

Historical Washington County Courthouse locks up security with modern networked technology from Dynamark and Milestone IP video surveillance.

“We like being able to watch what’s going on and be proactive instead of reactive in any situation, using the system to respond fast before things get out of control. We can see everything that’s happening anywhere around the building for full control over our security.”

- Lieutenant Don Stewart, Washington County Sheriff’s Office



Challenges: This courthouse had no security system before and the increase in weapons was becoming a greater risk to safety. Dealing with violent tempers is not uncommon in court proceedings, and the inmate transfer process to holding cells and courtrooms needed upgrading. The historical building had too many means of entry as new wings and doors had been added over the years. The Historical Society also had strict rules for renovations that created special needs for the installation.

Solution: Homeland Security funding covered the costs for Dynamark Security to install a networked security system that uses about 30 Vivotek (Models numbers?) and Axis (?) network cameras managed by Milestone XProtect Enterprise IP video surveillance software. They have also installed a Galaxy access control system, at the Sally Port with intercom buzzer into a secured passageway, and a metal detector at one main public entrance, turning other doors into fire exits.

Advantages: The officers now have full overview and control of whatever is happening throughout the courthouse’s many venues, whether it is stopping weapons at the front door, monitoring the inmates being transported and kept in the holding cells, or courtroom proceedings flaring up. The officers are handling all the security risks proactively.



Abingdon, Virginia, was named for the English home of Martha Washington, wife of the first President of the United States of America. With buildings dating back to the 18th century, Abingdon features a twenty block historic district that is on the National Register of Historic Places, anchored at the main intersection by the dignified Washington County Courthouse.

The passage of time has brought many additions to the original courthouse building, with the extra doors increasing security risks, along with the rise in weapons ownership in the population.

Sheriff Fred Newman recalls, “Around 2004 a letter was written to the Washington County Board of Supervisors, saying that we really had to take charge of the Courthouse because we continued to have problems that were escalating. There was the shooting in the Atlanta Courthouse and a Tennessee Correction Officer who was shot while transferring a prisoner, not to mention the Judge whose family member was recently killed up North. Ongoing events like that come on top of the 9/11 tragedy, that already raised security awareness and made funding available.”

A committee was formed with the Washington County Sheriffs Office (who is responsible for security in the courthouse), the Board of Supervisors, the County General Services Manager, and the County Administrator. They agreed a new system would be made and acquired the funding through a grant from Homeland Security. The bid process was initiated with 5-6 companies responding, and narrowed down to three proposals.

“Dynamark Security had the expertise and understanding about what we needed and came up with a plan. They had the best technology and we wanted that,” asserts Lieutenant Don Stewart, who heads the courthouse security for the Washington County Sheriff’s Office.

Managing the flow of people; checking for weapons



“Before, we had no security system besides ourselves being here, but we can’t be physically everywhere at once. The new surveillance system gives us all those extra eyes from the cameras and proof in the system,” says Lieutenant Stewart.

Cameras have been set up in the courtrooms (district court, circuit court, JDR or Juvenile Domestic Relations) and each of the waiting areas.

“If something happens, we just click to see the images on a bigger view in the HotSpot Window, to check out what’s going on and respond, if necessary. With cameras in all the hallways, stairwells and rooms, we’ve got it covered!” smiles the Lieutenant.

There are eight officers on duty every day, and sometimes the court sessions can go late into the night. There is always at least one person at the main entrance and work station monitoring the Milestone system.

Sheriff Newman refers to some of the security problems that courthouses have: “We’ve certainly had our own to deal with here. Most of the time our bailiffs have been able to handle them – they are well trained – but it’s the increase in weapons that has escalated everything: knives, guns or other sharp, dangerous objects.”

“That’s right: we’re checking for weapons, and we’ve collected a bunch of knives. In just the first three months of 2006, we’ve had over 23,300 people come through our metal detector at the main public entrance, where the Milestone central system is set up. We can see everything that’s happening anywhere around the building and have full control over our security: now we can be pro-active instead of reactive in any situation, not wait till something happens,” says Lieutenant Stewart. “We like the system so much we’re showing it to another courthouse in Virginia!”



Controlling the transfer of inmates and strong emotions



The Regional Jail is about five miles up the road. When inmates are brought to the courthouse, they have a special drive-in entrance to what is called the ‘Sally Port’ downstairs. There’s an intercom to buzz in, and the next step is to bring them through a secured hallway to their holding cells.

“A really good thing with the Milestone system is the complete control it gives us over the inmates coming in. We can watch the prisoners get out of the vans and into the building, with the Milestone System we can watch them all the way to their holding cells. We can also observe the inmates while they are being moved from the holding cells to the courtroom. We have one of the most advanced systems in the entire state.”



