Recommendations
to the
Rockdale County, Georgia Superior Court
Regarding Information System Planning

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE REPORT

Bureau of Justice Assistance
CRIMINAL COURTS TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROJECT
A Joint Program of the Bureau of Justice Assistance, U.S. Department of Justice, and American University School of Public Affairs
Recommendations
to the
Rockdale County, Georgia Superior Court
Regarding Information System Planning

April 1988

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Prepared Under BJA Cooperative Agreement No. 87-DD-CX-K061
ASSIGNMENT DATA SHEET

Technical Assistance No. 78
Requesting Jurisdiction: Rockdale County, Georgia
Requesting Agency: Rockdale Superior Court
Requesting Official: Ms. Joanne Caldwell
Clerk of the Rockdale Superior Court
Dates of On-Site Study: March 31, 1988
Consultants Assigned: Mark A. Zaffarano and Larry Polansky
Central Focus of Study: Information System Planning

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 1986, Rockdale County, Georgia, received JAA Block Grant funds to develop a computerized information system for justice system agencies in the County including the offices of the Sheriff, District Attorney, Magistrate Court, State Court, and Superior Court. Each of these agencies agreed to pool the JAA grant funds awarded to their individual agencies, with additional County resources, in an effort to develop an integrated county-wide criminal justice information system. Simultaneous with this information system development effort, the County also embarked on a Court Delay Reduction program, with several court officials attending a Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) National Workshop on Court Delay Reduction conducted by the National Center for State Courts/Institute for Court Management in Atlanta, in December, 1986.

To provide initial planning for this system, the County hired Scoggins and Associates, a private consultant organization, to assess the information system needs of the criminal justice system agencies involved in the system's development. In performing this task, Scoggins and Associates prepared an information system Master Plan and Request for Proposals (RFP) to serve as the basis for vendor responses to the criminal justice information system needs identified.

In order to assure that the Court's information system needs were adequately addressed in this needs assessment process and to assist the Court in more informatively participating in the vendor's information system development effort, Ms. Joanne Caldwell, Clerk of the Rockdale Superior Court, requested technical assistance from the EMT Group's BJA-sponsored Adjudication Technical Assistance Project (ATAP). The purpose of this assistance was to review the needs assessment and to meet with the task force of local criminal justice officials established for the information system project to discuss their information system needs and the information support which should be provided to the Court Delay Reduction Program underway.

Ms. Caldwell initially submitted this technical assistance request in April 1987 but provision of the requested assistance was deferred until completion of the needs assessment. Although it was envisioned that the Court would review the needs assessment before the County's issuance of an RFP, the results of the needs assessment were incorporated into the Master Plan and RFP, both of which were published in late February 1988, with vendor responses due by March 31, 1988. In order to review the
justice system information needs within this timeframe for the proposal solicitation process, the ATAP consultants reviewed the Master Plan and RFP and conducted the site visit during March.
II. METHODOLOGY

In response to Ms. Caldwell's request, the ATAP assigned Mark A. Zaffarano, Administrator of the Fairfax County, Virginia Circuit Court and experienced with court information system development, to provide the requisite assistance. In mid-March, Mr. Zaffarano reviewed the Master Plan and RFP and conducted a site visit to Rockland County on March 31, 1988. In addition, the ATAP requested Larry P. Polansky, Executive Officer for the District of Columbia Superior Court and a national expert on court computer planning and usage, to review the Master Plan and RFP and to discuss his findings with Mr. Zaffarano prior to the site visit.

During the site visit, Mr. Zaffarano met with the following Rockdale County officials in full-group session:

- Robert Mumford, District Attorney
- Hon. Hyrum Pierce, Magistrate's Court
- Michael Edge, Sheriff's Office
- Hon. Sidney L. Nations, State Court
- Richard Jugar, District-wide Court Administrator
- Ms. Joanne Caldwell, Clerk of the Superior Court and State Court

In addition, Mr. Zaffarano met with the following officials in individual meetings:

- Hon. Clarence Vaughn, Superior Court
- Lillis Hanson, Clerk of Magistrate's Court

Except for Mr. Jugar, all of these individuals were members of the Rockdale County Criminal Justice Information Committee (CJIC) involved in developing the local criminal justice information system. Although the individual CJIC members are very concerned with the information system development effort, as of this date, the Committee has only begun to address these tasks as a collective body.

