City of Arlington Citizen Notification Service and CrimeWeb

Summary

The City of Arlington embraces the concept of open and efficient communication between all levels of city government and the citizens served. Law enforcement officials recognize their responsibility in alerting the public of threats to their personal safety and to their homes and property. In keeping with those commitments, the city has instituted two powerful and unique communication tools. The first, CrimeWeb, is a national, web-based clearinghouse used by the police department to distribute critical public safety information to citizens. CrimeWeb was instituted in Arlington in 2005, and quickly became the most efficient and effective method of information dissemination for the police department.

In 2006, city leaders made the important decision to build on the success of CrimeWeb by building a customized, citywide web-based portal to allow all units of government to communicate directly with the citizenry.

Due to the dependability and performance of CrimeWeb, the city contracted with the vendor to design and build the Arlington Citizen Notification Service (ACNS). The ACNS is a unique stand-alone application that was built using specifications and features requested by the City of Arlington.

ACNS went online in November of 2006 and has been well-received by all city departments and by Arlington citizens. To date, the system has distributed about 350 notifications to citizens on a variety of subjects including:

- Severe weather alerts

- Parks and Recreation events

- Cowboys stadium progress

- Council meeting and agendas

- Planning and Zoning cases

- Road closures

- Festivals

All City departments now have a comprehensive communication tool to inform, direct, and even protect our citizens.

Scanning:

With the increased desire of the public to be completely informed at all times, the City of Arlington and Arlington Police Department are constantly challenged with communicating up-to-date information to citizens and partners. This method of communication must be quick, useful, easy and cost-effective.

Media partners are often utilized by public safety officials to disseminate this information but stories are at the mercy of other breaking news and messages can sometimes be altered. There was a particular concern on the part of the City of Arlington's emergency management officials regarding the city's ability to provide citizens with critical information in a timely manner regarding emergency matters or important public health issues, such as the avian flu. Other high-profile projects, such as the construction of the new Cowboys stadium were also topics of public interest where citizens wanted up-to-date information.

Additionally, public participation in police-sponsored events is always desired, but the invitation was most easily being distributed to a core group of police partners and businesses, while other members of the public remained unaware of – and uninvolved in – police activities.

Analysis:

In 2005, phone calls to police from residents led to the arrests of two aggravated robbery suspects in two separate cases. Surveillance photos of the two unidentified suspects had been distributed to the media. After recognizing the photos in the news, alert citizens called in tips

about the suspects' identities and locations. The men were believed to be responsible for a total of 14 robberies citywide.

Part of the Arlington Police Department's vision to achieve a safer community includes involving the community as partners. After the public provided information that was instrumental in taking the two dangerous suspects off the street within a matter of days, the department further realized the potential and commitment of an informed community in partnering with police. The Arlington Police Department joined CrimeWeb, an Internet-based e-mail alert system. Citizens register for the service for free and select the type of alerts they would like to receive. The choices include:

- o Major crime alerts,
- o Missing children alerts,
- o Missing adult alerts,
- o Homeland Security alerts, and
- o School information alerts and community information alerts.

The CrimeWeb tool allows Arlington police officials to directly alert interested citizens about requests for information on major crimes. This tool can also be used to inform users of police-sponsored community events in which they can participate. Registration to CrimeWeb is free and users can receive alerts by e-mail, cellular phone or pager from any nationwide ZIP code specified by the user. CrimeWeb alerts include photos, maps, a Spanish translation, a link for tips or feedback, and a cash reward system.

CrimeWeb is especially useful during significant offenses where there is a request for public input or assistance (as in "Missing Children" and "Missing Adult" alerts) or a need for public education. CrimeWeb allows information sharing between the public and the police. CrimeWeb offers a direct and efficient way for law enforcement to communicate with the public being served. Using this innovative technology further enhances the Arlington Police Department's partnerships with the community.

In the summer of 2006, the City began exploring "alert" options. The project evolved into a collaborative effort by numerous City departments resulting in a city-wide informational notification system for citizens. The project team included employee representatives from Fire, Police, IT, Community Services, Convention Center, Library, Public Works, Parks, Water Utilities, Community Development and Planning, and the Office of Communication.

