

The Domestic Violence Index Evaluation

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by the Alaska Judicial Council for the Alaska Court System

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Part 1: The Project

A. Introduction

As part of a 2002 Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) grant, the court suggested creation of an index for domestic violence cases in its case management system to help court employees who needed routine information about parties in civil or criminal domestic violence cases. Maximus made a test version of the index available to the court in May 2005. The court invited the Judicial Council to evaluate the effectiveness of the domestic violence index.

B. Background

During the past two decades, public awareness of domestic violence has increased substantially. The growth of awareness was helped by passage by Congress, in 1995, of the Violence Against Women Act, which funded states to carry out innovative programs and provide services for victims of domestic violence. States receive funds based on population, as well as qualifying for discretionary funds by developing innovative programs. Within each state, many of the funds are allocated based on formulas set out in the federal law. With a small portion of its funds received in 2002, the Alaska Court System considered ways to use technology to improve the handling of civil protective orders and criminal charges of domestic violence.

C. Purpose, Need, and Benefits

The index was intended to allow judicial officers and others to find all of the domestic violence and other related cases associated with a particular person. Before the new index, the court's existing case management system¹ indicated only whether a case was civil, criminal, etc., but did not indicate the type of civil case, such as domestic relations, DV protection order, torts and so forth. The court's new CourtView system had an index with more detail about types of cases but it could not filter the case types to list only cases of interest to a judicial officer handling a DV case. Court staff manually researched each case to determine whether it was a domestic violence case related to the parties before the judge in a current case.

¹ The court's original case management system in 2000 was known as "RUG" for "Rural Users Group," adapted from a system originally created for the rural courts. The court contracted with Maximus to begin to install CourtView. The pilot CourtView location was Palmer. Anchorage and Fairbanks now also use CourtView. Installation in the court's remaining sites is expected to be complete by about 2015. In the interim, the other court sites continue to use RUG.

Designers of the system anticipated that the domestic violence index could have several benefits. It could substantially reduce the amount of time needed for staff to search the court's files by hand for each related domestic violence case, civil and criminal. It could include information about other potentially related cases, including child custody and divorce or dissolution. It could coordinate information from different courts handling cases related to the same party(ies).² This same benefit was anticipated by the court in its proposal for the VAWA funds: "[T]he court lacks a competent electronic case management system to . . . retrieve data about overlapping cases, prior convictions, and other factors germane to the entry of effective civil and criminal protective orders."³

D. Structure of the Index

The judicial officer or clerk types in the name of a particular person, and clicks on the "DV Index."⁴ The index searches each of the court's specified databases for cases that include that name, and reports a list back to the user. The index includes all criminal cases,⁵ all domestic relations cases (including custody, divorce, dissolution), all civil domestic violence petitions and orders, and all child in need of aid and juvenile delinquency cases. For some cases (particularly criminal cases) the judge or staff will then have to review each paper case file individually for additional information, such as bail conditions and possibly victims' names, if applicable.

E. Design and Creation of the Index

The court system's contractor for the CourtView system, Maximus, developed this index. Maximus makes changes to the CourtView system quarterly and sends the changes to all of its clients in different states. There are two kinds of changes: (1) modifications requested by customers; and (2) system changes and enhancements initiated by Maximus. Within the first category, some changes are specific to a particular customer/jurisdiction and are not made available to other customers. Other changes, though requested by one customer, are made available to others optionally, if they wish to use them. Clients review the changes, decide whether they meet their needs, and may request either small, quickly-done revisions, or propose more major revisions that would be made during the next cycle of modifications.

² In a report prepared for the Alaska Court System on domestic violence case practices and services, consultant Emily Sacks noted "problems with inconsistent orders, lack of information before decision-making, and the inability of the judges to track parties' involvement in other cases." pp. 93-94, June 9, 2003 report.

³ Grant Application, Number 2002-X0855-AK-WE, prepared by Alaska Court System for VAWA funding. Available from Alaska Court System.

⁴ CourtView contains other indices for use in other types of cases.

⁵ The user can choose to list only those that have a "DV" flag. However, since the DV flag is often either not set, or can be deleted as part of a plea agreement, users may prefer to include all criminal cases.

