Using Technology for Critical Incident Management

Hanover County Sheriff's Office Case Study

In October 2002 several law enforcement agencies in the Washington D.C. area were challenged to a new level by their involvement with the Sniper Investigation. Over 20 local agencies were involved in the investigation, which consequently provided unparalleled learning opportunities for other law enforcement agencies all over the country.

The Hanover County Sheriff's office in Virginia was one of those agencies involved with the Sniper Investigation. On October 19, 2002 Ashland, Virginia became the site of the 13th crime scene to occur in 16 days. Hanover County soon learned what the previous jurisdictions had experienced already; that organizing and documenting the people and equipment at the crime scene was an overwhelming task. The agencies had no system in place that allowed them to track the various law enforcement personnel, with some of the crime scenes involving between 200 and 300 investigators.

The subsequent 2004 report on the Sniper Investigation issued by the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) addressed many of the challenges faced by the agencies involved. "Establishing, securing and managing crime scenes were enormous challenges for the local law enforcement agencies. The demands grew with each successive shooting... The three greatest challenges for agencies were determining the size of the crime scene, managing and controlling law enforcement personnel and the media, and coordinating the resources of different agencies.... While trying to determine the size of the crime scene, agencies also had to control access to and manage those people and resources that were allowed in the scene. These challenges were daunting"   (PERF 55).

The PERF report also discusses the task of information management from the sniper scenes and evaluates the procedures with hindsight. "The information management challenges during this investigation were unprecedented. Though some individuals have criticized law enforcement agencies involved in the sniper case for failing to manage the extraordinary volume of information that this case generated, they often overlook that there was no capable information management system that could have accomplished those tasks" (PERF 61).
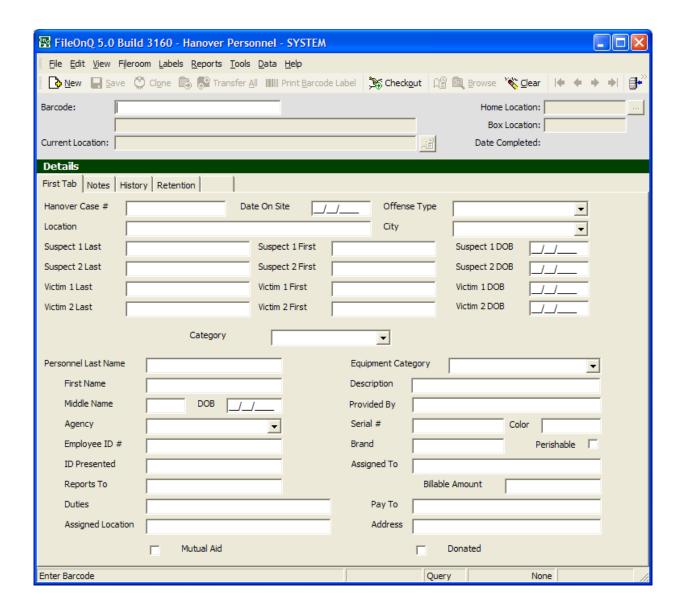
Not only was it difficult for the law enforcement agencies to manage the crime scenes, but it was also an overwhelming task to manage the information gathered throughout the investigations. In the introduction of the report, the PERF committee addresses this challenge. "It was difficult to develop organizational charts and schematics of exactly how the case progressed. Some Sniper Case reviewers have asked us for a comprehensive graphic of how many resources were infused and from what sources, or even at what times in the case, but there was no such static structure" (PERF 1).

One of the primary goals of releasing the PERF report was to identify the lessons learned from the sniper investigation. The Hanover County Sheriff's Office took these lessons and put them into action to assist them with future critical incident crime scenes. In 2005 they issued the call to software vendors across the country to provide them with a system that would give structure and organization to their emergency management procedures. FileOnQ, a Seattle based software company, answered the call with their EvidenceOnQ management system. With funding from a Homeland Security grant, Hanover was able to purchase the EvidenceOnQ system, which met all the criteria they required to manage critical incidents. The flexibility and versatility of the EvidenceOnQ system also provided Hanover County with solutions to additional management needs throughout their department. It put the same technology in place to manage routine crime scenes, their evidence management, and their officer equipment.

Hanover chose EvidenceOnQ because it is pliable to meet the unique needs of the user. The home screen (profile) is completely designed to the specifications of the individual law enforcement agency and is also specific to the purpose for which it is used. Every field on the database screen is user configured, searchable, and has the flexibility to be changed by the user administrator. With this in mind, Hanover created three distinct profiles for which the system would be used. For emergency management purposes, they created a profile that allowed them to track people and equipment at critical incident scenes.

This database is housed on a laptop computer in the mobile command post. In the event of a major emergency management situation, the database is used from the command post (regardless of how far away it is from the actual scene) to manage the people and equipment at the incident scene. The example provided shows the design of the Hanover system home screen. The top half shows the essential information about the scene, i.e. case number, date, location, suspects, victims, etc. This information is entered in to the system only ONE time, and then is automatically carried over each time a new person or asset is entered into the system. This saves valuable time by not having to re-enter repetitive data.

