DAILY REPORT

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Fulton County Launches Odyssey Computer System

After 7 years and $15 million, major computer overhaul unifies the county's judicial case-management system

GREG LAND | gland@alm.com

On Wednesday, the "regulars"—the investigators who spend hours running criminal background checks at the computer terminals in the Clerk of the Superior Court lobbies at the Fulton County Courthouse—noticed a new icon on their screens: "Odyssey Production."

A click pulled up a new search engine for the criminal dockets—one that didn't require the alphabet soup of codes needed to traverse the system they'd been using for more than a decade, although that system is still in place. Instead, just a defendant or lawyer's name or case number sufficed to access the records.

With little fanfare, one of the few outward manifestations of a major overhaul of Fulton County's criminal justice system had gone public. Seven years in the making and at a total cost of about $15 million, the long-awaited unified case management system replaces the aging systems used by the Sheriff's Department, district attorney, public defender, county courts and other justice agencies with one integrated system.

Odyssey went live July 8 for the county's criminal caseload; the State and Superior courts' civil cases will be folded into the system in the fall.

"This is the most awesome thing ever," said Che Alexander, deputy chief clerk of the Superior Court and the project manager for her office's portion of Odyssey. "This will take Fulton County to another level. We're coming from 14 legacy systems that we rolled into one system. The impact is tremendous; we've never been able to communicate as criminal justice partners —everyone had their own system so the information didn't flow, and there was lots of room for error."

"Now," said Alexander, "we're all looking at the same information. There've been a few hiccups, but we're working out the kinks."

The groundwork for Odyssey was laid in 2006, when the specially appointed Fulton County Criminal Justice Blue Ribbon Commission deemed the various agencies' overlapping computer systems to be a major impediment to the ability to move cases and defendants through the process quickly and fairly.

Zachary D. Porter

Che Alexander, deputy chief clerk of Fulton Superior Court, says the new Odyssey program rolls 14 legacy systems into a single unified case management system.

"In 2007, the Board of Commissioners approved the project and started to fund some of the needs," said Fulton County Chief Information Officer Ryan Fernandes, who heads up the small army of tech staffers and contractors who installed Odyssey and trained hundreds of county personnel to use it.

The county spent about $5 million on infrastructure—hardware and facilities to house it, Fernandes said—and about $9.9 million to pur-

chase the software, implementation services and maintenance contract from Texas-based Tyler Technologies.

"We've gone from a disparate, siloed environment to a single, unified system that basically follows the natural progression from arrest to disposition," said Fernandes.

In addition to the elimination of inefficiencies due to what have been largely paper-based filing systems, the multiple systems created multiple opportunities for error, as data was either entered incorrectly or not entered at all.

"The most significant thing, I think, is the next-to-real-time information," Fernandes said. "There's always a problem when multiple people are filling on the data; you never know if you're looking at the most recent, accurate information. When you're doing something over and over, the law of averages always catches up with you; you'll get errors eventually."

"At the end of the day, the key word is case management," said Kevin Edwards, the county Criminal Justice Information Systems manager. "Now, the whole process can be managed, reports can be run at any time. … We essentially have our own cloud."

"Access is a big deal within the justice community," said Johnnie Gordon, Tyler Technologies' regional project manager, whose squad of company support personnel swelled to as many as 35 at times. "The near-real-time ability to deliver all these records is very important."

Odyssey has been adopted by several state justice systems, including those of Indiana, Maryland and Rhode Island, Gordon said, and is also in place in Georgia's Forsyth, Glynn and Rockdale counties.

"It's working real well for us," said Forsyth County Clerk of the State and Superior Courts Greg Allen, who serves five judges. "We went live with the criminal system in 2011 and the civil in 2012. The clerks and judges like it, and

the attorneys have access to documents they can view and file at their office."

The system has made big changes in the way the Fulton County Sheriff's Department operates, said the office's director of technical services, Terry Fisher. "Many of the systems at our agency were used with different programs, and each one supported a different department and had a different function," said Fisher via email. "There were multiple systems at the jail to support each program, but none of the systems were connected, or shared data."

Fisher said the jail was in the process of automating several standard procedures, including video visitation, online bond information and online bond payments, which the system will expedite. While the courts and other agencies deal mostly with case files, the jail has to keep up with other information such as inmates' fingerprints, medical records, booking and bond information. Fisher said Odyssey also has functions to aid in those tasks.

"We are still using some of our old systems, but they are still also connected to Odyssey," Fisher said. "We use our fingerprint system, but now we can use the data that is entered into Odyssey to populate a diverse number of fields. When an individual is booked into the jail, their information … medical records, booking information, charges and bond information, is all stored in the Odyssey system. Any justice employee who has access and authority can directly access the information from their computer."

Fulton County Superior Court Administrator Yolanda Lewis said the judges and staff in her court have been very pleased with the system so far. "For the judges I think this is a really big change, because we're now in a position where information is presented in a more collective fashion; you don't have to research a number of sources, and you have a full-view

summary of everything that has happened to that defendant in your jurisdiction."

"The exciting thing about this system is that it that offers a lot of new features, new prompts," Lewis said. "We don't have to do as much research; for instance, if there's a warrant out, there's a prompt for that; there are prompts to let us know when a case is on appeal, when a defendant has been rearrested, or even when one needs an interpreter."

As to startup kinks, Lewis said, "the biggest thing is just the cross-communication between offices, making sure we're using the electronic process rather than that paper process."

Odyssey is "up and running" for the Fulton County State Court criminal departments, including Warrants and Traffic divisions, said State Court Administrator Cicely Barber via email.

"We are excited about the project because all Justice Agencies are now on one system and speaking the same language, so communication has improved among agencies," she said.

The State Court docket is also available online, she noted, at statemagcourtrecords.fultoncountyga.gov/PAStMagCrtCM.

"Many calls we receive are concerning simple requests like who is the judge assigned to my case and what is my case number? In this age of technology with smartphones, people are used to searching for information with the expectation of receiving it instantly. We can now deliver on that expectation."