

PRELIMINARY PLANNING
FOR DEVELOPMENT OF
COMPREHENSIVE COURT INFORMATION
SYSTEM IN DELAWARE COUNTY,
PENNSYLVANIA

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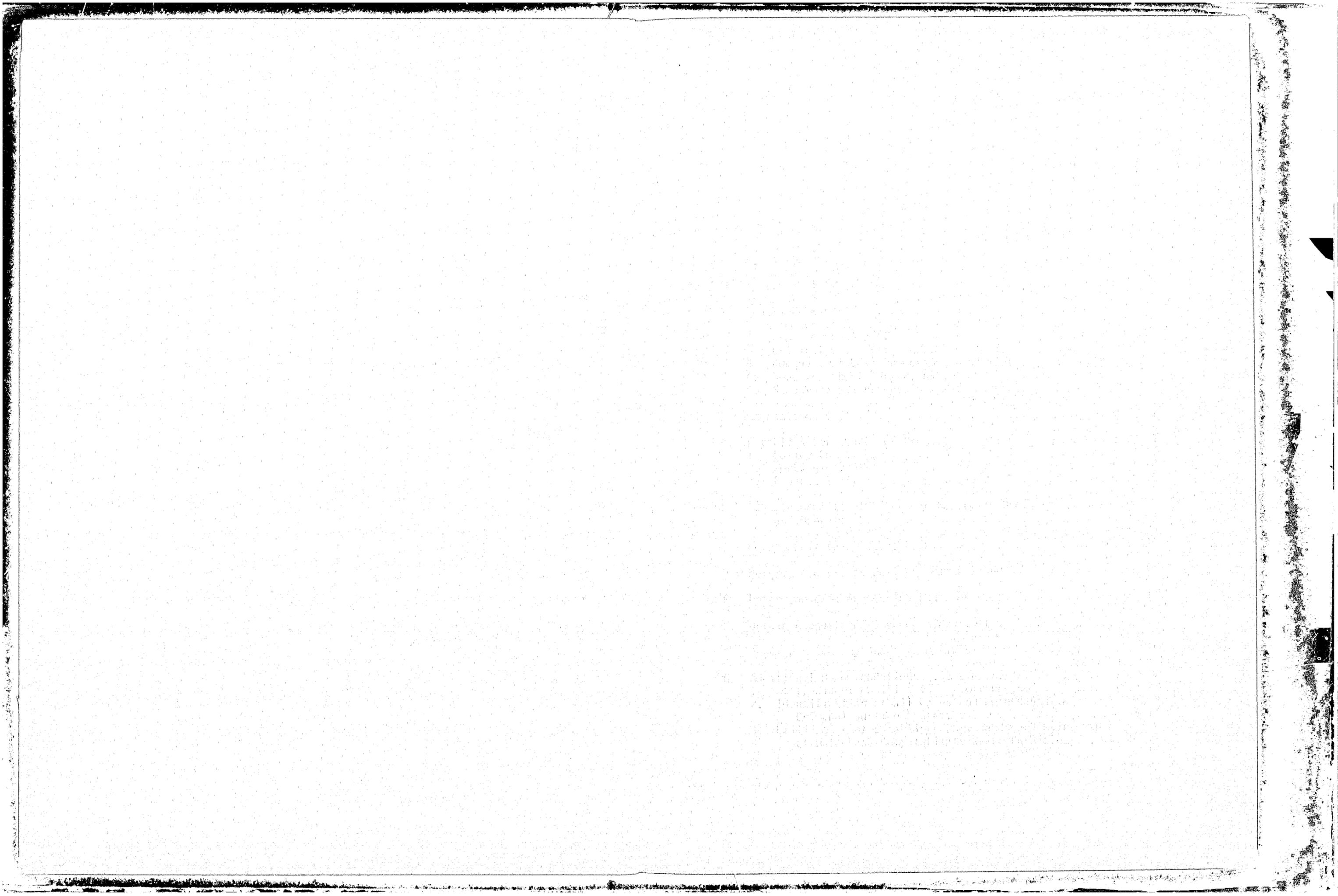
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ACQUISITIONS

