Playbook: ROI

Volume 1: In the Court System

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WHY A PLAYBOOK?

Today's economic and budgetary climate requires local and state government officials to pursue all possible means to increase revenue and reduce costs. At the same time, government is expected to continue providing essential services, frequently with fewer resources than have been available in the past. More than ever, it is critical to determine new and creative ways of maximizing revenue while lowering expenses.

The Blackboard Connect™ Playbooks for Local and State Government Revenue Generation Playbook series provides you with a blueprint for how to use your Blackboard Connect mass notification service to recover costs and generate revenues.

CREATIVE REVENUE GENERATION

Doing More With Less

Across America, local governments find themselves in the position of having to reduce staff in the face of declining revenues. Some examples include:

▶ Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel has proposed eliminating 2,000 vacant positions and laying off 517 more workers to close a $636 million deficit.

▶ In Nassau County, New York, after leaving 300 jobs unfilled this year to wipe out a $310 million budget gap, the county is considering laying off an additional 700 workers in 2012. Lower sales tax revenue, along with rising pension and health care costs mandated by union contracts, are facing the county this year.

▶ The city of Venice, Florida plans to cut its workforce by about 9%, or 23 jobs, and is laying off its fire marshal, deputy fire chief and fire inspector.

▶ After eliminating 588 jobs in the current fiscal year, the city of San Jose will need to cut up to 800 more positions next year, close all libraries, and end community center programs unless it caps soaring pension costs.
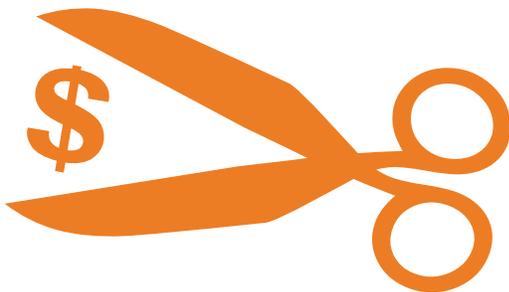
> *The first year we used Blackboard Connect, it completely paid for itself.*
>
> *- Jeff Suggs, Emergency Management Coordinator*
> *La Porte, TX*

Localities have eliminated 535,000 positions since September 2008 in an effort to deal with budget deficits, which result primarily from steep declines in property tax receipts. The National League of Cities has suggested that approximately 265,000 more jobs could be eliminated by the end of 2012. [1]

According to another estimate, state and local austerity from June 2009-June 2011 has cost about one million jobs in the government sector, depriving the U.S. economy of a vital job-creation engine. [2]

Clearly, state and local governments are under pressure to conduct business as usual with fewer resources than at any time in recent history. One result of this pressure is the need to automate processes, cut costs and collect untapped sources of revenue.

UNTAPPED REVENUE: OUTSTANDING COURT FINES

A frequent concern of court systems is the timely payment of fines and fees resulting from outstanding warrants. Some individuals simply forget about their obligations, while others, who may not be inclined to pay, use factors such as lack of reliable contact information or inability to navigate an automated response system in order to avoid their responsibilities.[3] Staff members whose workloads have increased due to budgetary restrictions often cannot follow through with the persistence needed to ensure prompt payment of such fines and fees.

Many cities and counties have millions of dollars in unpaid fines:

- ▶ Washington DC -- $355 million
- ▶ New York City -- $680 million
- ▶ Milwaukee -- $58 million
- ▶ Detroit -- $30 million [4]

In Sonoma County, CA, which was owed over $29 million in overdue fines, even the incentive of a statewide amnesty program resulted in less than one percent of fines being paid.[5] Even smaller jurisdictions can have hefty amounts of uncollected revenue, such as:

NEW HAMPSHIRE: "The Portsmouth Herald recently received an updated copy of the city's unpaid citation list, showing that parking offenders included in the top 100 owe a range of $320 to $750. Collectively, the worst offenders owe the city more than $40,000 in fines. That pales in comparison in the total amount owed in unpaid tickets over the past 17-plus years, which at last glance exceeded $700,000." [6]

TENNESSEE: "When times are tough, it's time to start calling people who owe you money. In Mt. Juliet, unpaid fines

and citations add up to more than one million dollars."[7]

TEXAS: "County records show there are about 76,000 outstanding citations with approximately $18 million in fines owed to Cameron County. Reports indicate there are also 161,670 outstanding citations and warrants issued by the cities of Brownsville, Harlingen, San Benito, Los Fresnos, Port Isabel, Laguna Vista, Rio Hondo and South Padre Island totaling more than $15.9 million." [8]

Mass notification using Blackboard Connect can quickly notify, and if necessary, regularly remind those with outstanding warrants of the need to resolve their cases promptly.

