

BATS sparks arson investigation expansion

For the first time, investigators of arson- and explosives-related incidents are sharing real-time information using a secure, nationwide system.

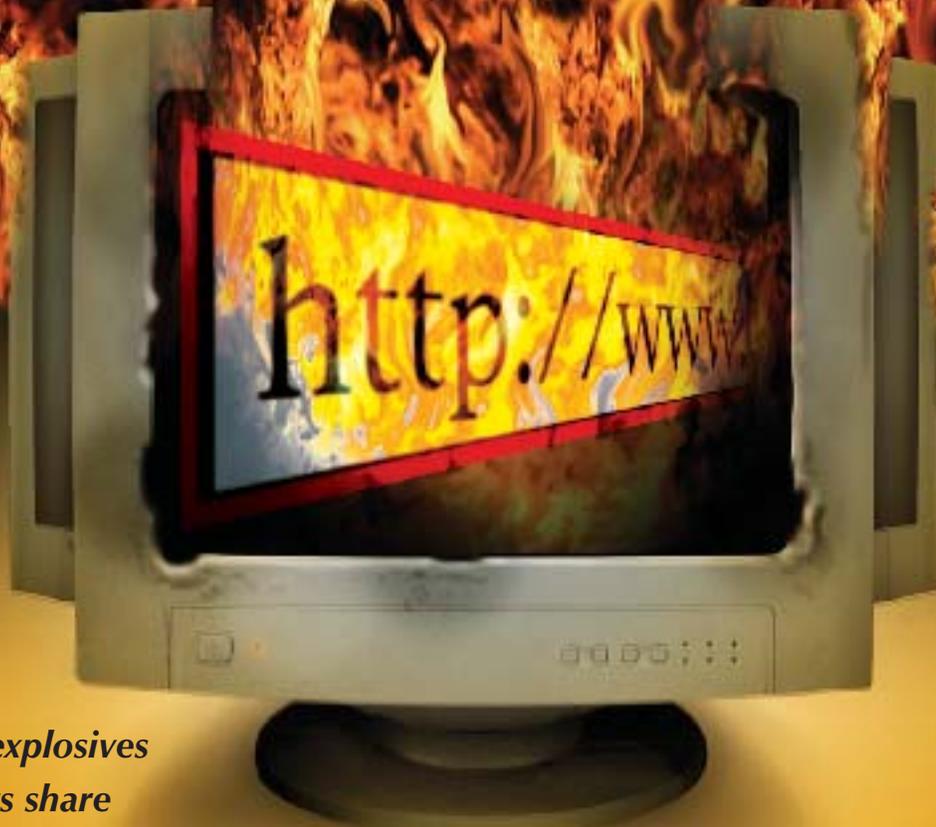
Last year, the Attorney General directed the Department of Justice's (DOJ's) chief information officer to consolidate all of the department's arson and explosives incident databases into a single database. The determination was made that all such databases within the DOJ should be maintained by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), and based on the BATS (Bomb Arson Tracking System) model.

Today there are more than 32,000 records in BATS and 140,000 records from previous databases now stored in the Arson and Explosives

Incident System (AEXIS), which will be converted to BATS. ATF is working toward a single arson and explosives information and intelligence portal, according to Jesse Chester, chief of ATF's Office of Strategic Intelligence and Information United States Bomb Data Center.

An Internet-accessible system for state, local and federal law enforcement agencies, BATS can be used as a basic turnkey records management system or as an adjunct to an existing records management system.

Without BATS, reporting often takes place on a local level, with information then being sent to the state and then the federal level. According to ATF, crimes of arson and explosives, often



Arson and explosives investigators share information nationwide

investigated by the same officers, have not always been statistically counted at a national level with the precision that they deserve. With arson, for example, there can be discrepancies between fire service records and law enforcement records for the same incident. Using BATS, ATF says a narrower range of information is collected and shared more quickly, and greater

precision and detail are realized.

“I think the ability for us to share information with other investigators across the country that participate in BATS is remarkable,” says Stewart Jacobs, a senior fire investigator with Maine’s Office of the State Fire Marshal. Maine was among the agencies piloting the system and one of the first agencies to go live with the system. “Before BATS, you really

didn’t have the ability to do that unless you had a contact somewhere or you spent time on the phone tracking people down.”