The court designated a group of “superusers” to test the pilot version of the Index. After the Index had been in use for about a month, the court asked the group for feedback. It received comments in June and July of 2005, and then summarized those comments and the court’s responses on an Excel spreadsheet which it provided to the Council.

F. Current Status

The court system has worked with Maximus on this project since April 2004. The DV Index was implemented in May 2005. Additional modifications were requested after initial testing. Some were enhancements requested by the court based on user reviews. Some were revisions to correct errors or bugs in the initial implementation. By July of 2006, the Alaska courts had been through the revision phase of the project twice since Maximus implemented the DV Index. Maximus is working on two additional changes and may have the final version available by late 2006.

G. Method of Evaluation

1. The Judicial Council reviewed the purposes and design of the index with court staff.

The Judicial Council has followed the design and development of this project since 2003. The Council began its evaluation in July 2006, and completed it in September 2006.

2. The Judicial Council reviewed the work done by the court system and Maximus on the index.

The Council’s review of the court’s work included looking at the index itself, reviewing the comments by users, and assessing the court’s and Maximus’s response to the comments.

3. The Judicial Council contacted all persons recommended by the court system.

The court gave the Council a list of “superusers,” people who were asked to test the index and comment to the court on it. The Council sent out a survey to the “superusers” group on July 31, 2006, and repeated the survey mailout in late August 2006. The Council’s survey is attached as Appendix A. Because of low response to the emailed survey, the Council staff also called some of the superusers personally to obtain additional information. Comments from the recent Council efforts and those made to the court at the project’s inception are summarized together below. The comments fell into four groups: screen layout and appearance, case types to be included or not, the underlying data in CourtView, and software bugs.

4. The Judicial Council prepared a report for the court based on the materials collected in the evaluation.

Using the survey sent out to the group of superusers, and the materials provided by the court system, the Judicial Council prepared this report.

Part 2: Perceptions of the Domestic Violence Index

The Alaska Court System sent an email survey to the ten court staff who had experience with the “DV Index” during its test phase. The court characterized these people as “superusers” who were heavily involved with the day-to-day operations and management of the court’s domestic violence cases in Anchorage, Palmer, and Fairbanks. They helped design the index, used it after it was installed, and commented on it to the court personnel responsible for the project.

To provide the basis for this evaluation, the court provided the Council with notes and comments made by the superusers in June and July 2005. Those comments, the Council’s evaluation work, and additional background information compiled by the Council, form the basis for the evaluation.

The court categorized some of these issues as training issues, and asked the court’s ISS (Information Services and Support) staff to train other court staff. Another group of issues was addressed with Maximus so they could respond. For a third group of issues, the court ISS staff either made changes or decided that none were needed. In other instances, the court characterized the request as “outside the scope of this project” or as an underlying data entry issue, and made no change. The ISS staff fixed the software bugs that appeared as staff identified them.

A. Training issues

Training issues identified by the court that ISS staff have or will address included:

1. Charge information

Court staff will demonstrate to users how they can easily obtain information about the individual charges in a case.⁶

2. Use of DV flag by other court staff

Court staff will work to train data entry staff on the appropriate use of the “DV flag” for criminal cases. This is a significant underlying data entry issue for the court that affects the usefulness of the index, but cannot be addressed by any changes in the index.

⁶ ISS noted that display of multiple charges on the summary screen would take “too much room.” Staff suggested that users could view charge details by hitting the “Charge Dynabutton” at the top of the first screen.

3. Use of party's full name in search

Court staff will work with users of the index to clarify the need to enter the party's full name (first and last) for a search, to reduce the amount of extraneous information about relatives and others sharing the same name that appears on the screen.

B. Issues for Maximus

1. DV Flag

One issue with the DV flag was the fact that staff did not always enter it when it was needed. A second issue was that the CourtView program in some cases automatically removed the DV flag that court staff had entered. This occurred in part because some offenses (e.g., assault) could be either domestic violence or not. If the DV flag was set for a domestic violence assault case, the program sometimes removed it. When users of the index asked for "only DV cases," the program did not report a significant number of them because of this program bug, substantially reducing the usefulness of the index. At least two of the superusers reported that they stopped using the index until this problem could be repaired.

