How Automating Victim Restitution Helps Agencies Maximize Revenue Streams

Theo Douglas | July 17, 2017

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Brett Sivits, a client executive at revenue cycle management provider Ontario Systems, told *Government Technology* that the company hears from agencies across the country that want to enhance victim restitution.

"We have clients in Texas, Virginia, Florida and all over the country, and I'm seeing more and more questions referring to victim restitution as a whole," Sivits said, characterizing the rise in interest as having emerged during the past two to three years. " California is probably the leading edge of that from our perspective. I believe it was a legal mandate that had caused increased attention on victim restitution."

In California, Assembly Bill 109, signed by Gov. Jerry Brown in 2011, sent inmates convicted of nonviolent, nonserious and nonsexual crimes into county jails instead of state prison. And Prop. 47, approved by voters in November 2014, converts many nonviolent/nonsexual offenses that once would have remained felonies into misdemeanors.

Supporters championed both pieces of legislation as having the potential to help the state make better use of criminal justice resources and reduce overcrowding. But both are now credited with increasing workloads and costs for local law enforcement and criminal justice systems.

Sean Sander, revenue and recovery director for San Diego County, said the agency's criminal justice departments collaborate to aid people in the system in becoming successful again — helping them find work and housing, and resolving mental health and addiction issues — because the largest roadblock to restitution is often lack of employment.

"All that has been areas that the county didn't previously have, that now they have responsibility for," Sander said, noting that as the county, a longtime Ontario client, looked closely to evidence-based practices to reduce recidivism, "they apply those techniques, and that's helping cut the recidivism rate. And correspondingly, also helping us have people be able to pay."

Automated victim restitution works similarly to other mechanized aspects of court systems around the nation. Typically, computerized case management systems track the whereabouts of offenders and victims alike. Systems notify offenders, commonly by telephone call, letter or email, of their balance owed, payment due date and previously unpaid installments.

Offenders can pay by mail, walk-in, telephone or online — though San Diego County is interested in potentially partnering with another entity on payment kiosks. Victims, in turn, can receive checks or "warrants" via mail.

And Ontario Systems' Ultimate Negotiator helps offenders who may struggle to negotiate against a preset minimum standard payment.

Ultimately, Sander said automating victim restitution has been a huge win for the county, which serves 129 agency clients and 440 unique revenue collection areas. All told, it monitors 522,000 debtor accounts.

The agency has been able to increase overall collections from $15.5 million in Fiscal 2013-2014 to $17.2 million in Fiscal 2016-2017. Victim restitution funds are estimated to account for 15 to 20 percent of those totals.

Simultaneously, the county has also grown the percentage of money it collects compared to what is "available to collect" from 6.7 percent in fiscal 2014-2015 to 7.17 percent in fiscal 2016-2017; and increased its return on investment (ROI) from collecting $1.66 for every dollar spent in fiscal 2013-2014 to $1.97 in fiscal 2016-2017.

"Some of that ultimately is the result of automation," Sander said, noting the county sends out more than half a million notices annually. "When you look at the ROI and the

productivity gains that you get from an automated system, it's incredible. You're able to send out a level of notice that you'd never be able to otherwise."

http://www.govtech.com/computing/How-Automating-Victim-Restitution-Helps-Agencies-Maximize-Revenue-Streams.html