



## Making TraCS With Traffic Safety

*Time has become a precious resource. Everyone is looking for ways to save it, and law enforcement is no exception.*

*The State of Iowa has come up with a way to save time—not just minutes, but hours, even days and weeks.*

*It's an electronic reporting program known as TraCS (Traffic and Criminal Software) that is available at no cost to law enforcement across the country.*

In 1994, in an effort to cut down on paperwork, the Iowa Department of Transportation (DOT) took the lead in developing TraCS. At that time it took up to 24 months for data collected in paper reports to be received, manually entered into a database, validated, and made available. By using TraCS, agencies can now create their own local databases in addition to transmitting reports electronically to the Iowa DOT, making the information available the next day. Use of electronic reporting eliminates duplicate data entry, cuts down on keying errors and problems caused by poor handwriting, and reduces time spent on the scene.

“When I first came in contact with the project in its infancy, I was able to bring the time it took to make an accident report on the scene down from 2 hours to 10 minutes,” says Rich Conner, Iowa DOT’s agency training specialist for TraCS. (From 1994 to 1997, Conner helped field test the software as a member of the West Des Moines Police Department.) “It is customized to be user friendly. In 25 years in law enforcement, I’ve never seen anything else like it for ease of use.”

Conner explains that before TraCS, if a jurisdiction wanted a new traffic safety device, such as a traffic light, staff could take months to compile the data needed to justify it. Now, the Iowa DOT can quickly analyze the electronic accident reports and the safety modification can be put into effect much sooner. “There is potential to prevent accidents and even save lives,” he says.

In addition to saving time and increasing safety, TraCS has the potential to generate enormous savings for other

departments. The State owns the source code for the software, which eliminates vendor licensing fees and enables Iowa to provide TraCS to other States and agencies within those States at no charge.

“If they developed electronic reporting systems on their own, it would be very expensive,” says Mary Jensen, TraCS program manager. “This is literally saving millions of dollars.”

Although the software is free, agencies still must purchase the hardware needed to run the program, which Jensen acknowledges is a struggle for many departments. But, she adds, TraCS will run on laptops that agencies may already be using for other purposes.

More than 15 additional States are in the process of implementing TraCS for some or all of their law enforcement agencies. TraCS’ design allows it to generate electronic forms identical to the paper forms an agency now uses, so no department needs to change its forms or procedures. The only change for officers is learning to input data electronically. Jensen says that New York has progressed the farthest of any participating State, running a successful pilot program using TraCS for traffic citations with plans to use it statewide.

“Most States start out with one form, and that is the way I would recommend doing it,” Jensen says, adding that although New York started with citations, other States started with accident reports. States receive the software free and may test it for a period of time before deciding to sign a royalty-free licensing agreement. These steps are part of the precautions that Iowa takes to keep the software from falling into the hands of third-party vendors who might try to sell it. In addition to receiving inquiries from other States throughout the country, Iowa recently signed an agreement with the U.S. Virgin Islands, has been contacted by New Zealand, and has received interest from the Canadian provinces of Manitoba and Quebec. The licensing agreement allows States to pay for any needed modifications; however, the resulting enhancements are made available to all participating States.

“For example, in Iowa, the traffic citation numbers are computer generated,” Jensen says. “New York found that they needed to be able to assign blocks of numbers. Now, all States can choose which of these two options they want to use. Another example is Georgia. We had three different diagramming options for accident scene reports, and Georgia wanted a fourth. They negotiated a contract for its development, and all four are now available to everybody.”

Periodic steering committee meetings, in which representatives of all participating States gather to discuss modifications, bring this cooperation to the national level. According to Jensen, although Iowa developed the software and owns it, future development priorities are decided by consensus. At the four steering committee meetings held thus far, States’ needs have proven remarkably similar. A combination of funding from various States (including Iowa) and Federal dollars pays for the enhancements. For more information on this cooperative project, known as the National Model, visit [www.dot.state.ia.us/natmodel](http://www.dot.state.ia.us/natmodel). According to the website, the National Model project seeks to “bridge the gap between state-of-practice (paper forms) and state-of-the-art.”

At approximately the same time the National Model effort began, Conner retired from his law enforcement job and joined the TraCS team. As part of the Iowa DOT, this four-person team provides training and support to users throughout Iowa. Conner adds that users from other States have signed up for the discussion forum on the team’s website ([www.iowatracs.org](http://www.iowatracs.org)), and he has provided them technical assistance. The website also contains extensive support documentation and software upgrades that registered users can download.

“This is our best means of support. We try to get an agency to become pretty self-sufficient,” Conner says. He also provides technical assistance over the phone and via e-mail and gives both system administrator and user training throughout the State. He adds, however, that the

software is so user friendly that a computer-literate person could figure it out without training. Conner also points Iowa agencies toward potential resources for grants, reduced-price hardware, or other forms of assistance.

“It’s kind of interesting to see the e-mails we get from hardware vendors that refer to ‘this TraCS that’s sweeping the country,’” Conner says. Sharing the software with other States has been Iowa’s goal from the beginning, Jensen adds.

“It just makes sense and it’s a good way to do business. We get more return for our dollars than if everybody acted independently,” Jensen says. “Certainly the opportunity is out there for every State to use it that wants it. Although some States have already developed similar programs on their own, if at some point it’s in all 50, that would be great.”

TraCS’ combination of current technology and ease of use has earned it several awards. These include the Federal Highway Safety Administrator’s Award in 1996, Vice President Al Gore’s National Partnership for Reinventing Government Hammer Award in 1999, and first place in the Best Practices Competition sponsored by the Traffic Records Committee of the National Safety Council in 2000.

***For more information about TraCS, log on to [www.dot.state.ia.us/natmodel](http://www.dot.state.ia.us/natmodel); contact Program Manager Mary Jensen at 515-237-3235, e-mail [Mary.Jensen@dot.state.ia.us](mailto:Mary.Jensen@dot.state.ia.us); or contact Rich Conner at 515-237-3051, e-mail [Rich.Conner@dot.state.ia.us](mailto:Rich.Conner@dot.state.ia.us).***



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