



TECHNOLOGY COLUMN

Auto Alert Systems: Technology Enhancing the Delivery of Court Services

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With the recent proliferation of text messaging, the general public is becoming increasingly reliant on automated notifications for personal communications, appointment reminders, and other transactions. Deployment of text messaging systems—along with email and voicemail messaging—is expanding to the state and federal courts to support ongoing communications with court participants.

In Arizona, some trial courts use text, email, and voicemail notifications to remind defendants about upcoming court hearings and court-ordered financial obligations. The Pima County Consolidated Justice Court in Tucson, Arizona, has achieved a 23.6 percent reduction in failure to appear (FTA) rates for pretrial defendants through deployment of interactive voice response (IVR) phone notifications, which include warnings about impending sanctions for failure to appear and notice of issued arrest warrants.

Likewise, the Glendale City Court has noted a reduction in FTAs and delinquent payments since implementation of voice, email, and text messages to litigants. Initially introduced through an auto dialer phone system four years ago, the court's electronic messaging systems now generate the following kinds of notifications, through integration with the case management system:

- Reminders of upcoming court hearings and missed court dates
- Reminders of payments due per time payment plans
- Notice of late payments, with an admonishment regarding follow-up steps and instructions to contact the court

Discussing Glendale's experience with electronic notifications, Presiding Judge Elizabeth Finn explained, "We are constantly trying to figure out better, more efficient ways to serve the public. Electronic messaging is an excellent technology solution, one which helps provide access to justice for defendants while helping court staff to better communicate with litigants. This kind of automation is especially helpful given our budget and resource constraints."

As part of the "Fair Justice for All" initiative, the Arizona Supreme Court plans to make text notification services available to all Arizona courts through a statewide contractual service. This notification system is intended to enhance compliance with court orders, thus reducing the need for issuance of arrest warrants and further sanctions in traffic and criminal cases. The state's Uniform Traffic Ticket Citation form is being amended to include the phone number of persons cited with traffic citations, as this information is required for electronic messaging.

In 2016, the Missouri judicial branch launched "Track my Case," a statewide email notification system integrated with the judiciary's case management system, Case.net. Subscribers receive automated notices of docket entries in selected cases, notice of court hearings, and payment reminders. More recently, the system has been expanded to issue text notifications, making the service available on mobile devices.

Similarly, at the federal court level, users of the PACER electronic access system can be alerted of case activity in participating courts by subscribing to an RSS (rich site summary) data feed. This free service notifies subscribers of court docket events and provides links to electronic documents on file with the federal courts.

While the foregoing systems serve litigants and those with an interest in court cases, the New Jersey courts are using technology to better communicate with prospective

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jurors. New Jersey courts now issue text and email reminders about upcoming jury service and “call off notices” to prospective jurors. The state court has also created a robust mobile device app for jurors, NJJuror.

In the broader justice arena, the Victim Information and Notification Everyday System (VINE) employs electronic messaging to apprise victims and concerned citizens about changes in offender status: an offender’s release from custody, transfer to another facility, or escape. This automated system provides such alerts via mail, phone message, text message, TTY device, and email.

Early results from the foregoing court and justice system e-notification projects are promising, with similar efforts underway across the country. These projects leverage stable, proven technologies—ones that are well understood, accepted, and widely used by the

public. Leveraging real-time court case and calendar management data, the notification systems facilitate communications with users in a highly-automated, cost-effective manner. Looking into the future, it seems clear that this is a long-lasting technology, use of which will expand in the years ahead. The challenge, now, is to identify other innovative ways in which courts can use automated alert systems to better serve the public and improve the quality of justice.

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A Mission to the International Courts at The Hague

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Introduction

The Hague, a small city west of Amsterdam, is the royal seat and capital of The Netherlands. It also hosts the world’s international courts. At the Peace Palace sits an early 20th century monument built with hopes for international peace, the International Court for Justice (ICJ)¹ and the Permanent Court for Arbitration.² The ICJ deals with interstate disputes, such as boundaries, access to water and other resources, migration, and other humanitarian matters.

In various locales around The Hague also sit several international criminal courts. These include the International Criminal Court (ICC), established by 120 nations in the 1998 Treaty of Rome, and several ad hoc international criminal tribunals (ICTs) that the UN Security Council created after the Cold War ended. The first came in 1993 when the UN Security Council navigated conflicting political agendas to establish and fund an ICT for genocide and other heinous

crimes committed during the civil wars in the former Yugoslavia. Another for Rwanda followed in 1994, and a tribunal for Lebanon came in 2009 to investigate and prosecute the assassination of Lebanon’s former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and 21 other people.³

It was to these criminal courts in The Hague that Judicial Division Chair, U.S. Air Force Colonel (ret.) Linda Murnane, led a 70-person ABA delegation during the last week of April, 2017. Linda, after retiring as an Air Force JAG judge, has spent nearly a decade in senior legal positions at the Yugoslavia and Lebanon tribunals. She arranged for presentations from judges, attorneys, and senior administrators at their courts in and around The Hague, engaging us in thoughtful discussions of their missions and operations. Topics ranged widely, including the development of international criminal law, how to reconcile differences between the legal systems involved, and thorny matters like translation, detention and punishment, security, and the treatment of witnesses to atrocities.

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