> " *When times are tough, it's time to start calling people who owe you money. In Mt. Juliet, unpaid fines and citations add up to more than one million dollars.* "

Several court systems have seen significant recovery of revenue through the use of Blackboard Connect. Some examples include:

- ▶ The Jefferson County Justice of the Peace Court uses Blackboard Connect to contact people with docket reminders, actual warrants, missed payments and outstanding citations over 30 days. Jefferson County has collected over $60,000 to date.
- ▶ La Porte, Texas uses Blackboard Connect to send targeted messages to individuals for minor infractions like missed payments, failure to appear in court and misdemeanor warrants recouping $364,000 in revenue in the last two years. "The first year we used

Blackboard Connect, it completely paid for itself," says Suggs. "We know that just sending messages out on a weekly basis for people missing court generates between $27,000 and $35,000 per year all by itself. We began using it in other areas, such as our annual Warrant Roundup, and now it's paying for itself ten-fold."

▶ Freeport, Texas offers an amnesty program to citizens with outstanding warrants for misdemeanors like traffic infractions. Freeport officials use the Blackboard Connect service to send a targeted message to affected citizens. The program has been a dramatic success, netting approximately $30,000 last year, and has prompted Freeport to change from

offering the amnesty program annually to now providing it on a monthly basis.

▶ The Ridgeland, Mississippi Police Department began using Blackboard Connect to collect contempt of court warrants for their Court Services Division. During a 12-month period ending in February 2012, the division collected a total of $27,904. "A portion of this money may never have been collected if it were not for Blackboard Connect," according to Sandra Monohan of the Ridgeland Police Department.

ADDITIONAL BENEFITS

Cost Reduction

Along with revenue recovery, the systems cited above have managed to reduce the costs associated with the collected warrants. For example:

▶ La Porte, Texas has saved the city over 2,000 labor hours to date.

▶ The Jefferson County Justice of the Peace Court has saved on man-hours and bulk mailings. In addition, they have avoided the costs associated with apprehension and incarceration.

Collection efforts require significant funding. Using Blackboard Connect to assist staff members with collections can allow for a portion of collections funding to be re-allocated into other areas of need.

"Labor hours required to collect fines were drastically reduced, thus increasing staff productivity in other areas," according to Ridgeland's Monohan. "More fines were collected using Blackboard Connect than by direct phone calls from staff alone."

In La Porte, "the staff doesn't have to spend time preparing mailings and spending money on postage, and they

don't have to pay a process server," says Suggs. Sonya Cates, Juvenile/Community Service Coordinator for the La Porte Municipal Court, adds, "We calculated that just in the first year alone, we saved $13,000 in man-hours among our clerks."

Incarceration costs are also reduced, as more people resolve their situations prior to reaching the arrest stage. "Without this program, a lot more people would have been incarcerated," says Freeport's Jeff Pynes.

Automation

Before revenue can be collected, it must first be located. Manually searching through court records is time-consuming and may not produce sufficient results. In addition, time spent searching for uncollected revenue is time that staff members, already stretched thin, have to take away from other important tasks.

Blackboard Connect can work with your existing systems to uncover potential sources of revenue. "By making the phone calls, you don't have to find these folks,"

according to Jeff Suggs, Emergency Management Coordinator for the City of La Porte, Texas. "They're being responsive, and realizing, 'if they can track me down on the phone, or by e-mail or text message, then I'd better go pay my stuff.'" Even when warrants are years old, Blackboard Connect makes enforcement easier. "If you have the data, you can reach everyone who's been touched by the system," says Suggs.

"With Blackboard Connect, it was easy to identify the outstanding warrant population group and then record our message and send it," adds Jeff Pynes, City Manager of Freeport, Texas. "In addition, we were also able to get immediate feedback on the people who received the message and which phone numbers were still viable."