While on site, Mr. Zaffarano also spoke with various employees regarding their assigned tasks.

The report which follows summarizes the consultants' review of the Master Plan and RFP, Mr. Zaffarano's discussions with local officials regarding information system needs and his assessment of the degree to which they are adequately addressed by these documents. Section III summarizes the most serious concerns relating to the adequacy of the information system development effort to date which this technical assistance effort
has raised. The recommendations presented in Section IV are designed to focus attention on the most pressing tasks which Rockdale County should address to respond to these concerns before further action is taken to launch the information system development effort.
III. ANALYSIS OF EXISTING SITUATION

A. Rockdale County Information System Objectives

The Rockdale County Court system supports a population of approximately 50,000 persons living close to Atlanta. It is projected that this small community will experience rapid population growth within the next five years. A neighboring county is already deemed the fastest growing county in the country.

Currently, the Court is monitoring its caseload through a manual system by mailing a paper summary of case actions at case initiation, one intermediate point and at case disposition. The Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) then keypunches this information and provides management reports to the County as part of a Court Delay Reduction Program funded under a separate JAA grant.

All three courts in the County collect statistical caseload information manually. Recently, legislation increased the workload of the Magistrate Court by imposing additional processing requirements. In addition, an influx of migratory workers from Texas has moved to Georgia and are actively engaged in drug usage and trafficking. Their spill-over into Rockdale County will result in an increase in the drug caseload of the local courts. The District-wide Court Administrator's Office has assigned an employee to the Superior Court to enter civil caseload data into a personal computer to provide more accurate and timely caseflow information to the AOC. This employee is able to generate various caseload statistical reports which the AOC requires on a monthly basis, but does not provide any significant information system assistance for the day-to-day operations of the Court.

In light of the current data collection needs of the Court and the anticipated growth of the County, Court officials want to produce an integrated court information system now in order to be in a favorable position to manage not only their increasing current workload, but also that resulting from the anticipated suburban growth which should arrive within the next two years.

There appears to be a significant degree of cooperation between all agencies within the Rockdale County criminal justice system. While this favorable political environment continues and while the total criminal justice system remains manageable in terms of total size and complexity, it appears to be an excellent opportunity to introduce significant changes in the policies, local practices, and administrative procedures of each agency. The implementation of an automated system will encourage each agency to reevaluate its current operating performance. All officials who met with the consultant
indicated their sincere willingness to make such changes and to suggest amendments or alternatives to their agencies organization which would be necessary to promote the efficient and proper administration of justice within the county. A significant level of concern, however, was expressed by all individuals interviewed that these changes would require considerable financial assistance from the local Board of Commissioners.

B. Current Information System Activities

Each agency appears to be utilizing a few limited data processing/word processing applications. For example, the Clerk’s Office has automated the jury selection process. The District Attorney has purchased from Omega Systems a limited data processing system to track cases, although this system appears cumbersome. The system provides limited information unless several screens are chosen in a specific order of input. The Sheriff's Office appears to have the most significant amount of data processing/word processing applications, which include an automated dispatching system. The Sheriff has assigned one employee, Michael Edge, to devote a significant portion of his work week to implementing the new automation applications for the office. No other agency, however, has sufficient staff to assign someone the sole, full-time responsibility for learning about the process of information system development. Unfortunately, the County does not have a trained staff of computer programmers which agencies may utilize. Instead, significant data processing work must be contracted out and the hardware leased from vendors.