A second problem associated with the DV flag was that the original specifications required that column titled "DV?" should be completed with a Y for "Yes," if the criminal charge had a DV flag; an N for "No" if the criminal charge did not have a DV flag; and a blank (no entry) if the case was a noncriminal case. Users of the index found that civil cases were being characterized with an "N" rather than a blank. Maximus was asked to comply with the original specifications for this column.

2. Chronological order in Index searches

Users wanted the results of an index search to appear on their screens with the most recent case(s) showing up first. The CourtView rules in use at the time that the index was tested said that results would be sorted first by Court Case Number (so that a "99" case would appear before an "05" case), and alphabetically, so that all of the Anchorage ("AN") cases would appear before the Palmer "PA) cases. ISS asked Maximus to change the sort date for the DV index, so that the index sorted on filing date rather the court case number. The steps the court showed for completing the project included getting a quote from Maximus on the cost of this change, confirming that funding was available to make the change, approving the new specifications, having Maximus make the change and send it out for testing, and once sure that the change worked properly, adding it into the current index.

3. Optional displays

Some users wanted to have the option to show either all criminal cases on the screen, or only all criminal cases with a “DV” flag.⁷ The court asked Maximus to create this option, and will test the changes when they are made.

4. Additional information on summary screen

Some users wanted more information about the case type for each case shown on the first screen of the index. They hoped to have the type of case and the judge’s name added for each case found by the Index. The court asked Maximus to make these changes.

C. Issues for ISS

A fourth set of issues identified by the users of the Index included those that ISS staff could resolve within the confines of the court system. Some of these were very technical; others had a broader application. They included:

1. Identifying what the term “Affil” that appeared on the users’ Index screen meant in the context of CourtView. If it is useful, ISS will train users; if not, ISS can remove it from the screen.
2. Addition of an extra blank row in the search list – ISS has eliminated this problem.
3. A bug showing a partial button on a screen – ISS has repaired the problem.
4. A bug in a particular case that results in another party’s case opening. ISS has corrected the problem.
5. A bug in a different case that locked the screen when the user tried to find the charges. ISS has repaired the problem.
6. One user could not print the full search with a single command, but had to print one page at a time. IS has corrected the problem.

⁷ One reason that users might want to show all criminal cases is that other court work has demonstrated that the DV flag is omitted from about 25% to 40% of the criminal cases that are actually domestic violence cases. Other users might want to see all other criminal cases for the party to better assess the context of the present case.

With the exception of the first problem, at the time of this report, ISS had repaired each of the problems brought to its attention.

D. Issues outside the scope of the project

The single issue identified by the court as outside the scope of the project was a user request to include the initials of the victim on the court computer database in a form retrievable by the index. Although the victim's initials are written in the paper complaint filed in the court's paper file, there is no provision for them to be entered in the computerized database. To add them to the database would take work by Maximus, and extensive staff re-training throughout the court system. Because of the time and cost involved, the court did not consider this suggestion.

The Judicial Council, from a research perspective, would agree that it would help to have some limited information about victim identity in CourtView. In its own work, and in the day-to-day work of court staff, answering a question about whether the victim in a case is a repeat victim or is the victim who requested a civil protective order requires a manual search of case files. Manual searches are time-consuming and sometimes made more difficult by files that are in judges' chambers or elsewhere in the court building. However, the underlying need for this information is clearly a matter separate from evaluation of the DV Index.

E. Issues arising in Judicial Council Survey

The Judicial Council's survey and followup phone calls highlighted other issues. Apparently, the index has been used infrequently. For example, one superuser said that the court's staff in the location in question was very efficient at doing manual searches, so that superuser had never personally tried the index. In that situation, the staff doing the manual searches might have found the index useful, but did not have access to it in the pilot project.

Other superusers had experienced problems with the index, both reporting incomplete information, and reporting too much information. Both of those problems are described above. Because of the length of time required to make changes to make the index more useful, these superusers had not yet had a chance to try the revised index, and had stopped using the index altogether. Another superuser believed that the index was cumbersome, but thought that once it was modified, it might be more helpful.

Several of the interviewees commented about the underlying data entry problem with the DV flag. Although sometimes the problems arose because staff did not always check the DV box, other problems described above were related to the Court View program. Apparently, Maximus has been notified of these problems and is working to correct them.

