How police in Lansing, Michigan, digitized social work case management

Police officers respond to crime- and service-related calls every day. While their training prepares them for most of these events, officers often don't have the experience or capacity to respond effectively to sensitive mental health calls, domestic disputes, and other non-criminal situations. But when people in crisis need help, the local police department is one of the first places they call.

To bridge the gap between social services and law enforcement, police agencies across the country have embedded social workers into their departments. In 2019, the Lansing Police Department (LPD) became the first law enforcement agency in Michigan to embed a social worker position into its organization. This new organizational component, which has grown now to include three social workers and a few interns, acts as a liaison between the police department, social services agencies, and the people they serve.

"When we're available and logged into dispatch, we can jump in and help

with calls where there's no criminal element," says Jessica Martin, a licensed master social worker and social work supervisor for LPD. "We can be there at the moment of crisis and refer people to the right agency rather than having officers trying to figure out which agency to call."

"Because we're direct employees of the police department and we're not funded by Medicaid or insurance, we can be a real liaison between the police and agencies that work on issues like homelessness or mental health," LPD social worker Amber Teunis says. "We gather information, determine the most appropriate resources available, and make referrals. Sometimes it's only one referral for a case. Sometimes it's a lot of them."

As LPD would soon discover, because police social workers must respond to and refer a variety of service calls to other organizations, they need their own information system. And when the information system isn't powered by modern cloud-based technology,

case management can be cumbersome, inefficient, and confusing.

The challenge: Managing cases with paper files

To manage non-crime-related cases, LPD's first police social worker developed a system based on file folders and spreadsheets. As the number of these cases increased, the need to digitize and automate paper-based processes became clear.

"Their goal was to have a single source of truth in an online format that social workers could access from anywhere, not just headquarters," says Isabella Carroll, customer education manager for Casebook, which provides LPD's social worker information system. "They had version inconsistency with spreadsheets and needed to bring all those paper documents into one central location."

The social work division also needed to keep case management separate from the police department. "We couldn't store our records in the police department's system because we have a duty to maintain client confidentiality," Martin says.

The solution: Casebook and AWS Cloud

Lansing police chose Casebook because the purpose-built social services platform stood out for its configurability, accessibility, and ease of use.

The Casebook suite includes cb Engage, a case management software and client management database, as well as other products for administration, intake, reporting, and tracking. Casebook also leverages the Amazon Web Services (AWS) Cloud and is developed to make full use of advanced AWS storage, security, and analytics capabilities.

The system's straightforward interface and flexibility are significant advantages for social workers who spend a lot of time in the field.

"You can literally sit anywhere in the community and write case notes, which for a social worker is invaluable," Teunis says. "I don't have to waste time driving back to the office to use a report-writing system."

Lansing's Casebook system also includes a Google form that allows police officers to refer situations to the social work division for review. Carroll says officers, as well as some constituents and providers, submitted more than 450 referrals in the first 10 months after implementation.

"We also get referrals via email, phone, and dispatch," Martin says. "We enter them all in as intakes. About eight or nine out of 10 become case records where we'll need to perform some type of follow-up with the client."

Setting up the system

Casebook worked with the inaugural LPD social worker to configure the system based on the organization's needs. The process included setting up features for data entry, form creation, and workflows. Historical .csv files were imported in bulk, while paper documents were entered manually into the system — a process that remains ongoing. "Once that heavy lift is done, Lansing will have so much rich data to report on," Carroll says.

The organization completed implementation in about 45 days. This timeframe is typical for Casebook and much faster than the six months or more that other case management system implementations require on average, according to Carroll. Other than having to onboard Martin and other team members during the process, Carroll says implementation went smoothly.

Learning the system

LPD's social work division coordinates with most of the social services providers in the area to serve a population of about 117,000. As the division steadily adds providers to the Casebook database, social workers have logged hundreds of cases with the new system, and they're just getting started.

Martin says the ability to analyze intakes and cases helps her write reports more easily. She is still exploring the different functionalities of the software's reports feature.

Teunis says she advises other police social workers to take advantage of advanced training and similar resources offered by Casebook. In addition to thorough onboarding, support, and knowledge base access, Casebook provides monthly training sessions and up to six one-on-one sessions.

Teunis says her team plans to do more of that training as time permits.

"When we bring on interns, we're going to have more questions," she says. "In the meantime, the support teams have been very responsive and quick to set up virtual meetings to walk through some of the features. I expect we'll continue to expand our use of the program."

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