"... One reaches the conclusion that a combination of consultant support with professional in-house staffing is the proper solution. ... It is a great temptation for the court professional who is a novice in the data processing area to pay an outsider to prepare a complete information system and then to turn it over to the court as a running system, ... when this occurs usually no system expertise remains with the user organization. ..."1

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C. Concerns Regarding Information System Planning Efforts To Date

As a result of the efforts of Scoggins and Associates, the private consultant hired by the County to develop the Master Plan and RFP, all interested vendors were required to submit proposals to develop the County criminal justice information system by March 31, 1988. It appears that the County must release the grant funds by August 1988. Local officials expressed concern, however, that the pressure to act quickly in order to keep pace with this schedule may result in failure to adequately address both the information system needs of the participating agencies and the mechanisms for their integration and coordination. The CJIC was also concerned that the two previous meetings it had held with the private consultant had not adequately addressed the following tasks which were considered essential before further information system planning took place:

1. The conduct of a tracking analysis which involves the complete flow charting of all major activities within each agency, clarifying all of the processing points in the paperflow process and, in addition, identifying the various points of organizational responsibility and control.

   This detailed flow charting of office functions should be completed for each agency prior to the award of the total contract to a vendor. The analysis of the paperflow throughout the system will serve to convince agency officials that the majority of their daily requirements for automation can be addressed more efficiently by the proposed automated system and will generate greater confidence that the project is responding to them. This systems analysis will also prove to local officials that their current operations are thoroughly understood by those who are determining the system requirements and who will be responsible for monitoring and implementing the project.

2. The setting of realistic module implementation timetables and plans for all user agencies. (There has apparently been no communication between the criminal justice agencies, the County and the private consultant in this regard);

3. A determination as to why the RFP was not sent to some of the vendors requested to be contacted;

4. A determination of the amount and level of service of computer training to be provided. For example, to what degree will the selected vendor be required to provide adequate training support during the entire life span of the project? To what extent will each agency be responsible for training its staff and to what level of funding will the County Commissioners support this training? Will the grant funds have to include training costs?
5. A determination regarding the hiring of a full-time criminal justice information systems coordinator.

During the course of the consultant's site visit, local officials expressed the desire to hire a full-time individual who would keep the CJIC informed about the progress of the project and monitor vendor performance. Currently, Court officials are kept so busy that they cannot devote even a portion of their daily time to this project. For example, Ms. Caldwell serves the Court as a courtroom clerk in addition to her other official duties as Clerk of the Court. Likewise, Richard Jugar, the District-wide administrator, indicated he could not devote any significant amount of time to the project and complete all of his other assigned tasks and responsibilities in Rockdale and the other counties he serves.

It does not appear appropriate for local criminal justice system officials to delegate monitoring responsibility for the project to Scoggins and Associates during the first year of implementation, as was originally suggested in the Executive Summary of the Master Plan. The CJIC is therefore considering two options: (1) hiring a current employee who knows how the current criminal justice system operates and then sending this individual for specific training on computer information system applications; or (2) hiring an individual with sufficient computer expertise and then having that person trained regarding the functions and activities of each agency.

6. A refinement of the scope of work (which appears too broad) and the timeframe for its performance (which appears too short) outlined in the "Rockdale County Judicial System Implementation Schedule" on Page 36;

7. Resolution of numerous security issues. For example, the District Attorney has questions about the level of access to certain types of information contained within his office which the Public Defender has indicated he would like to obtain. Likewise, the Sheriff has some questions concerning the use of passwords and the restriction of access to certain modules contained within his current decentralized information network.

8. Improving communication between those determining system requirements and the criminal justice agencies involved.

There appears to have been inadequate direct feedback received by each agency from Scoggins and Associates prior to the release of both The Executive Summary of the Judicial Information System Master Plan and the RFP. For example, the Clerk of Superior Court is concerned that a discussion about the fines and court costs collection
process, which is connected, and which entails the interface of her office and the Adult Probation Office, was not adequately treated in the report. The CJIC realizes that there must be more meaningful dialogue on a regularly scheduled basis in order for this project to yield positive results.

