

Berks-based technology aids law enforcement

A database allows input of records of contact with criminals or those who call in requests for police assistance. It could save lives.

BY JENNIFER HETRICK
READING EAGLE CORRESPONDENT

BY THANKSGIVING, officers with the Pottstown Police Department will have new technology at their fingertips.

A database will allow them not only to better protect their own safety, but to more effectively track down criminals and hold them accountable.

The officers will be granted access to Berks County's collaborative object-based regional access database called COBRA.net.

Created by Cody Systems of Pottstown in 1998, COBRA.net is an information-sharing platform. Law enforcement employees use it to input criminal records or those who call in requests for police assistance.

COBRA.net launched in Berks County in 1999. Then, the acronym stood for County of Berks Regional Access. COBRA.net later became a system used in many U.S. counties and states.

Across agencies

Missouri is setting a nationwide example by using COBRA.net across all of its law enforcement agencies.

Most people may not realize that police officers generally only have access to notes of criminal activity within their own jurisdiction. Details about incidents or dangerous criminal behavior across the border into a neighboring municipality typically would be out of reach from one agency to another.

Sergeant John G. Phillips of the Wyomissing Police Department accesses Berks County COBRA.net via C.tac, a tactical search app, in his patrol car.

But with the Web-based COBRA.net, agencies that agree to share information with each other can better prepare when approaching potentially risky situations or threatening individuals.

Since individuals with criminal histories usually move across cities, boroughs and townships rather than stay in one place, law enforcement will have more information about past incidents.

Cody Systems

Opened: December 1979.
Owners: Fran and David N. Heffner, mother and son; a woman-owned family business, due to the majority ownership by Fran Heffner.
Employees: Fewer than 50.
Location: 1005 E. High St., Pottstown.
Phone: 610-326-7476.
Website: www.codysystems.com.
Facebook: Search for Cody Systems.

Pulls results easily

What makes the Cody Systems platform so valuable for its users is that most law enforcement agencies use different record-management systems for the information collected from incidents. But COBRA.net is designed to easily, quickly and clearly pull search results from various places, with no garbling or complications.

Names, nicknames, gender, height, hair and eye color, last-known addresses or criminal activity and previous involvement in reported incidents are some items that can be searched in the system.

Car makes, models and colors as well as full or partial license plate numbers are available keyword searches. But the information made searchable is dependent on what each agency entering the data allows to be viewed by others.

"C.tac is the tactical search app that is used by law enforcement personnel to access the cross-system, cross-jurisdictional data aggregated within the COBRA.net system," said Maggie Riker, the director of marketing and public relations for Cody Systems.

Riker is the daughter of Fran Heffner, the president of Cody

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More information helps police, communities

Newtown Borough Police Officer Brian Steven Gregg died at age 46 on Sept. 29, 2005, in Bucks County, when a man with a violent criminal history, but documented only 30 miles outside of the area, shot him to death after what initially seemed like a routine drunken driving arrest.

Gregg's own police department at the time only had access to criminal reporting in its own jurisdiction. Realizing his murder could have been prevented and to honor Gregg, Cody Systems donated use of COBRA.net to Bucks County's law enforcement offices after the incident.

Systems, and the sister of its executive vice president, David N. Heffner.

In 1979, Fran started the business with her husband, David H. Heffner, who passed away in 2012.

Donated COBRA.net

Fran noted that since her husband's family has a strong history in Pottstown, and to honor his love of the town, Cody Systems has donated the use of COBRA.net and C.tac to the Pottstown Police Department, opening access directly to the bulk of Berks County's data. Maggie Riker noted the system should be operational before the end of this year.

When Pottstown Police Department's police Chief F. Richard Drumheller heard the benefits, he noted that he's grateful for any additional resources to help keep his officers safe, while explaining how effective policing can be. The

Pottstown Police Department has 46 officers, Drumheller said.

Criminal activity often moves across Reading and other parts of Berks County into Pottstown, and vice versa. Drumheller said the database and app will aid in addressing, and possibly decreasing, crimes such as illegal drug transportation and distribution, shootings, stolen vehicles, fraud and cases of missing and exploited children.

"It's somewhat cliché, but it's one more piece of equipment in the toolbox," Drumheller said. "Any additional investigation traction is important."

Safety benefit

Lt. Todd Trupp, with the Berks County district attorney's office, said COBRA.net is a great benefit to safety, intelligence and crime-solving issues.

"We're doing an investigation

now," Trupp said. "Through COBRA.net, we determined a person had violent tendencies in the past, to give us an idea of how to deal with it. We always take a safe approach, but now that we know this, we're going to double our manpower."

Trupp said the system is important for patrol officers, too.

"If an officer is doing a routine traffic stop, he can immediately look through COBRA.net and see how many involvements a driver has had with law enforcement," Trupp said. "There are markers that will tell you warnings and alerts that this person has a violent history or a past incident that involved a weapon. Before the officer walks up to the vehicle, he can know a lot about the person's background, seeing the incidents they've been involved in."

Darren Simmers, a detective at Upper Macungie Township Police Department in Lehigh County, noted a scenario in which he was able to find a teenager who did not brake for

a stopped school bus.

"The bus driver and a parent talked to confirm that they knew the first or final digits of the car's license plate number and that it was a white Honda," Simmers said.

Using the information they provided, Simmers later tracked down the 16-year-old driver. Using COBRA.net, Simmers discovered the teenager had been caught for speeding.

The search success came from being able to identify the vehicle by make, model and color. The department verified, by calling the parent, the owner of the vehicle, that the son had been driving the car on the day of the bus violation.

"And COBRA.net helps you to find people, especially if you're looking for someone on probation or parole," Simmer said. "This software is highly beneficial because it has contact that goes above and beyond what you'd find in public documents." ■

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The Cody name

In the mid-1970s, after serving as a decorated captain in the Army Security Agency during the Vietnam War, David H. Heffner, co-founder of Cody Systems, had a chance meeting with Bill Cody, the grandson of the legendary Pony Express rider, scout and showman William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody.

Bill Cody the younger had a past almost as interesting, if not as well-known, as his famous grandfather. Cody was a member of the OSS (the early CIA), serving clandestinely overseas during World War II. With their mutual intelligence backgrounds, he and Heffner quickly became friends.

It was about this time that David and Fran Heffner had a vision of a new business where they could take the knowledge David had gleaned from his years in intelligence and develop tracking and linking systems to help make the public safety more efficient at home. One night, the Heffners mentioned this idea to Cody. Cody loved the idea and told them that he would be honored if the Cody name lived on through the business the Heffners were planning. They shook on it and wrote a contract on a drink napkin, with Cody telling the Heffners that they had the right to use the Cody name so long as the business never tarnished the honored and forthright legacy of his grandfather, and furthered his pioneer spirit.

Source: www.codysystems.com/about-cody/our-cody-heritages

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