

The Probation and Pretrial Services Automated Case Tracking System: A Review of Operations*

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Introduction

VARIOUS ADVISORY groups representing the federal probation and pretrial services system petitioned the Administrative Office of the United States Courts in the late 1980s to establish a uniform local data collection system. The national systems installed in the early 1980s to enable phone access from one or two terminals to a central mainframe computer in Washington, DC, did not serve the needs for local data. "I need something that I can use to determine the proper staffing level in my district" was a common statement of chief probation and pretrial services officers. Others talked of the need to distribute their workload equitably among divisional offices and among officers.

Moreover, as Congress began to scrutinize the national budget more closely, it became imperative for local offices to be able to justify their expenditures with hard data and supply those data to the Administrative Office in a common format for national budget formulations and reports. "Most people don't understand the work we perform for our courts and the effort that goes into each case" was a recurring theme. As chiefs noted many times, not only have caseloads grown and investigations reached record levels, but many new laws passed by Congress have added complexity to the process. The staffing formula developed by the Administrative Office has further emphasized the need to track a broader range of specific activities performed by officers in federal cases.

The Probation and Pretrial Services Automated Case Tracking System (PACTS) was initiated in two sites in 1989. By 1997, it had expanded to 90 courts. PACTS was developed to meet the critical need for local tracking of case events. PACTS tracks activities from case activation in a pretrial services office to the termination of post-incarceration supervision by a probation office. Significant case events recorded in PACTS include preparing pretrial services investigations and presentence reports, opening both pretrial and post-conviction

supervision cases, and tracking special conditions of supervision. PACTS also records case termination information to help determine outcomes of supervision. A module was added in 1996 to track expenditures for substance abuse and mental health treatment and alternatives to detention. The Administrative Office continues to collect data for the national systems through monthly extractions that are made by local personnel and submitted electronically.

The Federal Corrections and Supervision Division (FCSD) manages the PACTS project in cooperation with user groups of court representatives as well as programmers and other technical specialists in the Administrative Office. A vital part of the growth and maintenance of PACTS has been site visits by project team members to review and assess PACTS' impact on local office operations. Post-implementation reviews began in June 1983. By September 30, 1997, 59 districts had been visited and 89 reports prepared for chief probation officers and chiefs in separate pretrial services offices. Pretrial services reports and supervision activities were provided through a separate pretrial services office with a chief pretrial services officer in 42 districts. In the remaining districts, pretrial services activities were performed by the probation office (combined offices).

During the period September 1995 through April 1997, 23 probation offices and 7 pretrial services offices were reviewed for PACTS operations. The recommendations that resulted were reviewed and tabulated to provide a basic picture of common areas that need more focus. A summary report of the recommendations is the basis of this article. The districts included in the summary have no special characteristics other than that they were visited during the period selected. A review generally was scheduled 12 to 18 months after a district had begun operating a "live" database.

Review Methodology and Report Format

Each post-implementation review was conducted by a two-person team. The team was led by either the project manager or the associate project manager from FCSD, who was accompanied by a trainer from the

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Technology Training and Support Division (TTSD). The purpose of the review was to: interview relevant staff to determine PACTS use and impact on the daily routine of all levels of staff; examine standard reports and queries produced from the database either as part of a pre-review assessment or during the visit itself; and compare the status of PACTS implementation in the district to that in other PACTS districts.

The review team introduced itself to, and conducted an interview with, the chief probation or pretrial services officer, then met with the systems manager (SM) or other PACTS coordinator. In larger offices with additional automation staff, other automation staff members involved in PACTS operations also were interviewed. Other interviews were conducted with one or more of the following: supervising probation or pretrial services officer, data entry staff, data quality analyst (DQA) or other staff person with responsibility for data quality, drug and alcohol treatment specialist (DATS), and line officer.

The following questions highlight the issues addressed:

- Is the application fully operational and available to all staff members?
- Are staff members familiar with the data in PACTS and with the possibilities for employing PACTS data in their routine work?
- Who performs the data entry and what procedures are in place for quality control?
- Has the staff been trained? Are there training opportunities that the project team can make available to the staff or to specific personnel?
- Do the supervisors use PACTS reports to track officers' workloads and assignments?
- Does the chief have a feel for PACTS as a management tool and is it meeting the chief's expectations?
- Is the automation staff familiar with the needs of the office and encouraging PACTS use by providing standard and special reports when appropriate?
- Is the office maintaining alternative systems that duplicate the data in PACTS?
- What implementation problems have occurred and have they been resolved?
- Are there suggestions for enhancements to the application that could make it more useful?

