

Regardless of where reporting is done, interruptions can cause officers to take a more skeletal approach to their writing. This results in reports that are filled with basic information but lack crucial details that are imperative for a successful prosecution. More than just a way to record complaints, these reports provide essential documentation for both civil and criminal litigation.

“We need officers to tell a detailed story that will stand up in court,” Stanley says. “Remember, if it’s not in the report, it didn’t happen.”

USING TECHNOLOGY TO IMPROVE REPORTING

Today, Stanley is the president of RMS Associates, a consulting firm that partners with the law enforcement community to deliver private-sector solutions to solve law enforcement challenges.

One technology he sees as beneficial is Nuançe® Dragon® Law Enforcement. This speech recognition software helps officers prepare detailed reports three times faster than typing while keeping them more focused on patrol. With powerful dictation capabilities, Dragon

Law Enforcement improves report accuracy and timeliness, speeds data entry, and allows officers to access information such as license plates, using voice commands.

“It’s important not to implement technology just for technology’s sake,” Stanley says. “It needs to adapt to an officer’s workflow—and that’s exactly what Dragon Law Enforcement does. It turns officers into storytellers and allows them to fill in the details while an incident is still fresh in their minds.”

According to Stanley, when police supervisors talk to an officer on the scene, the officer shares detailed information about the incident. But when that same supervisor reviews the written report, it often lacks that same nuanced detail. If the officer hurriedly typed the report, perhaps days after the incident, it is likely not to be as comprehensive as the initial verbal account.

“Dragon Law Enforcement lets officers capture a more compelling story of the scene,” he says. “By inputting the data directly into the system, it eliminates the need for transcription and helps avoid lag time in reporting. Plus, it keeps officers and their attention on the street.”

Ultimately, the real appeal of Dragon Law Enforcement is how it helps police better protect the communities they serve. “Higher visibility and more proactive policing build stronger community relations. That, along with more cruisers on the streets, offers a powerful deterrent effect,” Stanley says.

While policing may never be as glamorous as the movies portray, advanced technology is turning law enforcement into a more fulfilling job. “No matter what your line of work, you want to feel good about what you do,” Stanley observes. ☎



STANLEY

To hear more from Chief Richard Stanley about how technology, including Nuançe Dragon Law Enforcement, can make officers more effective, register for our “3 Ways Tech Can Improve Active

Community Policing” webinar, which will be held on Tuesday, April 28, at 2 p.m. EST, at www.PoliceMag.com/NuançeWebinar