

# Sun Herald (MS)

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## Mississippi Counties Adopt Critical Information-Sharing Technologies

By Robin Fitzgerald

GULFPORT – One by one, public safety agencies in Harrison, Jackson and Hancock counties are gaining high-tech resources unavailable anywhere in the nation.

The ability to share data already exists within individual public safety agencies in major U.S. cities. But a project that's unfolding in Harrison County is a system that allows neighboring agencies to share critical information instantly.

It's called the Mississippi Automated System Project, a federally funded program that is giving dispatchers, police, jails, and fire management personnel immediate access to a variety of public safety records. The project is endorsed by the state Homeland Security director and the state Public Safety director.

For example, a police dispatcher receives a 911 call about a domestic violence complaint. ASP allows the dispatcher to see the exact address, a record showing a history of violence at that address and the locations of available patrol cars.

"It's a tremendous service, not only to law enforcement, but to the public and every agency involved in safety and homeland security," said Harrison County Sheriff George H. Payne Jr.

Payne came up with the idea a few months after taking office in 2000. But even Payne will admit he had no idea how big the project would become.

Nearly all the public safety agencies in Harrison, Jackson and Hancock counties have agreed to come on board. The equipment and computer software they need is paid for with federal money.

Authorities in Forrest and Marion counties have asked to use the technology, which includes an upcoming project to add court records for the state's 22 district attorney's offices.

ASP is rural America's solution to a major problem pinpointed by the 9/11 commission in its final report on the terrorist attacks, said Julian Allen, executive director of the Office of Public Safety Technology and Training Programs at the University of Southern Mississippi.

Allen, who oversees ASP's development, points to the commission's finding that public safety ideals of "need to know" must be replaced with "need to share." The commission recommended a decentralized, coordinated way of connecting information systems across jurisdictional lines.

However, about 90 percent of the counties in America have sheriff's departments with five deputies or less, and most of them don't have computers or databases to store information, said Allen.

"The first thing you have to do is put the technology out there so you can use it," he said.

The project, estimated to cost \$ 25 million, has received \$ 14 million in federal funds. The money will pay for equipment and software to add every public safety agency in the three counties.

The Biloxi City Council met Tuesday night to discuss joining the project. Gulfport has not yet made a decision.

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