Recommendations Regarding Information System Development in the Superior Court of the Eastern Judicial Circuit, Savannah, Georgia

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE REPORT

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Recommendations Regarding Information System Development in the Superior Court of the Eastern Judicial Circuit, Savannah, Georgia

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ASSIGNMENT DATA SHEET

Technical Assistance No.: 99
Requesting Jurisdiction: Superior Court, Eastern Judicial Circuit (Chatham County)
Requesting Agency: Superior Court, Eastern Judicial Circuit (Chatham County)
Requesting Official: David Rathbone, Court Administrator
Dates of On-Site Study: November 9-10, 1987
Consultant Assigned: Thomas Lane
Central Focus of Study: Direction of Court Automation

This report was prepared in conjunction with the EMT Adjudication Technical Assistance Project, under a Cooperative Agreement with the Bureau of Justice Assistance of the U.S. Department of Justice.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In August 1987, David Rathbone, Court Administrator for the Superior Court for Georgia's Eastern Judicial Circuit (Chatham County), requested BJA's Adjudication Technical Assistance Project (ATAP) of the EMT Group, Inc., to provide technical assistance to guide the Court in its information system development. The Court had been using an automated criminal case management system since 1985 with considerable success in reducing case processing time. However, before proceeding with further system development, technical assistance was desired to address the following tasks:

- to assess the efficiency and effectiveness of the system,
- to make determinations regarding the system's expansion to civil case processing, and
- to determine in what direction this automated case management system should be proceeding.

Additional objectives for the technical assistance were to identify present staff needs and staff needs to expand the automated program to civil litigation and to plan for and implement an automated civil system.

The ATAP assigned Thomas Lane, a caseflow management and systems specialist, to respond to this request. Mr. Lane conducted a site visit to the Court on November 9 and 10, 1987, at which time he met with Mr. Rathbone and the following other individuals:

Fran Armsdorf, County Data Processing Analyst  
Laura Thompson, County Data Processing Analyst  
Charlene Harrall, Chief, Case Management  
Judge Brannen

Mr. Lane also reviewed various background materials relating to the Court's caseflow and information system, including the following:

- Court Case Management portion of UNISYS Proposal  
- Recommendations (For FAST TRACK enhancements) for EMT Group review  
- 2200 System Acquisition Considerations  
- Various FAST TRACK outputs and procedures  
- Court Caseload statistical reports
II. EXISTING SITUATION

The Superior Court in Chatham County (Savannah) serves a population of approximately 250,000 with five general jurisdiction judges. About 4,000 civil and 1,500 criminal cases will be filed this year and will be disposed in a timely manner. Managerial statistics, including aging of pending cases, are excellent.

The court relies on an automated caseflow management system called FAST TRACK operating on the city Sperry 1100. Although the system "...was created without benefit of any systems analysis, feasibility study or needs and goals assessment," it is extensively employed in criminal case processing and to a lesser extent in civil case processing. The manual dockets have been displaced by the automation and all necessary calendars and reports are produced by the system.

Shortly before the consultant's visit, the County accepted a proposal from UNISYS Corporation for the purchase of a mainframe computer (model 2200), and associated software for approximately one million dollars. UNISYS will develop all the necessary software for an Integrated Enforcement and Judicial System for the County which will include:

- prosecution case management
- warrant tracking
- booking
- jail administration management
- court case management

as part of the package.

As a result of this development, the consultant focused on issues facing the Superior Court as a partner in this venture. Raising such issues frequently can have a negative connotation although none is here implied and the intent is merely to advise the court in advance so that a successful conclusion to the automation project can be achieved.

