



Judicial/Court System

Daily Use

- Access to experts
- Remote testimony
- Inter-office collaboration

Solution

- Polycom® HDX 4000™ telepresence solutions
- Polycom® VSX® 7000 room and VSX® 3000 desktop systems

Results and Benefits

- In one case alone, saved 46 hours of “bench time” for analysts
- Faster turn-around for cases, and reduced backlogs
- Ongoing reductions in travel expenses

In Michigan, Forensics Experts Testify Using Polycom Telepresence

The Michigan State Police (MSP) Forensic Science Division analyzes evidence for all Michigan law enforcement agencies. In addition to DNA, firearms, explosives, fingerprints and other evidence, toxicologists at MSP's Lansing Laboratory analyze and process approximately 15,000 alcohol and 5,000 drug cases annually.

Nearly a thousand times a year, MSP forensic scientists deliver expert testimony at criminal trials around the state. With trips lasting up to three days, their absences impact productivity.

In 2003, when state lawmakers lowered the legal blood alcohol content from 1.0 to .08, caseloads increased and more cases went to trial, increasing the demand for expert testimony. Today, forensic scientists often receive multiple subpoenas requiring appearances at different courts on the same day.

Taking a new approach with remote testimonies

Looking to increase efficiency in the Toxicology Unit, MSP administrators wondered if testimonies, which on average last just 15 minutes, could be delivered by video without the toxicologists ever having to leave the lab. Leveraging video in this way would increase efficiency and provide a cost savings. Among state law enforcement agencies, the application would be utterly new.

After securing a grant from the Michigan Office of Highway Safety Planning, the State Court Administrator's Office helped MSP's forensics team identify a handful of courts throughout Michigan willing to participate in a videoconferencing pilot project. The MSP worked with City Animation Co., an AV systems integrator in Lansing, to install a Polycom® VSX® 7000 video conferencing system. With success during the trial stage, the program quickly expanded, and a grant from the National Institute of Justice provided the funds to deploy several additional Polycom systems, including seven Polycom® HDX 4000™ personal telepresence solutions.

Securing buy-in from courts and lawmakers

The high-definition telepresence solutions equip not only the Lansing laboratory, but all seven of the Forensic Science Division's labs throughout the state. The systems are available to all analysts for testimonies and remote consultation

“We receive between 75 and 100 blood alcohol cases a day,” says Inspector Greg Michaud, assistant division commander for MSP's Forensic Science Division. “Like all departments, we've undergone budget cuts over the past several years. That means we have less money for travel and overtime.”

“Judges realize this is the wave of the future. We hope to testify remotely in hundreds of cases every year.”

Inspector Greg Michaud, Assistant Division Commander, Michigan State Police Forensic Science Division

with other labs. MSP's two physicians use Polycom® VSX® 3000 personal videoconferencing systems from their offices.

Equipping the MSP labs with the right solution was important, but ensuring widespread adoption proved equally vital. Michaud and his colleagues had to secure buy-in from judges, prosecutors and defense attorneys. “I've been traveling across the state for the past year to introduce them to the technology and show how effective remote testimony can be,” he recalls.

To legally allow remote testimony in Michigan's district and circuit courts, the state also had to amend Michigan Court Rule 6.006. Under the amended rule, either the prosecutor or the defense attorney in a pre-trial district court hearing can move to allow remote testimony. For other proceedings, including jury trials, both parties must consent.

After making headway on both fronts, the MSP began installing mobile Polycom HDX systems in courtrooms around the state. The fundamental pieces were in place by June of 2008.

Saving 46 hours of bench time

In the program's first six months, MSP forensics experts delivered 20 expert testimonies via video—an historic achievement that earned the Forensic Science Division a 2008 Innovation Award from the Council of State Governments.

Already, MSP administrators have seen measurable benefits from the program. For instance, forensic analysts delivered remote testimonies in two high-profile drunk driving trials in Delta County, located a full day's travel from Lansing. By testifying via videoconference, MSP estimates it saved 46 hours of analyst bench time, not to mention the travel costs.

“I'm seeing great value in it,” says Mark Esqueda, chief assistant prosecutor for Delta County, whose office has prosecuted more than a dozen cases using remote expert testimonies. “It's efficient, and it works so well.”

Delivering in-person impact with HD

Esqueda says the quality of the Polycom UltimateHD™ video and audio technology makes all the difference. “It's almost as if the person is there live,” he says, noting that witnesses appear practically life-sized, typically on a large flat-panel, HD monitor installed in the courtroom. “I don't see any detriment to the quality of testimony. I've spoken with jurors after trials and they didn't have a problem that the witness wasn't physically there in the room.”

For prosecutors, the quality of the telepresence experience makes or breaks the testimony. “I don't want our witnesses to be seen as less effective because they're not personally here. But that's not been a problem. The picture and sound are crisp, and the experience is totally interactive. We see them, and they see us. If I ask a question, the witness hears it, and everyone hears the reply.”

Esqueda says defense attorneys in Delta County are increasingly willing to accept remote testimonies. “It would be great if we can use this statewide, and not just for forensics testimonies. We have a state trooper who has asked if he can remotely appear at arraignments. The possibilities are there.”

Planning for hundreds of testimonies a year

In Lansing, Michaud and his colleagues are looking to expand their use of the system. Eventually, scientists at all MSP labs will testify remotely. “We'll continue to drive adoption,” he promises. “Judges realize this is the wave of the future. We hope to testify remotely in hundreds of cases every year.”

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