Improved Compliance

La Porte, Texas has cleared over 650 warrants and they have reduced failure to appear incidents by 50 percent. "If they're clearing those warrants with Blackboard Connect, they aren't sending out paper," says Suggs. "We've seen a decrease of approximately 50% in additional charges filed, such as failure to appear, since we've been using Blackboard Connect," adds Cates. "It's increased our web payments and phone payments as well."

In addition, La Porte has experienced a significant increase in compliance with juvenile warrants. "We have a higher rate of attendance for community service since we began using Blackboard Connect," says Cates. "We used to have quite a number of absences, but now, we send out a message on Friday evening reminding the juveniles of their requirements under the court-ordered program. We reach not only the individual, but also their parents. The messages are delivered by phone, e-mail, and text, and we now see very few absences now in that program."

La Porte has also seen improved compliance in moving violations which involve commercial vehicles. "We are able to remind the companies of warrants, upcoming court dates, and payments that are due," says Cates. "This has helped a large number of commercial drivers,

since many are simply passing through the area or coming from out-of-state."

Freeing Staff for Other Duties

Time spent on cost recovery and revenue generation is time which could be spent performing more essential tasks. Typically, one area or the other tends to suffer. "We simply didn't have enough employee resources to sit down and make all those phone calls," says Freeport's Pynes.

In La Porte, court would have to close for two weeks while staff members tried to catch up on outstanding warrants. "The court would be shut down while seven people would sit for two weeks and make phone calls," says Suggs.

Now, court continues uninterrupted, and staff members can concentrate on their normal responsibilities and other duties. Time spent attempting to contact people who failed to appear immediately following their court session is greatly reduced. "Depending on how many people didn't show, someone could spend an entire afternoon making calls," says Suggs. "Now, they can do that in five minutes and then start working on the next court docket."

In addition, La Porte has been able to reallocate staff time to other programs. "We have a new juvenile program in the court, and we've been able to devote more time to that, as well as other programs," according to Cates.

Blackboard Connect has helped the Ridgeland Police Department collect more warrant fines and contempt of court fines with better results and with fewer labor hours. "The court services staff was able to focus on other duties rather than making phone calls," according to Monohan.

Improved Staff Morale

The ability to communicate quickly allows court systems to notify staff members in situations where they may not need to report for work, such as the cancellation of overtime. "We even use it to set up municipal court appearance reminders for our police

officers," says Pynes. "Many of our officers do shift work, and the reminders are an important component in ensuring they make it to court on the right day, at the right time."

"I think that the stress level is down because the staff doesn't have to do as much" when people fail to show up for their court date, says Suggs. In the past, staff members typically had to deal with conflicts which tend to arise regarding court appearances and the actions which necessitated them. With Blackboard Connect, information is delivered without conflict in a matter-of-fact manner. "Now that our system is automated, I think there's nearly zero psychological stress, because those interactions are greatly reduced," according to Suggs.

"We can personalize each message, which eliminates any confusion about who the message is intended for," says Cates. "Being able to insert the name has helped us a lot. We've also found that we get better response using Blackboard Connect for these calls than with calls made individually. The clerks love it, and I love it. Rather than picking 50 names out of a 200 page report, and trying to reach those people individually, we can send out a call with Blackboard Connect, and we're done. We rarely sit and make individual phone calls anymore."

Improved Customer Service

Reducing the burden of collections activity and warrant follow-up allows staff to place a greater focus on areas which impact service to customers. Responsive governments will want to provide positive interaction with citizens, regardless of the circumstances under which they are seeking service.

"The (amnesty program) has allowed us to have a positive impact on people. Especially in light of the recent economic situation, we want everyone to know that the city is here to help, that we are compassionate and understanding in regards to challenges people might be facing," said Pynes. "Our amnesty program gives people a chance to start over, and it allows us to collect money that otherwise would just be sitting on the table."

"We like the fact that we can send a call out after hours, which allows people to receive the message at home, rather than being interrupted at work," says La Porte's Cates. "The ability to send a message multiple times is also a plus. We often get calls from people thanking us for sending a reminder, which allows them to resolve their cases before a warrant is issued, and leads to a much better outcome."