Operation of the present system by personnel under the Court Administrator appears somewhat cumbersome for data entry requiring considerable knowledge on the part of the data entry operator as well as repetitious keystrokes. As is typical with most systems in courts, staff have become more computer literate and now request changes and enhancements to improve the systems operational utility. The Court data processing staff accommodate these requests when they are able to, but are limited by their own programming resources and Mapper, the programming language, constraints. In summary, although the design is somewhat dated, the FAST TRACK system provides valuable
information support to the court. The court, in this sense, has something to lose if the integrated replacement does not provide more than the existing system. It is in an effort to protect against this potential for loss, that the Findings and Recommendations which follow are made.
III. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The present situation provides an opportunity for the Court to advance its use of automation even further. However, in order to take maximum advantage of this opportunity, steps must be taken now and during the conduct of the project developing the integrated system, to ensure that the information needs of the Court are provided and that control over processing court data remains with the court. Specific issues/concerns to be addressed are:

1. Adequacy of "converting" the present system.

   The proposed design for the court component of the Integrated System is a replay of existing FAST TRACK capabilities; yet the court staff have enumerated changes and enhancements they desire and have not pressed for changes which they desire but believe Mapper cannot accommodate.

   The Integrated System will not be a simple extension of FAST TRACK, but will require a complete redesign and rewrite to accommodate all the new functionality (jail, prosecution, etc.) in an efficient manner. Therefore, court staff should start tabula rosa and think expansively in terms of their requirements for information support. They ought not be confined by the functionality and operation of the existing system, and they should consider their own productivity important in setting forth requirements.

   To facilitate this process, other systems could be visited and observed and an expert in court automation could be brought in for a brainstorming session with court staff. Requirements must be articulated in writing for consideration by the project team in setting design objectives for the court component and in balancing these with the objectives of other agencies.

2. The Integrated System approach presents a risk to the court.

   At present, the court has control over the entry of data into the FAST TRACK system. Under the Integrated concept, the court will not enter much of the data it uses, but will rely instead on the data entered by the Sheriff and Prosecutor. While this is conceptually beneficial, it can present practical and political problems. A priori interagency agreement concerning responsibilities and use of data (e.g., Prosecutor producing reports on judicial sentencing) ought to be seriously considered. An interagency steering committee for policy and control will also be desirable. The court might want to go through the mental exercise of considering what it would do if the shared system relationship proves unharmonious.
3. System Development is frequently more risky and costly than originally thought.

The new system is a diverse set of expectations that must be melded together and will involve tradeoffs, bugs and omissions. There will be inherent tensions between the user committee's desire to obtain the most comprehensive system possible and the Unisys project team's need for finality and "bottom line" orientation. The keys to an effective working relationship will be a clear definition of:

- the scope and objectives of the design
- acceptance testing criteria
- parallel runs and implementation planning
- data conversion, scope and cost
- roles and responsibilities.

For the court, it will be important for the design to provide flexibility and growth in areas such as:

- the numbers and types of participants associated with a case
- numbers and types of case events/proceedings
- maintenance of history of all events, including continuances
- system stored knowledge of the legal process in tables/files (not in program code)
- scheduling information on as many of the case participants as the court desires, but certainly on attorneys.

An equally important consideration will be how the system operates in terms of the knowledge and effort required of the data entry operators and the ease of use for the casual system user in making cross case inquiries.

4. The importance of project organization and scheduling.

Since control over the project will not lie with a single person, it is important to establish responsibilities for project deliverables, reviews and acceptances. A schedule with tasks and milestones and review meetings is also important, so that momentum can be maintained despite personnel turnovers and inevitable obstacles. Strong leadership will be required from planning through implementation.
IV. CONCLUSIONS

The court has been presented with an opportunity to build upon its already strong case processing and management information system capabilities by sharing in the development and operation of an integrated, multi-agency system.

However, existing design specification is inadequate and not expansive enough to take the court to the next generation of systems. The County data processing staff, while very competent, will be relying on the hardware vendor for technical decisions, and in some instances, programming, as well. The project will be quite complex technically and managerially since it involves shared database(s), multiple agencies for review and acceptance, testing, training and data conversion.

A significant portion of the court's workload lies in the non-criminal cases, of little interest to the other participating agencies.

The court must take a proactive stance, if not outright leadership, and must:

- articulate and promote its information needs beyond the current FAST TRACK;
- protect against loss of current FAST TRACK capabilities.