On a statewide level, some of Maine’s 15 fire investigators can be 10 to 12 hours away from each other if they’re located in the most northern and the most southern regions of the state. Investigators don’t have the opportunity to see each other and talk about a suspect who has been located in a number of communities throughout the state. If a Maine investigator wanted to query a suspect name before BATS, that meant searching paper archives.

With BATS, a suspect name, for instance, can be searched, and if information about the suspect has already

Getting BATS

To sign up for BATS, an agency must be a bona fide law enforcement agency with an originating agency identifier (ORI) assigned by the FBI. In addition, the agency must sign a memorandum of understanding, and individual users must agree to the rules of behavior.

BATS enrollment information can be found by going to the BATS link on the ATF Web site, www.atf.gov.



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been entered in BATS, investigators can get the name and contact information of the person who entered the case into BATS and contact that person for more information.

“BATS really is a good example of utilizing today’s technology for law enforcement agencies to share information,” says Jacobs, an instructor at the National Fire Academy and an investigator who provided input for BATS’ development. “I’m excited about it.”

An award winner

BATS was created by people that worked in or are working in the fire, arson and post-blast investigative fields. Launched in 2003, the system has proven to be an award winner.

Complete online arson resource

Interfire.org, supported by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), began as a reference section within a virtual reality training CD-ROM for law enforcement, insurance and fire investigators. ATF, the American Re-Insurance Co., U.S. Fire Administration and the National Fire Protection Association provided the content expertise for the CD, released in 2000. ATF later decided to expand and fund the collaborative project as an Internet site.

The Web site bills itself as the “complete resource for fire services, fire insurers, law enforcement and others whose duties involve arson investigation, fire investigation safety and fire scene training.”

It includes an online training center where, with the click of a mouse, visitors can travel down a charred hallway, turn into a room and zoom in for a better look at a burned out electrical socket. The site also features articles of interest, a message board and information on insurance.

There is a calendar of fire investigation training programs covering topics from arson awareness to fire insurance fraud, and fire codes and standards.

The Resource Center covers fire investigation from before a fire through to follow up and legal preparation. Visitors can access fire investigation materials that include arson investigation abstracts, articles and tutorials; U.S. Fire Administration technical reports; fire investigation links; and more.

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The E-Gov Institute selected BATS to receive a 2004 Government Solutions Center Pioneer Award. The 15 awards the institute gave to federal, state and local agencies this year recognize programs with innovative best practices delivering

essential e-government services to citizens, businesses and other public sector organizations.

Another measure of success is BATS' endorsement by the National Bomb Squad Commanders' Advisory Board,

Online learning program for fire investigators

CFITrainer.net, an online learning program for fire investigators, provides consistent training to the certified fire investigator (CFI) and broader arson investigation communities. Developed through a partnership of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) and the International Association of Arson Investigators, CFITrainer.net enhances investigators' knowledge by leaning on the skills and experiences of seasoned CFIs and by providing high-quality training.

CFITrainer.net is a comprehensive system that will allow registered participants to pursue programs, track their progress, take online evaluations and tests, as well as view live programs and participate in Web seminars, all through a secure Internet environment. Additionally, the trainer will provide credit for CFI certification and recertification.

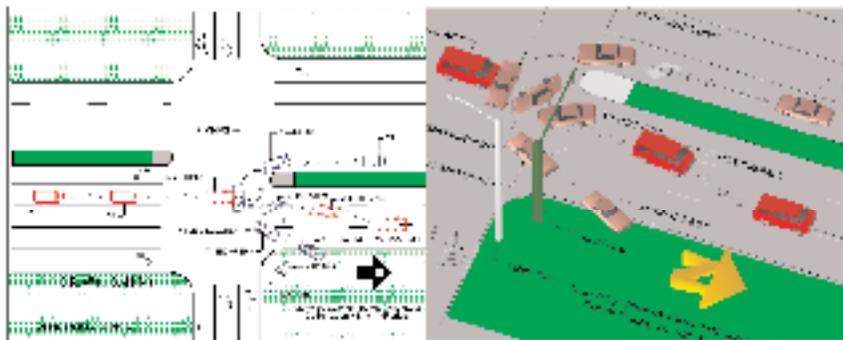
It is available to public sector investigators from police and fire departments, as well as private sector investigators from the insurance industry. It is designed for individuals who investigate arson and kindred crimes, and is available from any computer with Internet access.

