

ONLINE PROBABLE CAUSE

Superior Court of Contra Costa County

Online Handling of Probable Cause Declarations Saves Time and Cuts Costs

The Superior Court of Contra Costa County has developed a computer application that allows judges performing magistrate duty to approve or deny probable cause declarations—about 15,000 a year—from their home computers, or from anywhere there’s an Internet connection.

Since the procedure was placed online, the time that judges must spend in reviewing and approving these documents “has been cut in half or better, and we are saving huge amounts of money in faxing and paper costs,” says Judge Thomas Maddock, who became the first duty judge to use the new system in 2007.

In the past, handwritten declarations by police officers often were illegible. Fax machines jammed or failed to transmit, or they ran out of paper or toner. In addition, judges sometimes spent time reviewing declarations on suspects who had already been released by law enforcement.

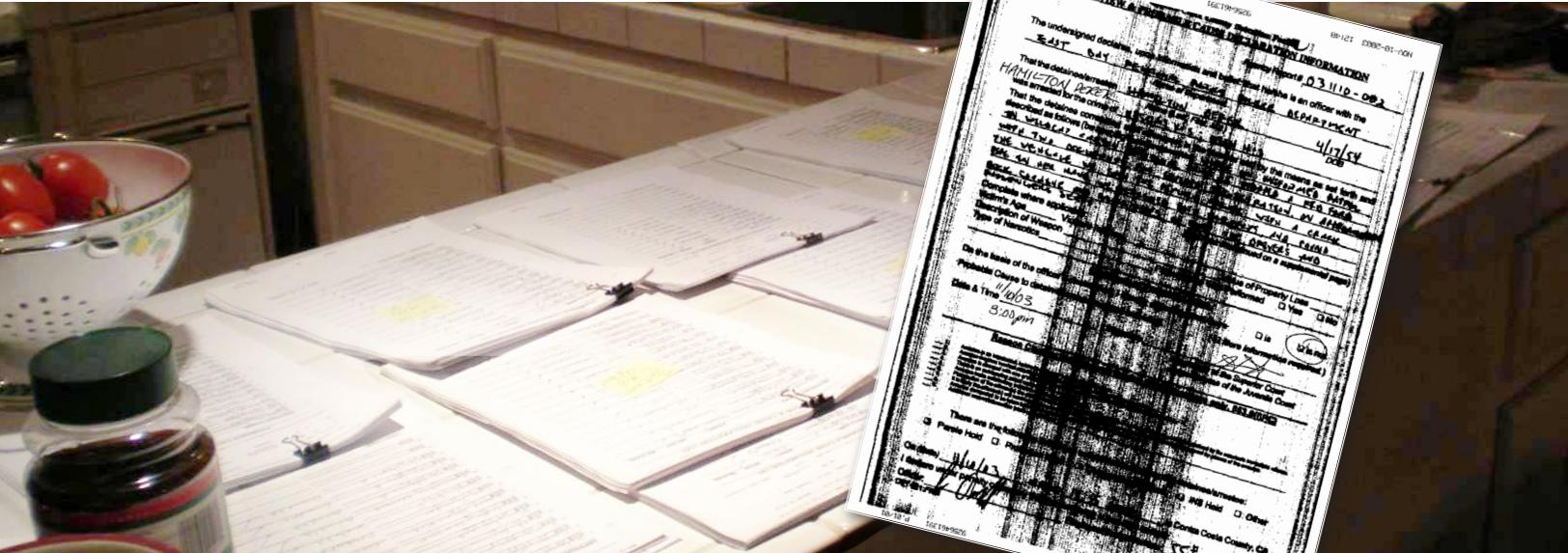
Now the declarations are clearly typed and, usually, spell-checked. Judges can simply read and act on declarations—they don’t have to decipher them. Going online has eliminated the need for judges—and, for that matter, clerks, administrators, and managers—to spend time faxing, sorting, stapling, and performing other clerical duties. Officers’ declarations are placed in a single queue, organized by time of arrest. If an arrestee is released, the declaration is removed from the active queue immediately.

The system was designed for adult cases, but at the request of the juvenile court judges, it has been replicated for their cases and juvenile probation.