SIX CALLS @ FIVE MINUTES EACH = $178,000 IN WARRANTS CLEARED

In February 2012, the La Porte Municipal Court and Police Department joined forces with more than 300 jurisdictions across Texas in the "2012 Great Texas Warrant Roundup." The warrant roundup began on February 25, and ended on March 4.

Rather than going through outstanding warrants by hand and contacting citizens individually, the Court used Blackboard Connect. Court staff members could easily import data from their warrant tracking software to set up outgoing calls with Blackboard Connect.

Beginning two weeks in advance of the warrant roundup, La Porte made a total of six calls, according to La Porte Emergency Management Coordinator

Jeff Suggs. Each call took about five minutes to set up and deliver. Between the six calls, a total of 2357 individual messages were delivered.

The results were astounding. A total of 440 warrants were cleared, with a face value of $178,000. After factoring in waivers and reductions granted by the court, as well as citizens who opted to serve sentences rather than pay fines, the actual amount collected came to $84,000.

"The court cleared $178,000 off their books in a total of about 30 minutes," said Suggs. "There isn't even a benefit cost analysis software that can generate that kind of number. The ROI in using Blackboard Connect just for the warrant roundup alone is incredible."

PREPARING FOR SUCCESSFUL REVENUE GENERATION THROUGH MASS NOTIFICATION

Idea Generation

La Porte Municipal Court decided to use Blackboard Connect after hearing about the successes a nearby town was experiencing. According to Cates, "We thought, 'Why can't we do this too? The city already has it, so we should make use of it.'" La Porte realized that their system for tracking warrants would need to provide data for Blackboard Connect. "We contacted our vendor to find out what would be needed to make this work," says Cates.
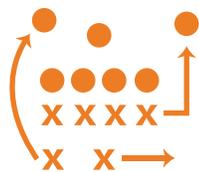
Creating a Strategy

At first, the vendor attempted to create a system that would allow La Porte to send notifications. "After we put the numbers down on paper, we could see that it would be more beneficial, cost-wise, to use Blackboard Connect," according to Cates. While it took their warrant tracking database vendor some time to export their data, Blackboard Connect was able to begin using it immediately thereafter. Cates noted that after their vendor saw several of their clients making similar use of Blackboard Connect, the vendor modified their pricing structure, "but it was still pretty steep," she says.

Once the structure is in place, some jurisdictions have used Blackboard Connect to offer incentives, such as Freeport. "Every month, we contact citizens via Blackboard Connect and offer to reduce warrant fees if the warrant is taken care of within the first 30 days of issuance," observed Pynes. "By doing it monthly, we have a better chance of ensuring the contact information is still current."

Communicating New Programs

In order for revenue generation and recovery efforts via mass notification to be successful, it will be necessary to communicate clearly and frequently about these new procedures. Prior to its launch, staff members and other internal constituencies will need to receive detailed instructions about how the program will operate. Court systems may wish to designate a primary and a secondary staff member to respond to questions from citizens who have been contacted regarding delinquent warrants, in order to ensure consistency in responses.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

▶ Personalize messages for more effective calls and better response rates

▶ Send calls to homes after work

▶ Send multiple reminders

▶ Include media in your communication plans

▶ Review program after implementation to improve and optimize

Likewise, local media will need to be briefed about the program, as some citizens will likely seek out their local "consumer watchdog," or other media representatives, as the program is introduced. If the court system maintains a social media presence, information can be posted there for public dissemination and discussion. "We provided information on our section of the town government website to let defendants and the public know that we planned to begin using Blackboard Connect to contact persons with business before the court," says La Porte's Cates. "As people came through the court, we would informally let them know that they would receive reminder calls as well."

When communicating about the program, accentuate its positive aspects, including:

▶ Consistent enforcement of warrants, ensuring regular follow-through and eliminating warrants which "fall through the cracks" due to a lack of resources needed to ensure timely action

▶ Minimizing the need to hire additional staff

▶ Increased revenue, which may forestall hikes in taxes and/or fees for other services

▶ Equal application and enforcement of the law, ensuring that all citizens meet their legal obligations in a timely manner

PROGRAM SET-UP

Launching Your Program

In La Porte's example, the city had initially purchased Blackboard Connect to use for emergency notifications, but there was a sense that more could be done. "We had a discussion within the city administration about using Blackboard Connect to its fullest capability," says Suggs. "I discussed the possibility of integrating some of our departmental software systems with Blackboard Connect, and I believe Sonya took the initiative to approach their systems vendor about integration."