The information gleaned from the answers to these and other questions was used by the review team to draft a report to the chief. The report provided to the chief probation or pretrial services officer was composed of four sections, with subcategories as shown in figure 1. The report summarized the team's findings and ended

with recommendations for changes or improvements to office procedures intended to help the probation or pre-trial services office gain the maximum benefit from the PACTS application. The team discussed the report with the chief in an exit interview the day following the interviews and delivered a copy of a rough draft at that time. The final report was mailed later.

FIGURE 1. FORMAT OF STANDARD PACTS POST-IMPLEMENTATION REVIEW REPORT

- I. Introduction
- II. Automation Planning and Management
 - A. Statistical Analysis
 - B. Staffing
 - C. Communication
 - D. Training and Documentation
- III. PACTS Application Utilization
 - A. Office Operations
 - B. Substance Abuse Treatment Module
 - C. Quality Control
 - D. Reports
 - E. Requests for System Enhancements
- IV. Recommendations and Summary

Progress in PACTS Implementation

Many of the initial implementation problems consequent to distributing a new application had been resolved by the end of fiscal year 1995. Nationally, the project had moved from a focus of collecting the data to making greater use of the collected data in daily operations. As a result, the focus of the reviews was wider than perhaps it had been in the early years. Districts generally were entering the intermediate phase of PACTS implementation, i.e., accomplishing data entry, beginning regular data extractions, and exploring data uses. "I like PACTS because I can control the data and get reports right here" was one chief's statement reflective of the change in emphasis from national data to local data that PACTS implementation had accomplished. The Form 5 Quarterly Account of Reports became available as a standard PACTS report during the period of these reviews, enabling probation chiefs to have all of the workload factors locally.

Data in PACTS are stored on a local server and can be accessed by all staff members using terminal connections and networks, or dial-in modems in very small offices. The officer assigned at each step in the progress of the case, the office in which he or she works, and the officer's supervisor are all recorded. Reports can be produced on demand by office, by officer, and by supervising officer and printed immediately on local printers. Supervisors in some of the offices reviewed were using standard reports to track investigation assignments, case reviews, and other scheduled events in cases as-

signed to officers under their purview. In one district, a supervisor, in preparing annual performance evaluations, was using PACTS summary data to compile the accomplishments of each of his officers.

The probation offices visited were entering all cases into PACTS, and most had been released from further entries into the Federal Probation Supervision Information System (FPSIS) maintained by the Administrative Office's Statistics Division (SD). A few offices still were making double entries into both PACTS and FPSIS. All but one of the districts visited, both combined and separate offices, also were entering pretrial services data into PACTS although most were still making double entry into the Pretrial Services Act Information System (PSAIS) maintained by SD. In most instances, offices visited were in various phases of reconciling the data in PACTS with the PSAIS data to gain release from PSAIS entries. The vast majority since have completed the reconciliation and been released from making entries directly into PSAIS.

In most offices, PACTS was available through network connections to all staff in the main office. The staffs in divisional offices also had connections to the PACTS server, either on a wide-area network or through a local-area network linked to the PACTS host machine by a dedicated leased phone line. In most instances in which the entire staff in a divisional office did not have a network connection to PACTS, at least one staff member was able to dial in to the host machine via a phone modem.

Nearly all probation offices visited had designed forms for collecting PACTS data or had employed forms developed in other districts. Officers were involved in completing at least those portions of the form for which their expertise was required. In most pretrial services operations, data entry staff members were performing data entry directly from the PS 2 worksheets completed during interviews. Several offices had redesigned this form to follow more closely the screens in PACTS. Some offices had contacted these districts and obtained the redesigned forms for use in their districts. In more than half of the offices, the data entry task had been distributed to the various divisional offices and to multiple staff members in the headquarters office. Data entry staffs were well trained and well versed in all PACTS operations. Data quality was consistently good, even though most offices had not documented their quality control programs.

