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Police putting reports online for public

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Anyone ever involved in a traffic accident, even a minor one with no injuries, knows the feeling of confusion and frustration with all the paperwork needed to begin to put things straight. That frustration often begins just with the attempt to obtain an incident report. Now in Union City, those days of frustration are over.

The Union City Police Department, in an effort to reduce the inconvenience to the victims of crime as well as those involved in traffic crashes, has instituted a system that puts motor vehicle crash reports and criminal incident reports on the Internet and available to the public, according to Union City Public Information Officer Sgt. George Louth.

Louth said reports are now available as soon as they are completed and approved. In the vast majority of cases the reports are available to the public within eight hours of the occurrence, he said.

Police Chief Mike Isome said there were two overriding reasons for going to the new system.

“First, it helps to streamline our process. We’re trying to get more bang for the buck, I guess you’d say,” he explained. “We tried to come up with a more efficient way to process records, to manage those records and to cut down on storage space and input time. The added benefit for everyone is that it’s convenient for the citizens, insurance companies and all those people that inundate us with requests for copies of reports.”

Isome credited Assistant Chief Chuck Odom with spearheading the project. Odom became aware of the system through working with traffic crash reconstruction software offered by Visual Statement of Canada, said Isome.

According to Odom, Report Beam, a division of Visual Statement, had employed the product in Canada and in several states for access to crash reports. Odom approached the company about the possibility of expanding the system to include incident reports.

“Within three days we were testing the system and within two months it was fully operational”, Odom said.

Isome said the new incident report system is a facet of the department’s years-long effort to upgrade systems and efficiency.

“We’ve been working on our input process for reporting for several years. And we’ve been instituting new components over time,” Isome said. “The first thing we did was to get our officers acclimated to doing reports on computer as opposed to writing them out. We purchased software and trained the officers and we got the equipment to support it. We did this a little at a time and now we’re at the point where we’re ready to trot out the entire thing. So what we’ve done is cut down on clerical time and the whole thing is digital.”

An additional benefit to online incident reporting, said Louth, is the ability of the Police Department to generate data as to location and time of occurrence for both criminal incident and traffic crashes on a continuous basis. This allows for much more effective utilization of the departments resources, he said.

Through multiple safeguards built into the system, only involved parties or their authorized representatives will have access to the reports, Louth added.

“This is in order to comply with restrictions placed on the release of traffic crash reports under the Georgia Open Records Act,” he said.

Commenting in his office Tuesday, Isome wore the look of a man happy with the accomplishments of his staff.

“This is cutting-edge technology. And to my knowledge Union City is one of very few police departments in the state of Georgia or even in the Southeast that are availing themselves of this technology,” Isome said with a smile. “We are a showcase agency for this technology, to be able to do these things online this way. We have very innovative information technology within the Police Department and the city that can research these things and see how they work. Being able to embrace this type of technology is off the chart. It’s something that’s not done on a regular basis.”

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