



CASE STUDY



## Getting Into High GEARS: Police in LaGrange, Georgia Use Crash-Reporting Technology to Manage Resources, Maintain Public Safety

Advances in automobile crash reporting technology are helping law enforcement agencies across the country to better manage resources and keep their jurisdictions safe. One of the places where this is happening is LaGrange, Georgia, where Chief Louis Dekmar and the LaGrange Police Department have been leaders in improving traffic safety in their community.

By applicable state laws, crash data is collected by police departments statewide and sent to the state crash repository maintained by the Georgia Department of Transportation. Prior to 2009, that data was collected using paper forms, and months or years could pass before it was manually entered into an antiquated computer system.

“Police collect a lot of information,” said Chief Dekmar, “but the challenge is getting that information out in a way that allows you to affect public safety and traffic.” Due to the lag that existed between data collection and its eventual availability, police, local elected officials, and other public safety stakeholders were hamstrung in their ability to make data-driven decisions in a timely way.

When Georgia adopted a statewide system called Georgia Electronic Accident Reporting System (GEARS) to collect, store and analyze crash data, LaGrange, situated near the state’s western border, was one of the first law enforcement agencies in the state to make use of the new technology. “It was about being able to use [data] in a way that better serves your community,” said Chief Dekmar.

### Why data matters

Vehicle crash data serves a number of functions in law enforcement and public safety. Highway research and safety groups make use of it when they ask for traffic studies, transportation agencies and elected officials rely on it when planning new routes or putting traffic-calming devices in place, and for law enforcement officials and organizations like Chief Dekmar and the LaGrange Police Department, it is a vital need in order to make informed decisions about how to best deploy officers and resources.

### Using data to boost efficiency

Historically, according to Chief Dekmar, crash data had to be processed manually and could take a significant amount of time to make its

way into an accessible format. “Technology was paper and a pen. That was technology,” Chief Dekmar said of his beginnings in law enforcement. “I came in 40 years ago: 27 years as police chief and 40 years in policing, so yes, of course it was all paper.” Officers would have to return to the station and transfer information from paper reports using desktop PCs, transitioning to laptops only in the late 1990s to early 2000s.

This was a common situation among Georgia law enforcement agencies until the state implemented GEARS in 2009. Developed by a company that would eventually become a part of LexisNexis Risk Solutions, GEARS was one of the first statewide electronic crash reporting systems in the nation. And, due in part to a briefing on the new technology delivered to board members of the Georgia Association of Chiefs of Police, Chief Dekmar was eager to take advantage of the solution and put it to use in LaGrange.

One of the major impacts of GEARS has been increased efficiency in deploying traffic enforcement personnel to high-priority locations. Chief Dekmar said, “We want fifty percent of our citations written in areas of the city where we have the most accidents or complaints. And GEARS certainly provides the guidance in assigning those areas.”

### Saving time and resources

Another advantage is a reduction in staff time spent analyzing data. “Given the size of our agency, we can’t afford to have somebody spend a day or two pouring through [crash data],” said Chief Dekmar, adding that LaGrange had 2,444 accidents in

the previous year. Analysis at this volume level would significantly cut into time better spent on more critical tasks.

### Achieving results: public service and public safety

Chief Dekmar said the response to electronic reporting has been positive, cutting down on the need to make an in-person visit to the police department.

The additional speed and efficiencies provided by GEARS have had concrete impact on Chief Dekmar’s department and on public safety in the city. The LaGrange Police Department has improved its ability to allocate officers and resources effectively in order to be responsive to citizens. Chief Dekmar said, “The expectations of the police are always expanding, and there are fewer social controls, whether they be in family, or community, or neighborhood, or education. The substitute for that when things go bad is always more police presence or more police involvement. You leverage everything you can in order to get those resources, and of course taking advantage of technology is one of those ways.”

“Our citizens receive the benefit of better enforcement and safer roads,” said Chief Dekmar. “GEARS is one piece of the puzzle that helps us improve traffic safety in our community.”