Response/Activity:

Group members researched notification systems used by other municipalities. Project leaders surveyed vendors and held meetings involving various City department representatives to review products. The proposals ranged from a $7,500 to $75,000 initial set up with recurring annual costs ranging from $9,000 to $35,000. Project team members considered several items:

- Avoiding the problems other cities conveyed with types of notification systems, including Reverse 911
- Timely notification to the public about emergency issues, such as pandemic flu precautions and community response information
- Customization to the target audience, primarily concerned citizens desiring information and community involvement
- A system that the user would "request" rather than perceive as unsolicited notices or spam
- Serving multiple populations within the City and overcoming any language barriers

Unfortunately, none one of the available products met all of the City's needs nor did they take into account all of the established priorities.

Since the Arlington Police Department was already successful in using the CrimeWeb system with thousands of Arlington subscribers, an in-depth look was taken into the system. The question was whether the service could be expanded to "plug into" the City's strong neighborhood initiative and offer individual city departments'\ better connectivity with their customers.

Assessment

The City coordinated with a local vendor to build a Web-based Citizen Notification System (CNS) based on the CrimeWeb system. The components of the CNS are:

- o Voluntary information service
- o Notices by email and text messaging
- o Citizens can focus on issues of interest
- o Departments can provide direct informational notices to involve citizens
- o Has a direct application to the strong neighborhood initiative
- o CrimeWeb programmers modified their website design to one specifically tailored for the City of Arlington
- o Representatives from various departments assisted in the production of a user-friendly website that met City standards and needs
- o An administrative module was completed by September 15
- o Administrative training was held the week of September 19
- o A public education campaign was devised
- o Service go-live date was in October
- o Online Google translation options were used to convert pages and notices to Spanish and Vietnamese to accommodate a large part of Arlington's community language needs

All city departments are able to customize the type of notices they send, and citizens choose their topics of interest.

In January 2006, police officials enhanced their use of CrimeWeb by creating a quarterly publication, the <u>Arlington Police News</u>. The newsletters, distributed solely via CrimeWeb, are designed and written specifically for groups identified as police partners, including Community Watch groups, Citizen on Patrol groups, local businesses, faith-based organizations and other neighborhood groups. The one-page, color newsletter includes a special message from the district deputy chief, police/community news and updates specific to the area, crime prevention tips appropriate for the season, kudos to officers and citizens, and an FYI or "Did You Know" section. Newsletter recipients are asked to print out the newsletter – add any group-specific news or messages on the back – and distribute them to other members, particularly those without computer or Internet access.

The response from newsletter recipients has been tremendous. Police partners look forward to receiving the customized bulletins and are prompted to learn more about their

neighborhoods. A deputy chief in one district who holds a quarterly "Coffee and Chat with the Chief" meeting reports that even when his newsletter served as the only means of advertisement and notice to the community about an upcoming meeting, more than two dozen citizens showed up, eager to discuss ideas and issues specific to their neighborhoods.

For the Police Department, CrimeWeb serves many uses. First, it serves as an outreach endeavor combining three of the agency's stated goals: communicating effectively; using partnerships to achieve a safer community; and using innovative technology to maximize performance. Secondly, CrimeWeb is a communication tool that has been successful on several levels:

- o Continual improvement of services to the community
- o Strengthening of police relations
- o Promotion of community participation
- o Effective use of available resources
- o Enhancement of communications to community stakeholders and cooperation among the various groups
- o Significant contribution as a crime prevention tool by creating an informed community that is less likely to fall victim to criminal activity.

Both systems require short training periods of approximately 2 hours for employees. Both systems enhance the ability to disseminate timely information quickly and accurately to a broad area and significantly improve the response time from citizens. These systems have evolved into the primary communication tool to inform the community of a range of important topics such as:

- o Closing of streets under construction
- o What to do in the event of severe weather
- o Flash flood warnings
- o Dangerous criminals acting in their neighborhood

CNS and CrimeWeb significantly improve the City's public relations and community interaction while remaining cost-effective by not requiring any software or hardware to run. This also allows the information to be sent from any computer via the internet and received in the same manner.

All City departments now have a comprehensive communication tool to inform, direct, and even protect our citizens. The Arlington Police and other city departments who use e-mail alerts need to continue work toward better communication and information flow. While our collective goals were in large part met by implementing the communication systems, we must continue to nurture our groups and encourage them to participate further in growing healthy neighborhoods.

Agency and Officer Information

This problem solving initiative was adopted by a core group that included the media relations office and the planning and development (information technology) unit. Input from detectives was also sought.

Numerous staff hours are dedicated to problem solving. The project contact is:

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