9. A determination by the CJIC as to what data processing features should remain a high priority to the users and which elements should be designated as lower priorities for implementation purposes in subsequent years. For example, several Rockdale County officials commented that the case management module, and the work processing module, should be designed and operational prior to the introduction of electronic mail.

10. Identification of which data processing functions within each office which can function as stand-alone systems without connection to the new criminal justice information system. These functions are generally those which can operate within each agency separate from work activities processed and linked with other agencies. These functions must be clearly identified now. On the other hand, there are other data elements, such as creating a master criminal justice defendant name index, which must be viewed as an integrated task necessary for all users.

11. A revision of the Master Plan to better reflect the information system needs of the individual agencies and the local justice system, after more substantive discussions with officials in each agency upgrading their functions and workload, and after completion of the tracking analysis recommended above. Particular attention should be given to the requirements imposed by each agency's workload and organization. For example, during the consultant's site visit, comment was made regarding the following hardware needs referenced in the Report;

(a) the number of point-of-sale cash registers as estimated is too low;
(b) a laser printer is needed for Judge Vaughn's office for use in preparing court orders;
(c) a minimum of one CRT should be included for each agency and located at the public counter for citizens to utilize;
(d) The Sheriff's Office estimates it will need a minimum of 20 CRT's;
(e) The District Attorney's Office estimates it will need a minimum of 7 CRT's;
12. The need to incorporate record retention schedules within the Master Plan. The Sheriff's Office and other agencies view records management as a critical element within the overall case management module. In addition, the CJIC should inform Scoggins and Associates, as well as the selected vendor, regarding the specific time periods established for retention of each court record so that filed papers can be converted by CRT's into automated records complete with specific directories organized by name and file number.

13. Adequate consideration as to how the system will respond to the use of a unique identifying case numbering system. The CJIC should discuss the concept of adopting an integrated numbering system. If it decides not to use a special identifying number, then it must determine what other alternative systems would be acceptable for all users. One committee member has suggested retention of the present numbering system with subsequent augmentation with a cross-reference numbering system.

14. The need for the County Commissioners to insert into the final negotiated contract a penalty clause for either late or poor performance by the selected vendor. This clause must be explained during the negotiation process and agreed to prior to final vendor selection. Likewise, a propriety clause should be incorporated within the contract which will state the following:

"... all software programs developed will remain the sole property of the County..."

15. A decision regarding staffing requirements required for the process of converting from manual to electronic files. CJIC members are undecided as whether or not they may need to hire temporary staff to complete the conversion. Other possibilities include asking the permanent staff to work on weekends or to contract the task to a company with supervision provided by existing staff. If possible, while the conversion is taking place, it would be helpful for some employees to begin their user training.

16. The provision of adequate information in the RFP regarding criminal justice agency operations to prompt meaningful vendor responses. As of March 31, 1988, approximately six companies submitted bids for the proposed information system project. These written proposals varied in specific detail and level of understanding about the
County's information system needs. These problems are likely the result of inadequate detail in the Master Plan and RFP. This lack of understanding may well require resubmissions by the vendors, based on more adequate information concerning the proposed project.

17. The need for the CJIC to meet with individuals within each agency and determine collectively within the Committee the type of management information reports desired from the new information system. The Committee should then submit specific design examples to Scoggins and Associates as well as to potential vendors.
IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the CJIC's concerns summarized above, and the tasks which must be addressed before the information system development effort can be launched, the following recommendations are submitted:

1. The County must make known the level of resources and support available for the information system development project. Clearly, this determination will require a detailed needs analysis, covering many of the items covered in the CJIC's concerns noted above. Once the scope of system requirements is defined and the level of resources available is determined, meaningful information system planning can take place.

2. The CJIC should meet immediately with Scoggins and Associates to develop a revised timetable for performing this project which reflects the scope of preliminary work to be performed and specific deadlines which all parties agree to follow.

