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SMART Computers: The Cutting Edge of Offender Supervision

By [Tony Bertuca](#), Internet Reporter

Efficiency is everything for the 470 Community Supervision Officers (CSOs) faced with the daunting task of managing and monitoring the 15,000 offenders on parole and probation in the Washington D.C. metropolitan area.

Plagued by database backlogs and frustrating complications with an unreliable information retrieval system, officials from the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency (CSOSA), searched for a better case-management system. After evaluating 19 off-the-shelf commercial products that could not meet CSOSA's unique needs, the agency decided to build and customize its own system: Supervision and Management Automated Record Tracking computer system, better known as SMART.

"It is a case-management tool that helps manage work effectively and efficiently," said **Tom Williams**, the Associate Director of Community Supervision Services at CSOSA. "The system is very easy to use, very user-friendly."

SMART is a cutting-edge, multi-faceted computer system that provides CSOs with the capability to quickly and continuously update files in the offender database, while simultaneously providing an electronic framework to organize and manage parole and probation programs for each offender.

SMART's database function holds a wide range of offender information: recent photos, current place of residence, criminal history, incidents while incarcerated, drug use, re-arrest, re-incarceration, technical violations, job retention, contacts with staff or treatment providers, and educational or vocational efforts. With a few strokes of a keyboard, offender information can be updated, emailed, or accessed by local law enforcement.

"It's nice not having to lug notebooks around for each offender or have to decipher people's handwriting," said **Debra Kafami**, a CSOSA official who helped design SMART. "The file becomes a living, breathing document that is constantly updated by the CSO."

Partnering with Local Law Enforcement

SMART is also updated with daily downloads from the D.C. Metropolitan Police Department, alerting CSOs if offenders have been rearrested-vital information for a parole and probation agency.

"We get downloads from the Metro PD three or four times a day," said Kafami. "I know of other jurisdictions where it takes much more time for that information to get to parole and probation."

Conversely, SMART is also available to law enforcement officials who often access offender databanks in search of recent photos and offenders whose M.O.s may match a crime under investigation.

"We're able to respond to law enforcement's needs," said Williams. "If there is a rash of burglaries in an area, law enforcement agencies might want to know if people were released with an M.O. for burglary."

Sometimes, the information in SMART's database can be the only link between finding offenders and losing them.

"We share a lot of information with the Metropolitan Police Department and U.S. Marshals and the Attorney General," said Kafami. "Sometimes we have additional information they don't have. For instance, one time the police had an old picture of an offender with short, cropped hair. In our [more recent] picture, he had long locks. He looked totally different."

Pop-Ups and Red Flags

SMART is also rigged with automatic notifications which, based on the information provided, alert CSOs to an

offenders needs or behavior.

“Our system lists offenders with different alerts,” said Kafami. “Offenders pop up if they need to be DNA tested, if an offender has failed to report to a parole officer, they pop up. We also have alerts built within the system if an offender tests positive on a drug test.”

The red flags and highlights appear automatically, saving a CSO the time it would take to cross-reference and sift through several separate reports. “The alerts let the CSO see what they should focus on when they first start their day,” said Kafami.

With 15,634 offenders under supervision, CSOs must divide into several specialized teams in order to properly monitor each offender and customize parole and probation programs to suit them. Cases involving domestic violence, substance abuse, sex crimes, and host of others, have their own designated team of CSOs, creating a complex network which necessitated the creation of a management tool and communication system like SMART.

“The SMART system tells us very quickly how an offender is being managed and supervised,” said Kafami. “But we’re still more paperwork bound than we’d like to be because there is still a paper file that needs to catch up with the offender once they are in the system.”

You Don't Even Want to Know...

A system too dependent on paperwork or an unreliable computer program can create stalls and backlogs that stifle the work of a CSO and allow scores of offenders to live unsupervised in the community; a scenario that CSOSA knows all too well.

“You don't even want to know how bad it was,” said Williams, referring to his agency's old computer system.

When CSOSA was first formed by the US Congress in 1997, it used a program called Offenders Automated Supervision Information System, or OASIS, a data retrieval system that constantly broke down, according to Williams.

“It was a horrendous tool,” said Williams. “It was built on an old, unreliable platform and could not keep up with the demands of a modern agency. It was not a functional system at all.”

Because approximately 70 percent of all criminal offenders in Washington D.C. serve part of their sentences outside of prison, either on parole or probation in the community, it is vital that CSOSA have an organized and efficient case management method. And because approximately 60 percent of all crime in Washington D.C. is committed by repeat offenders, the safety of the community is in endangered by an inefficient system.

Get SMART

By 2002, CSOSA officials knew they needed to get organized.

“We were kind of in a crisis,” said Kafami. “Crisis may be too strong of a word... But it was chaos. The system was constantly breaking and it could not handle the number of users. We built SMART as a response to that.”

Following six months of design and development, the SMART system went online in January 2002 and was enthusiastically received by CSOSA staff.

“It was written in the latest technology,” said Williams. “From a user standpoint, a lot of times a user doesn't work with a product until it's developed. But there was a true partnership [among the staff who built SMART] and it sort of mirrors our business process of working as a team.”

Coming Attraction: The "Smartest" Computer Yet

Lately, however, staff members have become hungry for an encore and Kafami and SMART programmers say

they are ready to deliver.

"These days when CSOs say 'I wish SMART could this, I wish it could do that,' they pause and realize how far we've come from where we were a few years ago... but we plan to have a new version out by December or January."

The new version will include a function called Auto-Screener, an "intelligent" risk/needs assessment module that will determine the level of supervision an offender requires based on their risk to the community.

In a revolutionary marriage of technology and quantitative logic, Auto-Screener will also prescribe and customize a supervision plan complete with support service recommendations like drug counseling, job training, anger management, and education courses.

"It's really great because it provides consistency across all CSOs and it provides quick guidance to the CSO about treatment of an offender," said Kafami.

However, realizing that a CSOs professional judgment and instinct cannot be programmed into a computer, programmers gave Auto-Screener manual override capability.

"It allows a CSO to override a recommendation if they have a gut feeling, but it must be done with a supervisor's approval," said Kafami. "So, in that way, it causes a CSO and supervisors to work even closer together and puts a double-check on the CSO handling the case."

In that way, SMART is a tool that can be used to measure staff performance. Supervisors can access the files and cases of any CSO and view its progression, according to Kafami, who added that supervisors are also automatically alerted if a CSO's case has incomplete components or overdue tasks.

Å "If something needs to happen in 30 days, we have features that pop out and let a supervisor know if its been done [before time runs out]," said **Frank Lu**, Service Development Director for CSOSA. "SMART also tracks how much money spent on certain activities."

Most recently, CSOSA has developed the ability to take SMART wireless-SMART Mobile. The innovation would allow CSOs to immediately access and update offender information from anywhere in the field, whether it be from a vehicle or an offender's living room, according to Lu.

However, SMART Mobile has not yet been slated to go on the new version due to budget constraints.

"We are currently in the test mode for our wireless version," said Lu. "The technology is there, it is really a budget issue now."

But Lu says the system updates will still include Auto-Screener and a few other bells and whistles.

"The technology we are using is very new, cutting edge actually," said Lu. "We've adopted the latest Microsoft Internet framework and we have brand new hardware."

All technological advancements aside, Williams says that he and other CSOSA officials are pleased that the SMART system has helped facilitate better communication among staff members.

"SMART allows information to be used across the spectrum," said Williams. "If I am working on a case in northeast Washington, someone on my team in southeast Washington can look at it. It has really allowed us to work better as a team."