The first two workshops for PACTS custom report writing, both training 30 students, were completed before the period covered in this summary, and a third session was completed during the period. These workshops trained SMs to create custom reports to supplement the standard reports available for both probation and pretrial services operations. A Remote Network Access Library (RNALib) maintained by TTSD contained

141 custom reports by April 1997. SMs from 12 offices had produced 107 of the custom reports, and the TTSD staff members had added 34 they had written to address expressed or perceived needs. Other reports that had not yet been submitted for sharing also were presented during the reviews. In other districts, the SMs had reviewed the reports available in RNALib although they had not created any themselves. The review teams made appropriate recommendations for those who had neither written nor reviewed custom reports. In addition, 380 modifications requests (MRs) to the PACTS application had been submitted by technical staff members, data quality analysts, and others involved with routine PACTS operations. The high number of MRs testified to the wide use of the application and to the depth of knowledge many users had gained during the implementation process.

Recommendations for Improvements

The 30 reports surveyed contained 225 recommendations, which is an average of 7.5 recommendations per report. Individual reports contained as few as 3 and as many as 14 recommendations. The number of recommendations was not necessarily indicative of the status of PACTS implementation, however. The scope of the recommendations and their relationship to the overall program were of more importance. Some recommendations indicated severe problems that could not be summarized and for which multiple small suggestions would have been useless. In other cases, several points may have been made separately because they were not as easily summarized, but the application in general was operating satisfactorily.

The recommendations are listed individually and aggregated into categories that represent the basic subject areas of the reports. Although many recommendations could be used in multiple districts with little change in the wording, others were tailored for special situations. Similar recommendations that differed in their wording to suit a particular situation were aggregated for purposes of the consolidated report.

Operations

General Operations. Nearly half of the recommendations fell into the area of operations. A typical recommendation, which appeared in 23 out of 30 reports, was to *eliminate redundant systems*. Many districts were keeping card files and other personal data files that can be obtained from the PACTS client screen. Other districts were tracking investigations, hearings, or supervision activities in alternative database systems, in spreadsheets, in lists kept manually, or in WordPerfect files. PACTS data storage and query capabilities allow districts to eliminate alternative systems or files that formerly captured the same data. Using PACTS as the sole source for case information produces maximum ef-

iciency in administrative operations and frees clerical staff members for other tasks.

The recommendation to *create or update a local procedures manual* appeared in 22 of the 30 reports. Most offices were using the standard PACTS procedures manual that is distributed with each version of the application software to guide their data entry procedures. However, local procedures are needed to define the roles of officers and support staff in collecting information for PACTS data entry. A collection of distributed memos and messages distributed by e-mail can serve as an informal manual. The formal table of contents and index can follow later. A local procedures manual should detail the manner and establish time frames for submitting information for data entry and entering it into PACTS. A local manual also should establish conventions for entering defendant names in cases of hyphenation or foreign formats and for corporations as offenders. Guidelines should specify uniform abbreviations for streets or cities that are common to a particular area. For example, one address should not indicate "NYC" while another record shows New York City or Manhattan.

The recommendation to *distribute data entry tasks*, which appeared in 13 reports, was directed toward what the review teams saw as an obstacle in encouraging support staffs to adopt PACTS as an everyday tool. Nearly half of the offices visited had concentrated PACTS data entry tasks under the responsibilities of one or two persons who were trusted to make entries correctly. In these districts, although the clerks and other support staff often were participating in completing forms for their officers, only "key" personnel had system privileges on PACTS to add and modify data. PACTS was designed for distribution to all support staff for data entry. Relying on one or two staff members to make data entries causes delays in data processing. Moreover, it disenfranchises the clerks from an important part of office operations and gives rise to comments by clerks in these districts that PACTS is someone else's system, not theirs.

Technical Operations. The subcategory of technical operations accounted for 24 recommendations. Seven of these referred to special situations where separate pretrial services offices did not have their own SMs and needed more support from the automation staff in probation. The total is misleading because in all but one instance, the recommendation was made to both the chief probation officer and the chief pretrial services officer to ensure that an agreement was reached. Eight recommendations were directed to connectivity problems concerning network, electronic access to criminal data in the clerk's office, printers in satellite offices, and ensuring that the PACTS application is available via Windows with ongoing background access. Two offices were not operating with the

latest version of PACTS and were advised to load it immediately.