Upon arrival at the command post, the individual will check in and present their credentials, ID, or badge. This information is entered into EvidenceOnQ along with that person's specific duties at the scene. A barcode label is then generated Zebra roll fed printers and attached to an identification badge issued to the individual that displays their name, their duties, and who they report to. They are now authorized to go to the entrance of the scene.

FileOnQ 5.0 Build 3160 - Hanover Personnel - SYSTEM

File Edit View Fileroom Labels Reports Tools Data Help

New | Save | Clone | Transfer All | Print Barcode Label | Checkout | Browse | Clear

Barcode: [   ]   Home Location: [   ] [...]
         [   ]   Box Location: [   ]
Current Location: [   ]   Date Completed:

Details

First Tab | Notes | History | Retention |

| Hanover Case # | [   ] | Date On Site | [__/__/__] | Offense Type | [▼] |
| Location | [   ] | | | City | [▼] |

Suspect 1 Last [   ]   Suspect 1 First [   ]   Suspect 1 DOB [__/__/__]
Suspect 2 Last [   ]   Suspect 2 First [   ]   Suspect 2 DOB [__/__/__]
Victim 1 Last [   ]   Victim 1 First [   ]   Victim 1 DOB [__/__/__]
Victim 2 Last [   ]   Victim 2 First [   ]   Victim 2 DOB [__/__/__]

Category [▼]

Personnel Last Name [   ]   Equipment Category [▼]
First Name [   ]   Description [   ]
Middle Name [ ] DOB [__/__/__]   Provided By [   ]
Agency [▼]   Serial # [   ]   Color [   ]
Employee ID # [   ]   Brand [   ]   Perishable ☐
ID Presented [   ]   Assigned To [   ]
Reports To [   ]   Billable Amount [   ]
Duties [   ]   Pay To [   ]
Assigned Location [   ]   Address [   ]

☐ Mutual Aid   ☐ Donated

Enter Barcode   Query   None

The perimeter security officer at the entrance to the scene has a barcode scanner for logging personnel in and out. Gone are the days of the yellow legal tablet that requires information to be manually written about the personnel entering the scene. The officer scans a barcode, generated via EvidenceOnQ and Zebra Printers, which indicates initial entry to the scene and then scans the badge of the person. They are now free to enter the scene and the system has documented the exact time the person entered. As personnel come and go from the scene, the security officer scans the appropriate status ("exit" or "enter") as often as needed. The system assigns a date and time to that transaction that is unalterable. When a person is finished at the scene, the security officer scans a barcode titled "clear scene". The person then reports back to the command post and turns in their identification badge.

Equipment and supplies at major scenes would be documented in the same fashion; the information about the equipment is put into the database and a corresponding barcode, produced by Zebra the roll fed printer, is attached to the item. It is logged in and out of the scene in the same way. Hanover County designed their home screen with the left-hand information being pertinent to people, and the right side being applicable to assets. If the user chooses "person" as the category, the left side is enabled. If the user chooses "asset", then the right side is enabled.

At the completion of the scene, or as often as needed, the data stored in the portable bar-code scanner can be downloaded into the database. Management of major crime and emergency scenes is now automated for Hanover County, with the ability to immediately retrieve information about scenes and the personnel who were there. Because every field is searchable, there is virtually no limitation to the data that can be retrieved for on-site review or for later analysis. The flexibility of EvidenceOnQ also allows for easy modification of the screen at the incident site if changes in management or tracking needs occur during the incident.

The EvidenceOnQ system meets the challenges of critical incident management that were addressed in the PERF report: planning and preparation; defining roles and responsibilities; managing information efficiently; and maintaining effective communications.

Additionally, the PERF report addressed the issue of being knowledgeable and comfortable with the functionality of a critical incident management system. "Lack of experience with the system makes people reticent about trying it, especially during a high profile investigation. It is unrealistic to expect personnel to learn a new system in the middle of the crisis. Individuals must be familiar with the systems they will use during the investigation, and ideally should employ the same system as they use every day" (PERF 67, 74).

Because EvidenceOnQ is used on a daily basis by the Hanover County Sheriff's office patrol, investigations, crime scene personnel, evidence personnel, and administration, they are familiar with the same functionality that exists during a major incident. They will not have to acquaint themselves with an unfamiliar system in the midst of a crisis.

The PERF analysis addresses the goals that all law enforcement agencies should have in preparing for the future. "It's not a question of if there will be another multi-agency investigation; it's a question of when and where. Law enforcement needs to get ready for the next one." -- Detective James Trainum, Washington Metropolitan Police Department. (PERF 59)

The Hanover County Sheriff's Office utilized the lessons they learned from their involvement with the Sniper Investigation to prepare for the future. The EvidenceOnQ system gives them the tools necessary for future emergency management situations, and the confidence and security to know they will be able to successfully meet the challenge. Written by Shannon Turner, FileOnQ Evidence Specialist