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This report was prepared in conjunction with the Institute's Criminal Courts Technical Assistance Project, under a contract with the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration of the U.S. Department of Justice.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Delaware County, Pennsylvania is in the process of developing a comprehensive court information system which will permit not only the maintenance of accurate records but also the immediate retrieval of case information for both civil and criminal caseloads. This system will be based on a study and plan to be developed jointly by the Court Administrator's Office and the County Data Processing Department. To assist local officials in this system development project, Michael F.X. Gillin, Director of Delaware County's Criminal Justice Planning Office, requested the services of a specialist in court automation through the resources of LEAA's Criminal Courts Technical Assistance Project at The American University.

In view of the broad scope of effort involved, the requested assistance has been divided into two phases. The first phase, documented in this report, has involved a preliminary survey of the present computer facilities in the County, an outline of the needs and resources of the participating agencies in relation to the proposed system, and recommendations for system development. Once this report is reviewed by Delaware County officials and a basic plan has been developed, additional technical assistance will be provided for review of the system plan.

To accomplish the first phase of technical assistance, a three-man consultant team met with Delaware County officials on June 21 and 22. The

members of this team were selected for both their general expertise in court automation system development as well as the specific jurisdictional experiences they represented. These team members were: John Clark, Information System Project Director for Jacksonville, Florida; Clifford Kirsh, Court Administrator for the Beaver County (Pennsylvania) Court of Common Pleas; and Larry Polansky, Chief Deputy Court Administrator for the Court of Common Pleas of Philadelphia.

During their on-site visit, the team reviewed the court's preliminary information system plan as well as the organization of the limited computer information services currently available to the county's criminal justice agencies. In addition to this review the team interviewed the agency heads and/or other representatives who were and would be involved in the proposed system to determine:

- a) whether they were now actively participating in the system planning and policy direction,
- b) to what extent their agency was being served by the system,
- c) to what extent they perceived the possible benefits which might be derived from the proposed system, and
- d) what resources their agency had committed to the project.

The focus of these interviews was upon developing a reasonable picture of the level of activity of the proposed project so that the consultants would provide recommendations suitable to that stage of development which the project and its organization had achieved.

During the two day visit the team encountered an atmosphere of total cooperation. The list below indicates the officials participating in these meetings and, without exception, each had a positive attitude toward the proposed system and gave willingly of his or her time to apprise

the consultants accurately of the situation and attitude of their respective agencies:

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| 1. Honorable Judge Francis J. Catania | Administrative Judge-
Delaware County Court of
Common Pleas |
| 2. Honorable Judge John V. Diggins | President Judge-Delaware
County Court of Common Pleas |
| 3. Patrick Flynn | Administrator-Delaware County
Courts Total Data Information
System |
| 4. Michael Gillin | Director of Criminal Justice
Planning Office |
| 5. Donald Guthrie | Administrator-District Justices |
| 6. Robert F. Kelly | Prothonotary |
| 7. John F. McNichol | Director of Data Processing-County |
| 8. Joseph Palazzo | Deputy Clerk of Court |
| 9. Rita Prescott | Court Administrator |
| 10. John Reilley | Assistant District Attorney |
| 11. William Toland | Assistant District Attorney |

In addition to these meetings, the consultants visited several of the agency working areas and reviewed the current activities, always with an eye toward the manner in which it affected the information system project. The data processing operation was also reviewed and the products now being provided for the justice system were analyzed.

The consultants' observations and tentative recommendations were reviewed with the Delaware County officials who were most actively involved in the administration of the project to allow them the opportunity to begin, as

quickly as possible, to implement those recommendations which they and the consultants deemed most important. In addition, this review allowed the consultants an opportunity to ascertain whether they had mistakenly interpreted any of the important data gleaned during the interviews.