Statistical Reporting Operations. A total of 15 recommendations concerned statistical reporting, another subcategory of operations. The recommendation to *ensure timely entries* was made in eight districts where few or no records were found activated in pretrial services or opened or closed for probation supervision within the preceding 2 weeks or more. Untimely data entry is one of the primary complaints expressed by persons who are reluctant to rely on data collection systems. Other recommendations concerned the use of true names in sealed cases and updates of special conditions and other statistical fields in data records.

Substance Abuse Treatment Module (SATM). The SATM was initiated in April 1996 with the release of Version 5.1. The SATM allows for the entry of case treatment plans for each offender as well as vendor data and rates for each contract. Invoices received after all preparatory data are completed can be entered directly into the module, which then calculates expenditures according to program codes. Among its other benefits, the SATM informs the user when more treatments have been charged than are authorized in the treatment plan. Of the 26 offices visited after the SATM was available, 11 had not implemented it, and 2 others were not entering profile and outcome data. Recommendations were made in these districts to enter all relevant information into the SATM and work toward phasing out previous methods of capturing treatment plans and payment data. With all of the time and planning that went into this module, it is most important that districts implement it fully. The SATM will enable the FCSO to report to Congress on the results of distributing some \$38 million in substance abuse treatment funds annually. Implementation and use of the SATM, voluntary during the period of these visits, has been mandated beginning with fiscal year 1998.

Training and Documentation

Thirty-one recommendations concerned training. The need to train officers was noted in 16 reports although there were many districts in which officers had been trained and many of them were using PACTS reports regularly. For offices with problems, more training is required in using PACTS to research individual case data and to organize caseloads and investigation assignments. Although most districts were successfully performing data entry functions, retraining all staff or more support staff was indicated for five offices. This recommendation was made in support of one cited above under general operations concerning data entry task distribution. In seven other offices, training was recommended for specific individuals such as the SM or the DQA. In several instances, the review team leader

made a commitment to arrange for these staff to visit other districts for one-on-one training with more experienced colleagues.

Three offices were advised to distribute the PACTS operations manual and the PACTS statistical reporting guide to the support staff members performing data entry to provide them with easier access to resource materials. Although there were other districts that had not fully distributed these materials, the review teams avoided making a separate recommendation in more recent reviews because the teams were able to provide to the SM a disk with files of both manuals for immediate loading on the network.

Reports

Thirty-three recommendations addressed more complete use of PACTS standard and custom reports. In general, the reviews revealed that most districts had implemented data entry, but not many were making full use of the data. PACTS was designed to be much more than a data entry tool. Its greatest utility is its ability to aggregate the data to provide reports on case-load totals, investigations pending, detention rates, and many other management issues. In five offices, the SM had not made reports available to the staff on a regular basis or had delayed answering requests for custom reports. Recommendations were made to distribute reports to all staff at the end of the next reporting month and to review requirements to address requests for reports in special formats.

Chiefs were advised to take steps to *integrate PACTS into routine operations* in 17 of the 30 reports. Officers and supervisors in these districts still were using other methods in place before implementation of PACTS to track daily activities. In many instances, they continued to rely on pen and paper. Such practices not only deny them the benefits of a modern database application, but also create inaccuracies in the reports that are produced due to late reporting and a lack of focus on the database.

Eleven reports made the recommendation to *review and use the Remote Network Access Library (RNALib)*. One of the major benefits of instituting a national database application is that everyone can benefit from the advances made by SMs locally. The UNIX-based PACTS application is designed to allow local development of special reports to supplement the standard reports. Annual workshops are sponsored by the FCSD to train SMs and other PACTS coordinators in custom report writing. The review teams often found that the SM had not accessed the RNALib to review its contents or make the custom reports available to office staff so that determinations could be made as to which reports might benefit the district. In some cases, the SM had written several useful reports but had not submitted them to TTSD to include in the RNALib.

Communication

Only one major recommendation was classified as primarily falling into this category, although many of the other recommendations certainly affect this area as well. The recommendation to *establish a PACTS users committee* was recorded in 22 reports. The teams found that many districts initially appointed groups to determine implementation procedures but that these groups were disbanded when data entry became routine. Since 22 of the 30 reports recommended a users group, it is fair to say that, as with most things, more attention should be paid to incorporating user concerns. Extending committee membership to representatives from all levels of staff also encourages wider ownership of the PACTS application.

