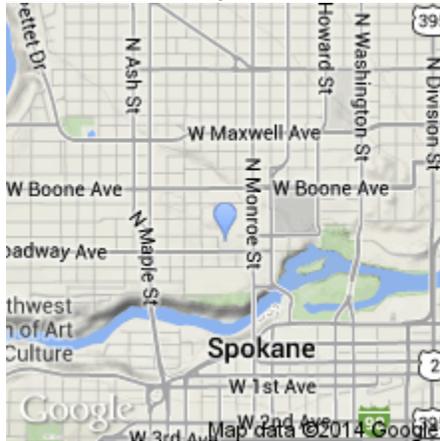


Shawn Vestal: Outdated computers say a lot about Spokane County justice system

[Shawn Vestal](#) The Spokesman-Review



On the Web: Read the full report online at spokesman.com

The elegant, historic Spokane County Courthouse was built almost 120 years ago.

The inelegant, historic computer system can't be much newer.

In an age of touchscreens and voice commands, the Superior Court's public computer system relies upon awkward command codes and hot keys. In an era when the latest gee-whiz gadget operates smoothly, it relies upon Pong-era technology: ALL-CAPS on a black screen and confusing navigation. Using it, you run into more roadblocks than the Dukes of Hazzard. It is a rusty old plow in the age of the tractor.

What's more, it tells us something about the way we do justice here in Spokane County.

"It is representative of the system," retired Judge James Murphy said.

Murphy and his fellow members of the Spokane Regional Criminal Justice Commission [have released a detailed report](#) suggesting a broad range of reforms. The report emphasizes the need for alternatives to a broken, expensive tradition of sticking nonviolent offenders in jail for everything – on creating "offender-based" approaches that aim to reduce repeat offenses, streamline the system and help minor offenders get off the track to becoming major ones. Instead of building a new jail, it recommends a lot of ways to keep more nonviolent criminals out of the current one.

A common thread in the report is the need for more cooperation among the different parties in the system. Another is a shift toward “evidence-based” models, in which programs are measured and evaluated.

Either way, computers by Hasbro won’t be the tools for getting there. How political leaders approach the technological hurdles will tell us something about the prospects for the whole report: The need is obvious, the cost is high and it will take a lot of effort and political will to do more than just piece-meal it.

The city of Spokane and Spokane County have separate information technology systems. “The systems,” the report says, “do not ‘sync.’ That is, none of the data from either department is integrated with the data from the other.”

The city has a “highly successful” Web-based system that manages data, the report says, while the county has designed and maintains several separate applications that manage case files for the Sheriff’s Office, District and Superior courts, and detention services. All told, more than a dozen separate systems are operating to manage cases, ranging from pretrial services to coordinating jail visits.

In other words, a single busy defendant can leave paper all over town – from the city police department to the county jail to the prosecutor’s office to the public defender’s office, from Spokane Municipal Court to Spokane County Superior Court – and never create a single coherent trail.

Another consequence of the information briar patch: Efforts to resolve cases quickly get hung up. A promising program known as Early Case Resolution – an effort to quickly settle simpler, lower-level cases – depends on defense attorneys having quick access to police reports, which doesn’t always happen now, said former U.S. Attorney Jim McDevitt, another commission member.

That’s just one example of the reason the report recommends developing a single system that everyone would share.

“Some integration of the systems has occurred, primarily between the courts and detention services, but many stakeholders expressed the need for a single source of all information for each offender, regardless of the origin of the data,” the report says.

Doing so will be costly and difficult, at least initially, though the range of reforms hold out the promise of savings. Will it be too costly and difficult? That’s an open question. Those creaky old computers at the county courthouse illustrate this clearly.

Certainly it is not news to people at the county that the computer system is Paleozoic. That old system is there because it would have taken money and will to change it. And that’s a patch on the money and will it would take to create a single unified information system for all criminal justice agencies in Spokane County.

The report does not estimate a cost for this, but it suggests a way to cover some of the costs associated with reforms: bumping the sales tax up by a tenth of a penny or two to raise millions for reform.

Money and will. That's the doorstep where the commission report leaves us.

Based on a year of work, 37 public hearings, 300 witnesses testifying – all overseen by Murphy, McDevitt and longtime local attorney Phillip Wetzel – the report offers a thoroughgoing, impressive array of ways to smarten up the system of justice in Spokane County.

“Now it's up to the decision-makers and the people with the purse strings,” McDevitt said.

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