II. ANALYSIS OF EXISTING SITUATION

A. Problem Areas

1. Project Study and Plan

There is no comprehensive plan or study completed or even firmly undertaken at this time. In addition, inquiry revealed that no set plan for what was going to be done existed at this time. The planning effort is primarily in the hands of the Information System Administrator who appears to be a highly competent data processing professional with, thus far, only a minimal exposure to the general criminal justice system and even less experience with court and court related agencies and their problems. There is no doubt that in a reasonably short time he will obtain the necessary familiarity with the justice system.

2. Project Organization

Although the cooperation is excellent and the interest evidenced by the agencies involved is at an extremely high level, there is no formal organization for an orderly and logical administration of the project goals. The direct responsibility appears to lie with the Court Administrator and the Information Systems Administrator, both court employees, with no clear line of responsibility other than that which naturally runs from the Court Administrator directly to the Administrative judge. When the system is properly designed and functioning, this line of ultimate authority will

provide the essential management pyramid (i.e., vesting one person with the final authority to act or, more frequently, to order action) to make the system work efficiently. However, the decisions to be made now affecting what information to capture and, most importantly, what information will be desired and provided to the ultimate users of the system are not, under the present organizational method, going to be made jointly by those who will have to live with the results of this project for years to come. This may very well lead to disagreement, distrust and disuse of an otherwise promising resource.

3. Criminal vs. Civil Needs

The major emphasis appears to be on the criminal side of the court system, whereas, it was determined that from 50% to possibly as much as 75% of the court and court related activity is in the civil area.

4. Adequacy of Data Processing Equipment

The data processing equipment (commonly called hardware) appears to be capable of supporting the short-range needs of the Court Information System, especially in light of the currently ordered upgrade in equipment which is anticipated to raise the workload capacity of the organization before the beginning of 1974. However, this capacity does not include any capability for providing "immediate retrieval" of case information if, by that term, one means the use

of cathode ray terminals at many locations in the justice system which would enable users to enter questions into a simple typewriter key-board and, within seconds, receive full and complete answers. The cost of expanding the "hardware" to provide that type of service would, at this time, be prohibitive. Further, the change would require extensive additional education and training of existing data processing personnel.

If, however, the desire for immediate retrieval could be satisfied by providing frequently updated printed listings at all appropriate locations, then this picture is much brighter.

On the darker side, however, there was a distinct feeling by the team that the County data processing center was heavily engaged in many high priority tasks which might very severely limit the speed with which they could respond to court information system job requests. For example, it is obvious that if the choice had to be made as to whether a County payroll or a civil litigant index were to be run at a critical moment, the choice would clearly be to run the payroll.

5. Need for Short Term Plans

There appears to be a short-term as well as a long-term need for information systems support. At the very least, there is a need for producing the various statistical reports required by the Pennsylvania Department of Justice and the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania. It appears that although serious consideration has been

given to this need, as yet no clear automated plan exists as herein before noted for the collecting, data processing conversion and finally the communication of this data to the appropriate agency.

6. Need for Data Processing Staff Support

The systems and programming staff for the Court Information System consists of one man, the Information System Administrator. The County data processing staff, although apparently competent, appear unable to provide any systems or programming assistance at all for this project. No matter how limited a project is anticipated, there is no way that one man will be able to accomplish this unless he is given many years in which to put it together. We are certain that Delaware County does not wish to wait years for the assistance an information system can provide to the Court and Court-related agencies.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Establish Organizational Structure for Project Direction (Problem #2 above)

The team recommends very strongly the immediate formation of an organization which would include a high level policy committee as well as a working committee.

