

System simplifies protection orders

Two federal grants allow quicker input of data into computer

By Ashley Smith
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Nearly 3,000 protection orders fill cabinets in the Allen County Sheriff Department's Civil Division.



It's a lot of paperwork for the data entry clerk to track, but a new computer system has simplified the process for sheriff officers, court personnel and the public to file and access protection orders and no-contact orders.

A protective order is a civil court order that restricts the contact certain people may have with the "petitioner" (the person requesting the order). A protective order requires one or more individuals over the age of 18 to refrain from directly or indirectly contacting the petitioner and from threatening, abusing or harassing any member of the petitioner's household.

The Protection Order Registry, which went live in Allen County at the start of the month, was devel-

oped through the Indiana Supreme Court with two federal grants to allow these types of court orders to be available locally, in the state and nationwide through the Internet.

Previously, the paperwork had to be copied and faxed to the various police departments, which would input the information into their computer systems when time became available. It was sometimes as long as a week before material would be inputted.

"The problem became how long from the time that a person was injured or battered to when it was on the record with law enforcement," said Allen Civil Court Magistrate Jerry Ummel, who helped revamp the protection order laws that led to the computer system.

Tippecanoe County was the first to test the program in 2007, and 83 more counties soon followed. It wasn't until Gov. Mitch Daniels mandated a July 1 deadline that Allen County came on board. "It didn't have a lot of advantages for Allen County because we were already efficient," Ummel said, but now that it's active, court and law-enforcement officials are pleased with the results.

Filing a protection order still operates the same as it has. The person in need of the order goes to the Courthouse Annex, 113 W. Berry St., and provides information that is immediately entered into the computer. The order then goes to the magistrate for approval and a hearing is conducted.

Once the approval process is completed, the order is put online through the Indiana Protection Order Registry (POR), which is linked to the Indiana State Police's Indiana Data and Communication System and the FBI's National Crime Information Center. Information is then made available in police cruisers and online through a password-protected system that guards the privacy of the individual.

"It's eliminating a lot of the paperwork," said Judy Knudson, supervisor for Allen County's small claims, adding that the information is also backed up. "We used to have to fax a lot of the sheriff's depart-

ments and police departments,” but now that’s not the case.

Even changes to the orders show up immediately in the system because it is maintained by the state Judicial Technology and Automation Committee.

“By the time the protection order person leaves the courthouse, it is already sent out across the state,” said LaJuan Epperson, POR project manager.

Even though the program is only a few weeks old locally, it has already proved to be a timesaver, especially considering the 3,800-some orders filed each year.

“We get faster service,” said Sgt. Michael Vaughn, supervisor of the civil process servers in the sheriff’s department.

Information on the POR Web site is only available to those with a user name and password, such as law enforcement, court clerks and victim advocacy groups. The general public does not have access to this information on the site even though protection orders are public record. Those documents can be obtained however, through the courthouse.