Quality Control

The only major recommendation in the area of quality control (QC), but cited in 23 of the reports, was to *establish or document a quality control program*. Personnel in some districts were not fully aware of the QC reports PACTS can produce. The review teams spent time with these persons to establish a basic routine for them to validate PACTS data. Most districts had informal QC programs in place based primarily on the edits programmed into the PACTS application and the QC reports that can be produced on demand. The review teams performed queries and reviewed reports during these visits and found a minimum number of obvious errors such as duplicate records, invalid birth dates, and records with missing data. The PACTS application edits specifically were directed at these types of errors. Districts need to structure a more comprehensive program to prevent errors that are not invalid or incompatible but, rather, represent information that is simply wrong for the record itself.

In addition, the number of offices in which officers and supervisors were not using PACTS reports was high. As a result, the quality control that naturally flows from officers' review of reports was not in place in these offices. The review teams highlighted in the exit interviews that procedures were necessary to ensure that all staff members understood their roles in maintaining data quality. The teams also stressed the importance of double checking PACTS entries and of comparing a random sample to the information in the case files.

Many districts had a tendency to place the responsibility for data quality on one or two DQAs or clerical supervisors who do not document the methods they use for quality assurance. Procedures are necessary in case the person with primary responsibility for data quality in the district is unavailable. Moreover, in several districts, the DQAs perform much or all of the data entry. Most often, no procedures were in place for reviewing their entries.

Other Accomplishments of the Review

The review process provided excellent opportunities for direct contact between the Administrative Office and the court units visited. The public relations value of this contact and its effects in refreshing relationships were considerable. The review teams gave the offices guidance in implementing and utilizing PACTS that could not be included in standard instruction manuals. The teams, in turn, were able to gain insight into office operations by personal observation, which is an invaluable supplement to reviewing written materials and summaries. Issues were resolved that could not have been adequately presented through a phone call or by e-mail. The team discovered advanced uses of PACTS and taught them to others.

The review teams were able to supplement the training provided in the classroom with individualized instruction. The TTSD trainer who provided initial training for a particular office was included as a member of the review team whenever possible. As a result, office staff members often were familiar with the review team members. Thus, the teams often were able to encourage staff members to anonymously report problems or make comments that the staff members may have hesitated to offer to the chief or other managers. The teams translated this information into ideas for revisions to PACTS programming and instructions and then provided it to the chiefs in a way that allowed the chiefs to understand problems and resolve them locally. The review team members were able to share ideas for PACTS uses with personnel in other districts and to present these ideas in various seminars and meetings. The teams also were able to facilitate contact among colleagues in different districts to help resolve problems common to each. Moreover, the teams identified personnel who had adapted well to the PACTS application. These personnel were called upon to provide technical guidance and leadership in visits to courts just beginning the implementation process. Providing “mentors” from more experienced districts is important for advancing the progress of a nationwide application.

Summary

The post-implementation reviews made as a part of the PACTS implementation process have uncovered both successes and problems. As a national program, PACTS certainly has been overwhelmingly successful at helping districts collect case data and transmit data to the national programs maintained at the Administrative Office. A positive commitment by the chief probation or pretrial services officer and by other management staff is significant indication of successful PACTS implementation. Training provided to SMs has encouraged them to distribute standard reports and to write or use custom reports that are not part of the core package. Dispersing PACTS access and data entry responsibilities is another key factor in gaining wider acceptance of the database by all staff members.

Offices have been slower to use PACTS as a management tool that produces current reports on caseload trends and investigation assignments. Officers need to be trained to incorporate PACTS queries and case reports into their routine activities. Supervisors are more likely than officers to be using PACTS reports but still need to use them more in their management activities. Once officers see their managers using PACTS data, they will be encouraged to use it themselves. Many offices visited recommended establishing a local PACTS users group to facilitate the integration of PACTS data into routine office work.

Procedures need to be formalized in most offices to ensure that all staff members know their role in providing data, reviewing reports, and promoting data quality. Redundant systems that contain the same data as PACTS should be eliminated in all offices. The effort spent to maintain these systems can be better directed to ensuring that PACTS data are complete and correct. As offices accomplish the objectives put forth in these reviews, all staff members will become comfortable in using PACTS as the primary source for research on individual cases and workload trends.