3. The Chief Judge of the Superior Court should be designated Chairman of the CJIC. Judge Vaughn should articulate on behalf of the Committee what revisions need to be made to the Master Plan and to any new RFP drafted.

4. Scoggins and Associates should personally meet with a representative from each agency to discuss information system needs not addressed in the Master Plan and RFP and to review the unresolved security issues.

5. The Public Defender should be asked to attend all future meetings of the CJIC.

6. Scoggins and Associates should either complete the detailed flow charting analysis or hire a court consultant to perform this work. If Scoggins and Associates does not intend to do this work, the CJIC must decide if it should hire its own consultant to accomplish this task prior to final selection of the vendor.

7. As part of maintaining a more continuous dialogue with all agency officials, Scoggins and Associates should discuss any other outstanding problems with a representative of each agency.

8. The CJIC should priority rank which modules within each agency should be implemented first. Then the Committee must decide which agency or agencies should have the first vendor contact and which agency or agencies would be the last one(s) to be tied into the on-line system.
9. If initial cost estimates were inaccurate, then the CJIC should examine which functional areas of the participating offices could be omitted from the project during the first two years of the project. These special areas must, of course, be capable of operating independently.

10. The Master Plan must be revised immediately to reflect the concerns of the local agencies noted above.

11. The Master Plan does not clearly articulate the role of automated case records as a significant component of the case management system. Each agency has records management problems which should be addressed vis-a-vis the automation plan. The CJIC must determine whether the records problems are so serious as to require that separate systems be developed later.

12. The CJIC should ascertain the names of counties where integrated information systems have been developed and contact these counties regarding current system development issues, such as numbering options.

13. The CJIC should determine which members will be selected to negotiate the contract with the vendor and with other County officials. These individuals should consider what type of contract should be written and seek advice from experts regarding contract options.

14. A file conversion plan with specific time deadlines for implementation should be established. Key individuals should be identified with specific responsibilities regarding the performance of this plan.

15. The references listed by each vendor should be contacted to assess their previous court automation experience and expertise. If possible, the CJIC should visit actual site installations implemented by the two vendor finalists before a final selection decision is made. The criteria for vendor selection must be based on many factors and reflect more than the single "low bidder" requirement.

16. If the CJIC does not feel comfortable about proceeding to select a vendor now, then it should not allow existing time constraints to dictate a decision regarding either the necessity for revising parts of the Master Plan or for re-bidding the project.

17. The CJIC should contact other counties to obtain actual examples of useful management information reports.

18. The CJIC should convince the County to hire a systems coordinator for this project. Each agency could share in the total cost to create this position. Likewise, the CJIC should insist that the selected vendor provide at least a minimum of one year of system programming support for a specified fee. If this cannot be accomplished, then
the Court should hire its own coordinator who could receive further continuing education and training when the total project is completed so as to then be in a position to serve as the Court's permanent systems analyst/programmer.
V. SUMMARY

If the Rockdale County project is to succeed, there must be greater analysis of individual agency operations and information needs as well as more overall project planning and interagency coordination. The CJIC committee desires to create a new information system which will contain a state-of-the-art design. The Committee has reasonable goals and the proper outlook toward understanding the potential benefits of automation and adapting them to local criminal justice operation. However, the ability to acquire adequate staffing resources to support this project will remain a key issue. While each agency leader understands his/her agency's mission, its procedures, and problems, these leaders need assistance in determining how to develop an integrated system which links their individual agency operations and how to work with sophisticated computer vendors.

The CJIC needs as much administrative and technical support as possible, whether it can be provided from the District Court Administrator or through other sources. Given available resources and support, system priorities must be set and an appropriate timetable for system development determined. For example, it may be desirable to omit the Juvenile Court segment of the project until such time as the other agencies have been brought into the automated network.

Regardless of the system requirements identified and timetable developed, it is essential that close communication be maintained between those responsible for system development and the system users in order to assure that information planning adequately addresses local justice system needs.