As a result, a single judge can now handle the probable cause declarations for both adult and juvenile cases for a week’s rotating duty. Two judges were needed previously.

The sheriff’s department workload also has been reduced by nearly the equivalent of one full-time

Before: The home kitchen table of a judge on magistrate duty. Quality issues, such as the dark streaks on the fax shown here, were common with the paper system.



employee. Jail supervisors seeking to determine a suspect's status before the 48-hour deadline expires no longer have to phone the judge's home. A glance at the computer reveals the status of any arrestee at any time.

ID # / Case #	Arrestee	Arrest Date / Expiration Date	Officer / Agency	Status	Time Left
24472 / 07-23198		8/7/2007 19:17 / 8/9/2007 19:17	Spanner, Matthew / San Pablo Police	Submitted To Judge	10:49:55
24522 / 07-18827		8/8/2007 00:21 / 8/10/2007 00:21	Lingua, Andy / Walnut Creek Police	Submitted To Judge	15:53:55
24499 / 07-20441		8/8/2007 13:00 / 8/10/2007 13:00	Ryan, Marty / CCC Sheriff	Submitted To Judge	28:32:55
24498 / 07-8042		8/8/2007 13:15 / 8/10/2007 13:15	Mortimer, Michael / Antioch Police	Submitted To Judge	28:47:55
24501 / 07-7770		8/8/2007 14:30 / 8/10/2007 14:30	aisello, steve / Antioch Police	Submitted To Judge	30:02:55
24502 / 07-14861/NN07-085		8/8/2007 15:00 / 8/10/2007 15:00	Jacala, Edwin / El Cerrito Police	Submitted To Judge	30:32:55
24510 / 07-23306		8/8/2007 15:20 / 8/10/2007 15:20	White, Sandi / San Pablo Police	Submitted To Judge	30:52:56
24503 / 07-20466		8/8/2007 16:30 / 8/10/2007 16:30	Bwian, D. / CCC Sheriff	Submitted To Judge	32:02:56
24505 / 07-8051		8/8/2007 16:30 / 8/10/2007 16:30	Ganozalez, Adrian / Antioch Police	Submitted To Judge	32:02:56
24504		8/8/2007 17:04	Jimenez, Michael	Submitted To Judge	32:36:56

After: Probable cause declarations are clear and accessible online in a single, countywide queue, organized by date and time of arrest.

“On April 23, 2007, we turned the system on and never looked back,” says Lieutenant Steve Simpkins, commander of the West County Detention Facility in Richmond. “There were a few small hiccups that were cosmetic in nature. Otherwise there have been no serious problems with the system. Feedback that I have received from the sergeants at both [jail] facilities is that they have regained at least an hour of their work shift and have far fewer telephone calls to make and headaches to deal with.”

Training judges to use the application typically requires a session of less than 30 minutes with the Court Information Systems staff. A judge leaves the session with an icon on his or her desktop or laptop and information on connecting to the system from home.

For the judges, hiccups in using the system have been rare, though there have been some. A week after the system was first brought online, for example,

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the judge assigned to probable cause duty phoned Kathy Ridgeway, the court's deputy executive officer, to alert her that declarations had not been coming in from the jail in the expected numbers. Ms. Ridgeway called the jail, which confirmed that the customary numbers were being processed and added to the queue. A bit of research by the jail commander cleared up the mystery. Judge Maddock himself had been reviewing and acting on the declarations before the duty judge could get to them because, he said, the computer application “is just so cool.”

Startup costs for the project were paid in part by a federal Department of Justice automation grant and local police funding. Maintenance has been funded through fees paid by Contra Costa law enforcement, the court, and other area agencies to the county's Automated Regional Information Exchange System (ARIES), a consortium of law enforcement agencies that pool resources and share information. ARIES has classified the application as a “critical justice system application,” ensuring that keeping it up and running will be a high priority.

TO REPLICATE THIS PROGRAM:

- *Get stakeholders to buy into the concept.*
- *Demonstrate how the system will work to the judges and jail staff.*
- *Contact a vendor to create the system, or work with your IT staff.*