1. Policy Committee

This committee must be manned by the heads of the several justice agencies. This group must meet frequently to first determine the direction and then monitor the progress of the project. Unless there is continuing involvement and direction from all those agencies which the system attempts to serve, it will not be possible for the system to truly serve the needs of the total justice system nor to fairly serve its agencies.

As noted above, the major functions of this group will be to make policy decisions and to approve or disapprove of progress by the project. This committee might include the following representatives:

- a. The Administrative and/or President Judge of the County
- b. The Clerk of Court
- c. The Prothonotary
- d. The Court Administrator
- e. The Prosecutor

- f. The Sheriff
- g. The Public Defender
- h. The Chief of Probation Services

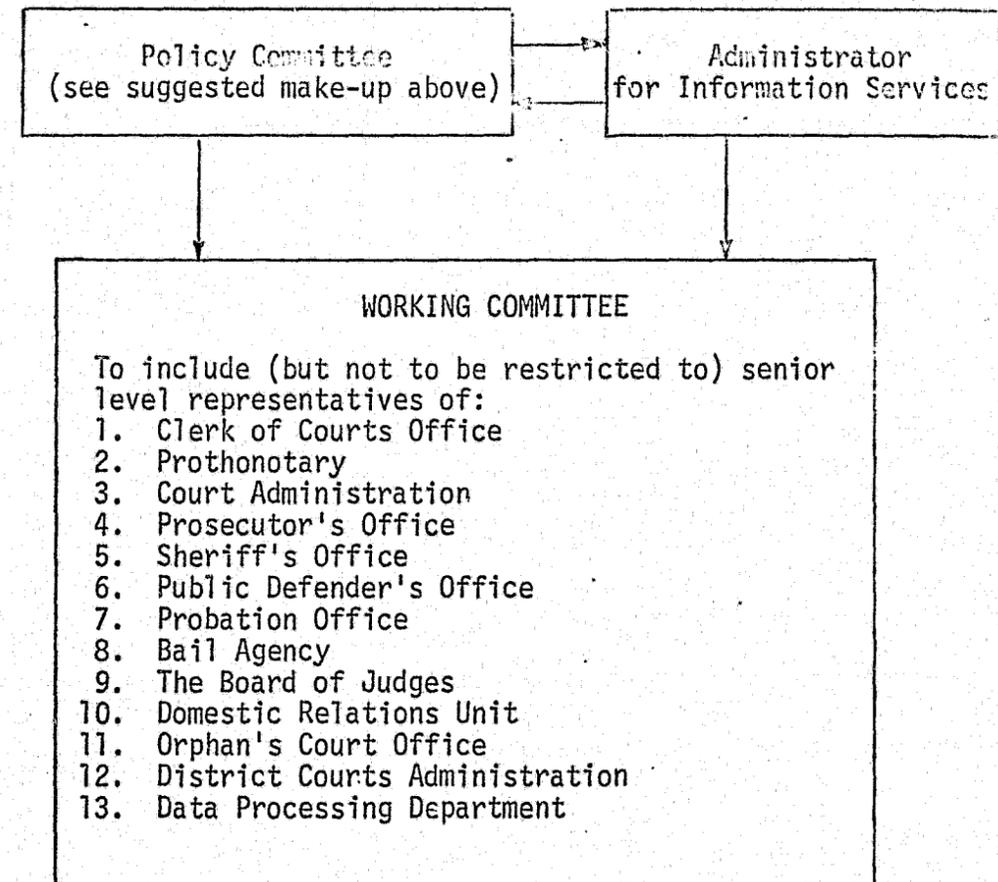
2. Working Committee

Every office or agency involved in the system must designate a senior level employee to serve on a work committee. There is nothing to preclude any member of the policy committee from serving on this committee if he or she can devote all the necessary time to the effort.

Persons on this committee will be the voice of their agency. They will share in making recommendations to the policy committee and be responsible for monitoring the study and design effort to assure that the project is meeting the needs and requirements of their office or agency. These persons will be responsible for articulating to the designers the needs and sources of information. They must be able to individually set priorities for their agency needs and to collectively evaluate the total system needs and recommend priorities to the policy group.

