

Case solved: electronic records system transforms juvenile division of San Diego County's DA Office

Developed by HP, the Justice Electronic Library System eliminates paper, supports more effective case management and streamlines courtroom proceedings

San Diego County

“HP brings solutions that enable us to reach our goals and our mission. Our relationship helps us think and strategize about innovation and solutions that excite county employees, and provide services to our staff and our customers.”

—Harold Tuck, chief information officer, County of San Diego

HP customer case study

San Diego County partners with HP to replace its juvenile court paper-based case files with an electronic document management system

Industry

Public sector

Objective

Enable more efficient, cost-effective management of juvenile court case records

Approach

Collaborate with HP to design an electronic records management system that replaced the existing, unwieldy paper-based processes

IT improvements

- Users have faster, more efficient access to documents, streamlining workflows and freeing staff to focus on higher priority tasks instead of filing and retrieving paper records
- Attorneys can now go into court paperless, confident that they are faster and more efficient with electronic files than the old paper ones.
- Files are more secure, helping to protect case confidentiality

Business benefits

- Six FTEs, representing \$300,000 to \$400,000 in annual labor costs, can be re-allocated from managing paper to more meaningful work, which improves the county's ability to offer high-level services to the community
- Paper purchasing costs reduced by \$50,000 per year, freeing budget resources for other county priorities
- Attorneys able to focus more time on cases, improving their ability to fulfill the DA Office responsibilities



Every year, the 21 Deputy District Attorneys working for the Juvenile Division of the District Attorney's (DA) Office in San Diego County make around 25,000 court appearances. Their cases involve every manner of crime, from minor offences like graffiti and traffic violations to serious crimes like sexual assault and homicide. But regardless of the offense, all of these cases have one thing in common: a defendant who was under age 18 when the crime was committed. And for that reason, the DA Office adheres to processes and protocols that recognize the juvenile offenders' minor status. Records are kept confidential. The processing of cases is coordinated with agencies that offer rehabilitation services such as drug counseling.

Efficiency is another priority, both to prevent court backlogs and to ensure juvenile offenders who need help get it as soon as possible.

Until recently, however, San Diego County's DA Office had an enormous problem: paper.



Customer solution at a glance

Application

Applications development

HP Services

- HP Applications Development Services

A million pieces of paper per year

Juvenile cases generate huge numbers of documents. In addition to police and court reports, there may be probation files, case evaluations, medical reports, school records and child welfare records. Often juveniles have multiple court appearances, adding exponentially to the volume of documents.

Many of these records are generated electronically, but the DA Office had no way to accept or distribute electronic versions. Instead, they were printed by the numerous agencies involved in this process and shared in hardcopy format. The result was a mountain of paper; over a million pieces were generated per year. Files associated with some cases were so bulky they had to be wheeled to court in boxes.

Managing all of that paper was unwieldy, to say the least. Several clerical employees were dedicated full-time to filing, retrieving and distributing paper records. Often, multiple parties—lawyers, investigators, paralegals—needed to work on files at the same time, so complex protocols had to be followed to govern access. Files were occasionally misplaced, which hampered attorneys' abilities to process cases in a timely manner. And during court appearances, Deputy DAs, who handle 20 or more cases per court session, struggled to keep case records in order. "You'd spend half your time just picking up the files, figuring out which file they were talking about, which document you needed to pull from the stack," says Michele Linley, Deputy DA, San Diego County. "And you had to do that with every case."

The office knew it should switch to electronic records, but the transition was easier said than done. "It's no trick to deliver paper electronically," notes Susan Green, assistant chief information officer, San Diego County. "The trick is to put it in a form the attorneys can take into court. Lawyers have been doing work with paper for literally hundreds of years. If electronic records are not in a form that's easier and faster to use than hardcopy files, they won't use them. They'll print them out and your project will be a failure."

And in fact, that's exactly what had happened when the DA Office previously tried to convert to electronic documents. "We tried paperless systems," says Linley. "They didn't work. They were not user-friendly."

Still, San Diego County knew there had to be a solution, so it turned to its technology partner—HP.

"HP knows and understands our vision"

San Diego County first outsourced its IT operations in 1999. HP has been serving the county since the 1990's, however since 2011, HP has been its sole outsourcing provider, managing the county's servers, desktops, networks, applications development and help desk.

It's a landmark relationship in several respects. San Diego County is the fifth largest county in the United States—larger, in terms of residents (3.1 million) than some U.S. states. As is typical for California, the county government offers many health, human and law enforcement services that are regulated elsewhere at the state level. To support this breadth of services, the county's payroll includes 16,000 employees. If it were a private enterprise, it would rank as one of the top 1,000 largest U.S. employers.

In addition to its size, San Diego County is also unique in its approach to IT. "We are a forward-thinking, progressive government that also values technology," Green notes. And for that reason, she adds, "we were the first and the largest government agency to completely outsource all of our technology."

As an outsourcing provider, HP is an ideal partner—and not just because it meets its Service Level Agreements. The value runs deeper. "Hewlett-Packard understands sustaining local government business better than any other vendor that we know of," explains Harold Tuck, chief information officer, County of San Diego. "We have a great working relationship. It's very collaborative. HP knows and understands our vision, and that is illustrated by their awareness and knowledge of IT strategic planning."

Then Tuck expanded that vision to include a paperless DA Office. "I was convinced that if we did this right, our District Attorney's Office could go into the courtroom with just a tablet or a laptop," Tuck says. "The tools existed. All we needed was to bring the people together and do it."

So Tuck gave the green light to the Justice Electronic Library System (JELS), and HP began developing a first version to support the county's Juvenile Justice partners, which included the DA Office's Juvenile Division.