Part 3: Summary and Suggestions

The court and Maximus followed a systematic approach in creating the index, putting it into place, and making modifications. They invited suggestions from experienced judicial officers and staff in the court system, incorporated those suggestions in the design of the index, established a pilot project to test the index, and then reviewed the index and are making modifications or providing extra training. The process has taken about one and a half years, but is expected to be complete soon.

The project was difficult to evaluate because of the limited use by the superuser group. Most of the group asked to test the index either did not use it at all, or used it for a short time. Those who used it for a short time found it cumbersome or inaccurate, and believed that they could do their work manually more easily. When contacted by phone, all of the superusers were helpful and had useful comments and suggestions for the index.

A. Give more staff access to index and training in its use

The Council's interviews suggested that even if the judicial officers are not always using the index, the court staff working with the judges might benefit substantially from being able to use it. They did not have access to it during the pilot project. The Council suggests that they be trained in its use, be given a period of time to work with it, and encouraged to suggest modifications from their standpoint.

B. Train judicial officers as needed

The Council suggests that when the index is more widely available that the court provide additional training for judicial officers in its use. The court will recognize that some judicial officers are more comfortable with computers than others, and will not necessarily expect that all judicial officers will need or want to use the index.

C. Continue to modify the index as needed

The court may need to make additional modifications to the index, to make it most useful to staff and judicial officers. Each proposed modification will require the same type of analysis that the court has undertaken during the development of the present DV index.

D. Address underlying data entry and programming problems

The court apparently is working on the underlying problems with the domestic violence “flag” in the CourtView database. The correct functioning of the flag appears to be essential if the index is to be most useful. As noted, users could not rely on the index to report correct data and therefore did not use it at all.⁸ In addition, the court could undertake more training for data entry staff about the need for complete and accurate data entry, and how it could benefit them as well as the judicial officers.

⁸ Although the index reported a variety of cases to users besides the ones involving the DV flags, most people interviewed believed that if they didn't have the criminal cases reported accurately there was little point in using the index for the other types of cases. At that point, they preferred to do their whole search manually.

Appendix A

Judicial Council Survey of Superusers

Survey Evaluating the Domestic Violence Index

July 31, 2006

As part of a VAWA STOP Arrest grant, the court suggested making changes in its case management system that would benefit court employees who needed to routinely find information about those who were domestic violence defendants or parties in civil domestic violence cases. The court invited the Judicial Council to evaluate the effectiveness of the domestic violence index that was designed to allow judges and others to quickly call up all cases associated with a petitioner/respondent pair, or with a domestic violence defendant.

The court system has worked with Maximus on this project since April 2004. The DV Index was implemented in May 2005. Additional modifications were requested after initial testing. Some were enhancements requested by the court based on user reviews. Some were revisions to correct errors or bugs in the initial implementation. Maximus is working on two additional changes and may have the final version available by late 2006.

You have been selected to receive this survey because you are one of a small group of judicial officers and staff who have helped to create and test the index. You may already have commented about the index, but the purpose of this survey is to summarize your experience with it and make any suggestions that you have for changes. We appreciate the time you have taken to work with the project thus far, and look forward to hearing from you.

Please describe your role in the creation or use of the domestic violence index.

Are you satisfied with the types of cases included in the index? Are some cases being missed because of underlying data entry issues that you believe should be included?

Is new data entry (e.g., entering previously incomplete data) required to make the index most useful?

4. About how much more time would it take per case to make the index most useful?
Do you think that this is feasible?

Some training has already occurred for the "superusers" of the system. About how much more time do you think that it will take to train all possible users of the new system? Who do you think would be the best people to do the training?

Maximus is still working on two changes to the index. Are you satisfied with the length of time that has been needed to implement the index?

Which users, in your view, benefit the most from the index? What are the most important benefits?

What other uses could be made of the index, such as research?

What use are you, personally, making of the index? Please estimate how frequently you use it.

In your experience, have the staff people working on this project been capable and helpful? If you are a staff person who has worked with Maximus, what has been your experience with Maximus on this project.

What would you like to see added to the index or deleted from it?

Do you have other suggestions or comments about the index?

Thank you for working with the court and Judicial Council on this evaluation. Your assistance has been invaluable. If you would like to have a copy of the Council's report on the domestic violence index, please check here:

Yes, I would like a copy of the Council's evaluation.