3. Project Staff

The administrator of the information system will serve as advisor to the policy committee and project leader for the working committee. It will be his responsibility to co-ordinate the synthesis of the needs and resources and to articulate the plan and design which evolves from the work committee effort.



B. Educate Committee Members in System Technology and Operations
(Problems #1 and 2 above)

Both the policy committee and the working committee will require some basic introduction to and understanding of the technology which they will be asked to apply to their operation. It is imperative that all involved be immediately exposed to an introductory course in data processing. Most manufacturers of data processing equipment are willing to provide this training, and it is suggested that necessary arrangements

be made for training immediately. Possibly, the training could be supplemented with a few sessions led by the Administrator of Information Systems who would relate the general introductory materials to the Delaware County System operation.

These training sessions should be immediately followed by a visit or visits to currently operating justice information system locations to enable the group to see and touch what others are doing in this area. The policy committee, especially, is encouraged to visit and review the completed and also the in-process efforts of others.

The three project consultants, all of whom are involved in operational information systems efforts have extended an open invitation to the Delaware County Committee and staff to visit and review their operations and, it is suggested, such reviews should be conducted as quickly and thoroughly as possible.

Obviously, not all of the persons involved will be able to personally visit distant locations. Therefore, it should be the responsibility of those who do make these visits to make a presentation of their findings and observations to the balance of the committee group.

No adequate plan or design can be produced by the group unless and until an awareness of what is being done and can be done is obtained by both the policy and working groups.

During the on-site visit, it was indicated that at least two seminars relating to information systems in the justice area will be given in the near future--one by the Institute for Court Management and the other by one of the hardware manufacturers. It is recommended that some of the members of the policy and/or working committee participate.

C. Adopt Preliminary Study Plan (Problem #1 above)

As stated above, there is presently no plan or planned study in existence. In the opinion of the consultants, it is too early for a detailed long range plan for the group. The following schedule is as broad a planning program that can be articulated until the learning processes outlined above are completed:

1. Establish a formal organization: identify and/or appoint policy and working committee members and prepare a fixed schedule of individual and joint meetings.
2. Prepare a plan for the educating and familiarizing of the committee in the Justice Information Systems area.
3. Prepare interview forms and questionnaires which, when completed, will provide documentation of the development of the inventory of needs and resources that the project will require.
4. Determine the priorities of the needs and goals identified above.
5. Provide a realistic and logical plan for the achievement, in sequence, of those prioritized goals.
6. Develop a projection of the realistic times and costs required for the achievement of those goals.
7. Develop the systems design for that plan.
8. Implement the systems design.

D. Determine Civil as well as Criminal Needs (Problem #3)

The team unanimously recommended that the plan developed give early attention to the needs of the civil side of the justice information system. The indications are that heavy early emphasis will fall on the criminal side of the picture and, although there should be emphasis there, it is apparent that since perhaps as much as 75% of the justice system workload is not in the criminal area, Delaware County should at least give equal priority to the non-criminal system needs.

E. Determine Data Processing Equipment (Problem #4)

A recommendation as to the equipment needs of the system will be highly dependant upon the decisions that will be made as to the needs and goals of a Delaware County Court Information System. The decision as to whether or not an "on-line" system (capability for instant inquiry, response and update from and to strategically located terminals all tied to a central computer system) is a goal will have a tremendous effect upon the equipment needs. If "on-line" systems are in the future picture, Delaware County must not only plan for the expansion of the County data processing system (and its operations staff) but must also consider duplicating all critical pieces of data processing equipment. Once the operation becomes dependent upon instant interfacing with the computer, it will not be able to accept any time when the equipment is "not working" or unavailable (an overly strong analogy might

be the need for emergency alternate power sources in hospital operating rooms). In the opinion of the consultants, however, present needs do not require an "on-line" capability in the near future.