Collaborative approach ensures usability and acceptance

From the start, HP knew that developing JELS was an enormous undertaking. After all, it must accommodate over 1.3 million documents which come from a wide variety of sources and in a wide variety of file formats. A number of separate organizations—district attorney, probation, public defender, alternate public defender, and separate county contract panel attorneys—must have access to it. And for ethical reasons, each of these organizations needs its own, unique portal with its own separate and secure document repository.

But the most overriding concern was usability. JELS had to meet the DA Office and the other county attorneys' needs both functionally and in terms of ease-of-use. It was therefore critical that HP collaborate with those attorneys throughout the application's eight-month development cycle.

However, those attorneys are also very busy. It wasn't feasible to ask them to focus full-time on specifying and testing software. So instead, HP took an iterative approach that gave attorneys the opportunity to provide input incrementally.

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Harold Tuck, chief information officer,
County of San Diego

The attorneys in the DA's Office embraced the opportunity to partner on the software's design. “We explained that we needed to build the courtroom portion first,” recalls Mark Whitmore, Deputy DA, County of San Diego. “It created some development challenges for HP. We would tell them how we wanted it to operate. They would program it. We'd take it to court. Some parts would work, some wouldn't, and we'd come back and say ‘Okay, we need to change this.’ And HP was very accommodating.”

“One of HP's key strengths is its overall philosophy,” adds Green. “We're in this as a team. I can say, ‘Look, I've got a problem. How do we solve this?’ And we put together a small team, and worked back and forth. It's very fluid, very agile, very team-oriented.”

The result of this teamwork was a platform the attorneys quickly embraced. JELS is built on Microsoft® SharePoint®, and leverages that software's site creation, document library and workflow features. But unlike most SharePoint deployments, which typically focus on document storage, JELS also supports user-friendly, in-court use of these documents. Called an “e-briefcase,” this feature lets attorneys easily copy electronic case files onto their laptops. The e-briefcase files are searchable and they can be amended using Adobe Acrobat. Attorneys can also append notes to them, which is helpful for maintaining their confidential records of court proceedings.

JELS is also highly secure. Each organization that has access to it works through its own, dedicated web portal. This ensures that information generated by, the DA Office, for instance, can't be viewed by other JELS users, such as the Public Defender, who might be adversaries.

Information “faster than anybody”

Having court files in electronic form is a tremendous help to attorneys during court appearances. “Now, the judge calls a case, you pull up the name on your computer and there are the files,” says Deputy DA Linley. “It's very intuitive. Even people who were introduced to computers later in life have no problems catching onto the JELS system.”

Because the attorneys can find information more quickly, it helps to streamline court appearances. “We are the fastest in the courtroom,” notes Deputy DA Whitmore. “We can get to our information faster than anybody.” The justices appreciate the attorneys' efficiency. More efficient courtroom proceedings are also good for the community; it helps clear juvenile court dockets and speeds processing of juvenile offenders.

Outside the courtroom, JELS helps attorneys manage cases more effectively. When files associated with cases are submitted to the DA Office, they are available immediately. Because files can be easily searched and accessed, attorneys can focus on the casework itself.

JELS eliminates old worries about who could use paper files and when. As a result, attorneys can be more flexible as well as more mobile. “I can go home, and immediately call up my files,” says Whitmore. “I can call up my paralegal or my investigator, and we can work on the files at the same time.”

Working off-site also no longer puts files at risk from a security standpoint. “Before,” says Linley, “you'd take the file with you, and you'd worry. If I stop at the store, can I leave my file in the car? Do I need to carry it with me? If I do carry it, will things fall out? Now they are

all in my computer. They are easier to carry around, and safer, because you have to log in to view them.”

JELS also protects case files by backing them up. Working copies are stored at the server, on the network, and downloaded to the laptop a day before the scheduled court hearing. This significantly reduces the risk that documents will be lost, which also improves attorneys’ peace of mind. After all, Deputy DAs walk into court knowing that if anything goes wrong, “people could be released who should not be released,” says Whitmore. But with JELS, Whitmore knows every document he’s prepared for his cases will be there when he needs it. “We sleep well,” he says. “The whole system could go down, but it won’t matter. We even have backup laptops.”

Another benefit of JELS is financial: it helps San Diego County allocate its budget dollars in ways that better serve the community. Including all of the agencies that participate in the Juvenile Justice process, the county required six full time employees to manage its paper records. This represented \$300,000 to \$400,000 in annual labor costs. Once JELS was up and running, the county was able to re-allocate those staff to other jobs. “They’re now doing more meaningful work than just lugging around paper,” notes Assistant CIO Green.

The solution also reduced the county’s paper purchasing costs by \$50,000 per year. It will avoid future costs associated with archiving paper records.

Reinvesting savings to drive transformation

In addition to JELS, which is now being expanded to other San Diego County agencies, HP is working with the county on a number of other initiatives. A phone technology project will make it easier for citizens to access county websites from mobile devices. HP is also building the county a virtual private cloud platform. The cloud solution will let the county host applications more flexibly and cost-effectively. It will be easier to scale up applications resources temporarily if needed. It will be easier to predict IT costs. “We’ll be better stewards of taxpayer dollars,” notes CIO Tuck.

“We’re continually improving,” Tuck adds. “And that’s why it’s good to do business with Hewlett-Packard. Through our partnership, we generate savings and reinvest them back into information technology. We’re engaged in transformational activities.”

The JELS project exemplifies that ethos. “The first time I saw the JELS system prototype and demo I was excited, because the vision is now a reality,” Tuck concludes. “It’s going to grow, and quite frankly, it’s going to be a legacy. And that legacy and the whole system is something of which we can all be proud.”

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