"I spoke with our Blackboard representative and shared my ideas with her for using Blackboard Connect in our court system," says Cates. "We agreed that it was something we could do, and it progressed from there." La Porte's Blackboard representative brought Cates and the Blackboard Client Care team together to create a system that met the court's needs. Their representative "stayed with me each step of the way until we launched the first call," according to Cates. "They've been wonderful to work with."

Step-by-Step Procedures

While specific procedures will vary, depending on the systems involved, the process for sending a revenue generation message will generally include the following steps:

▶ Select the people to be called -- this can be done by date, by offense, or other criteria

▶ Prepare the data for use in Blackboard Connect

▶ Import the data into Blackboard Connect

▶ Use Blackboard Connect to send the message

As La Porte's Cates describes, "We begin by going into the case management section of our software and entering a date range. After we retrieve the data, we export it into a spreadsheet, modify data headings as needed, save the spreadsheet as a .csv file, then import that file into Blackboard Connect. At that point, we are ready to begin sending messages. The whole process from start to finish takes less than five minutes.

"After a message is sent, our clerks are able to search by phone number when they receive a callback, which

allows them to provide information about the warrant and offer options to resolve it. Defendants can make payments online, or while speaking with the clerk."

Monitoring for Message Quality

After your program has been established, you may come up with ideas or questions about how to improve the process. Your Blackboard representative and the Blackboard Client Care team can work with you to implement changes or suggest improvements. The reporting features within Blackboard Connect make it easy to measure the success of your efforts.

"Every time we send a message, we receive a report about it," says Cates. "We can review the report and determine what percentage of the people we called actually received the call. We can also see which numbers were disconnected, and which calls were answered by a machine.

"We continually work with Blackboard on ways to improve the process. For example, we decided that we wanted to include the name of the defendant with each call. We worked with our representative to determine what was needed, and were able to make that adjustment, which has made a significant improvement. I always work with Blackboard for help or advice on how to improve the process and the messages themselves."

Helpful Hints

▶ Depending on how often warrant data is refreshed, it may be necessary to compare data generated with recent payment receipts prior to importing the data into Blackboard Connect.

▶ With juvenile cases, extra care is needed when sending messages due to the sensitive nature of these cases. Consider sending messages related to these cases separately from cases involving adults.

▶ Work closely with your court system software vendor and have a clear understanding of its capabilities.

"Sometimes, when discussing this process, it sounds like there are a lot of steps involved," says Cates. "But I've found that it's more helpful to see the process rather than hearing about it. Any city which already had Blackboard Connect should be using it in their court system. It's very beneficial to the whole department. It's the best thing you can get."

CONCLUSION

With the dual objective of reducing costs and increasing funding, Blackboard Connect can play a key role in your court system's efforts to generate revenues. Today, court systems are using the power of mass notification to clear outstanding warrants; reduce costs associated with collections efforts, apprehension, and incarceration; and to do so in a professional manner which preserves and enhances good public relations.

"Ultimately, our goal is to get people to come in and take care of their stuff," says Pynes. "We want to keep people out of jail. Blackboard Connect has helped us connect with citizens in a timely, consistent manner without expending additional resources. With the service, we can record one message and then get that message consistently to ten people or thousands of people at the push of a button. Without it, we just wouldn't be able to communicate like we do."

The Blackboard Client Care team is available to assist with all aspects of establishing a revenue generation and recovery process, from setup and system interfacing, to training and go-live support. Ongoing Client Care support is available on a 24/7/365 basis.

Contact your Blackboard representative to help you begin the process of using Blackboard Connect to generate and recover needed revenue in your court system.

ABOUT BLACKBOARD & BLACKBOARD CONNECTTXT

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Blackboard ConnectTxt works securely on the Internet wherever you are in the world. Our online application allows you to send and receive SMS text messages securely from your desktop, and data can be uploaded from any existing system.

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