The equipment available today does not appear capable of supporting the short-term needs. However, with the added capability (now on order), the equipment should be able to support the early stages of development.

The lack of priority for the information needs of criminal justice agencies may be solved by scheduling a second shift just for the running of justice system jobs. This could very well eliminate any friction which might occur because of a divergence between County and justice system priorities. It is not suggested that data processing operational staff be splintered. Rather, it is recommended that an allocation of time to justice system work be devised to insure that justice system priorities and needs be satisfied.

F. Obtain Adequate Data Processing Staff (Problem #6 above)

It is strongly recommended that the addition of at least one system analyst/programmer to the information systems staff be made. Any and all unallocated funds in the grant as well as other available funds should be used to provide the means by which the system will come into being. It is too early to act now on this. While policy and working committee members are learning about the uses of technology, the added staff member(s) will have to be learning about the justice system. Delaware County must be prepared for the need to provide a competitive

salary. There should be no skimping, for not only is there the need to get good people, but this staff must stay on and provide support and continuity to the growth and improvement of the system. This project staff should be full-time permanent employees in lieu of contracted consulting services, wherever and whenever possible.

G. Develop Necessary Short Term Plans (Problem #5 above)

For the short range, the team recommends that the Information System Administrator work on the design and implementation of a simple system for satisfying the reporting requirements of the Bureau of Criminal Justice Statistics and the State Court Administrator's office. The completion of the data capture form, currently under design, and the efforts required to arrange for the adequate and complete data collection will be worthwhile for all involved. It will give the operating agencies some small feel for the degree of difficulty to be encountered during the attempt to implement the "complete" information system without resulting in a great deal of wasted effort. All of the data collected will necessarily be required in the final system, and will be easily adapted to that system.

If at all possible, a comparable short range project should be instituted on the "civil side" in an attempt to provide all participants with some valuable early automation experience. Short range goals generally should be:

1. Statistical Reports
2. Index files and reports covering:
 - a. Criminal defendants and litigants
 - b. Attorneys, law firms, arbitrators
 - c. Judges, Assistant District Attorneys
 - d. Judgments
3. Defendant status reporting
4. Civil and criminal court lists.

H. Additional Recommendations

1. State-Wide Identification of Attorneys

During the discussions, an idea was generated by Delaware County officials relating to the state-wide identification of attorneys. The team approves wholeheartedly of that idea and recommends follow-up with the appropriate state authorities.

2. Identification of all cases and defendants in Criminal Justice System

It was generally agreed during the discussion that there was a need for a unique and continuing identifier for all cases and defendants in the criminal system. It appeared that there was general agreement on the use of district justice case numbers and social security numbers, respectively, as the best possible solutions.

3. Utilization of Established Standards and Maintenance of Data Base Compatability Where Possible

As the design of data bases is undertaken, the standards provided by the national SEARCH project in their offender-based transaction system (O.B.T.S.) and computerized criminal history system (C.C.H.)

should be utilized as extensively as possible. Further, care must also be taken to maintain data base compatability with the Pennsylvania State Police project entitled Commonwealth Law Enforcement Assistance Network (CLEAN) in order to insure compatability with that system and adherence to its minimum standards.

4. Review of Basic Plan Before Implementation

Upon completion of the "education" of the policy and working committee staff and the development of a basic plan for implementation, a short review should be made, before implementation, to insure that the direction taken by the project is "on track" toward a successful implementation.

IV. SUMMARY

There is an excellent opportunity for successful implementation of a justice information system in Delaware County.

The atmosphere of cooperation and the extremely strong support from the court bodes well for an eventually successful project. The common start-up problems evidenced in this report can be overcome by a logical and systematic attack on these problems consistent with a more adequately prepared plan for that attack.

In order, the recommended steps to be taken are:

1. Organization
2. Education
3. Planning
4. Action

END