Maximum security prisoners wear red uniforms; minimum security ones wear orange. Even if they try to swap uniforms, they've got colored bands on their wrists that show their status. When they are being transferred in for court sessions, they have chains on their ankles. The officers report that women prisoners can be some of the worst behaved: the most foul-mouthed and the meanest fighters. They scratch, bite and kick.

"We like being able to watch what's going on and be proactive, using the system to respond fast, and even to resolve cases where prisoners might claim an officer has hit them or something like that. We have the proof of what really happened," affirms Lieutenant Stewart.

There can also be violence, both with the inmates and with the families coming in for domestic disputes. Tempers run high and there can be fights both in the courtrooms and the waiting rooms.

"We can see if we need to run in and stop it. We have panic alarms in the chambers, courtrooms and hallways as an extra alert for assistance. When they go off, we can see in the video system what's going on and respond fast in the right way," says the Lieutenant.



"Prior to getting our new system if a panic went off, it would only notify central dispatch that an alarm had gone off at the Courthouse, since getting the new system the master alarm panel will give the exact location of the alarm and now they have the ability to look in the location and see what is happening. Before, there were alarms that went off and lots of officers rushed in, if someone had a gun, the whole situation could get out of hand unnecessarily," states Sheriff Newman.

"A lot of people have permits to carry a concealed weapon, but we're checking everyone at the door to make sure they don't bring them in here. Keeping them out of the courthouse is the number one focus," states the Lieutenant.

Child custody cases are very bad situations with protective orders against previous family members.

"99% of the problems we see are from tensions being so high, like care of the children in divorce situations that creates unbelievable animosity. Tempers flare and things happen that normally wouldn't. It's a very special situation that we have to work with," explains Sheriff Newman.

Historical requirements in the implementation

The Washington County Courthouse in Abingdon is one of the oldest courthouses' in the state of Virginia. It was built in 1858 and stands under the protection and renovation rules of the National Historic Preservation Society. This created special challenges for Dynamark Security when implementing the new system.

Doors and other woodworking could not be drilled into for camera installations. For example, the Historical Society had to give special authorization to replace the main doors to improve protection. The solid oak doors had to be remade by a special craftsman, who did it just like in the old days, using pictures from 1858.

Above the main stairwell is a beautiful, original Tiffany glass mural created in the early 1940s that depicts a scene from the Civil War.





"Several years ago, someone shot a 22-caliber bullet hole in it and that was \$27,000 to fix – they say it would cost about \$2 million to do today," recounts Lieutenant Stewart. "He got four years in prison. There's Plexiglas on the outside of that now to protect it there and we're watching it inside with the system."

There are also intricate brick sculptures in the entrance wall that cost \$50,000 to make. These depict the wars throughout the American History, and honor the Military Personnel who served.

The building even has stories of being haunted. People insist they have experienced ghosts – one person swears he felt someone tapping him on the shoulder!

"We haven't seen anything on the video that could prove it, though," adds Lt. Stewart with a smile.

Fiber optic cables for the new system were wired by Dynamark. They had to re-build the old doors that had been kicked in so many times they weren't secure anymore. These open out now, not in: they are only functioning as fire exit doors.

"An old building like this has been added onto over time with new wings and more doors, so there way too many means of entrance. There was no way to make it safe till we got it closed down to one main door of access where we could check for weapons," explains the Sheriff.

"We have upgraded the officers' radio system with a channel to contact each other in the Courthouse. The thickness of the walls in the old structure made that a problem before. A special repeater was installed that allows the bailiffs to be in touch now. They also have the capabilities of talking to Central Dispatch or to a road officer," explains Sheriff Newman.

The antique pressed-tin tile ceilings also required that they had to get special dispensation to put in new lighting.

"The cameras were put up in the corners of the walls, so we managed to avoid that problem," relates Lieutenant Stewart. "It's easy to add more cameras anytime, if we want to. We know that we can add more whistles and bells in the future - that's an advantage with using Milestone."

"This security system gives me peace of mind," stated Washington County Sheriff Fred Newman. "Now I know that our judges, court staff, employees, and county citizens, who work in and utilize our courthouse, are well protected."

Surveillance combined with Access Control

There's an employee entrance where the courthouse staff have to swipe access cards for validation.

"Dynamark has installed the Galaxy access control system that presents on the computer screen the person's name and employee number, with the times they come in and leave the building. We look on the other screen at the Milestone views of the door cameras to double-check. Every time the door opens, we hear the alert sound in the software to look at it and see what's happening," explains a pleased Lieutenant Stewart.

"We gave Dynamark a deadline to get the new system in, and they did it. We worked with them nights and weekends to meet it, but we got it done. We just love it. We're very satisfied with it," concludes Lieutenant Stewart.

www.dynamarkteam.com, www.milestonesys.com