ATF contributed to the distance learning system by participating on the steering committee that developed the training modules, beta testing the program to ensure its benefit to investigators, and working to protect the educational interests of state and local public service partners.

This distance learning program provides a valuable opportunity for arson and fire investigators, and in turn supports ATF's training initiatives. Programs and topics of current interest to the fire investigation community now are readily available online.

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which includes bomb squad commanders from 450 bomb squads.

To achieve these initial successes, ATF's Arson and Explosives National Repository (now the United States Bomb Data Center) had to face the challenge of putting together a system that was generic enough to be used by agencies for fire and bombing investigations across the United States, yet specific enough to provide utility and be an asset to its users. BATS met that challenge and holds much promise in the fight against general criminal activity, as well as the war on terrorism.

"One of the critical components for bomb techs in law enforcement and the military when dealing with terrorism is to understand and know what it is they're looking at," says Chester. "BATS helps provide those critical identification features."

When most people think of a bomb, they think of a ticking clock and sticks of dynamite, the kind of bomb Wile E. Coyote would have used to slow down the Road Runner. But most of the time, Chester says, "when you're looking for bomb-makers, you're not looking for C-4. You're looking for components like remote control equipment. We've had several cases where law enforcement officers have gone in on search warrants and they've seen certain components but they weren't able to associate them with bomb-making materials. BATS allows officers to search for components, whether they're batteries or remote control equipment or improvised explosives, for example."

BATS also advises officers of safety precautions they should be taking and lets them know what previously

was required to make a specific type of explosives device safe.

Don't be afraid of BATS

Very minimal training is required to use BATS — another reason BATS is successful. Only a short,

operational familiarization and security brief are necessary to get a user comfortable with the program.

To use BATS, an Internet connection, Web browser and Acrobat Reader are required. Having these, an investigator can then enter the

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incident date, time, what the incident was, suspect information, vehicle information, and in a bombing, for example, information about the device itself and what kind of explosives were used. All those fields can be queried.

“We haven’t had that type of capability within law enforcement,” Chester emphasizes, noting the FBI had a system that was limited by its connection.

A growing pup

BATS continues to grow. Version 2 of the system, released in November 2004, adds the ability to capture vehicle information and allows for the appending of attachments (document files, images, etc.) to a specific incident record. The latest version also offers new fields for the bomb squad community to include special event information, render-safe procedures and other activities such as responses to bomb threats.

Expected to be released sometime around November, Version 3.0 will have a GIS component for geo-referencing and mapping incidents. Another improvement will be more granular activity reporting for the bomb squad community. This will allow the user to map selected local and national arsons and bombings.

ATF has worked hard to not oversell BATS and started with only a few agencies. The number of investigators using the system today totals 919 and the number of agencies is 616.

“We’re measuring and monitoring growth to make sure that

we don’t grow faster than our capabilities will allow us,” says Chester. “We want to make sure that when people are accessing BATS, they’re getting the same kind of response times that they’re used to when they’re using Web-based applications for banking or other things they do. In the next version, we’ve built up our infrastructure some; we’ve purchased middleware and servers to give us that type of performance.”

Next, the ATF will be looking to get the National Association of State Fire Marshals and the International Association of Fire Chiefs involved with BATS.

While the system’s use is limited to law enforcement agencies only, only federal agencies are required by law to post their reports in BATS.

“For state and local law enforcement, we’ve tried to include some value-added enhancements so that we’re not just taking advantage of their data,” says Chester, who started with ATF as a bomb and arson investigator about 14 years ago, and has 22 years of experience in the military explosives program. “They’re able to share data among themselves and selectively determine who they share with.”

In the next five to six years, ATF’s goal is to have about 10,000 BATS users.

“We don’t think we will get every investigator to use BATS,” Chester says. But because BATS conforms to the DOJ’s Global Justice XML Data Model, the

U.S. Bomb Data Center

The U.S. Bomb Data Center, formerly the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives’ (ATF’s) Arson and Explosives National Repository, in Washington, D.C., was established by congressional mandate in 1996 as a national collection center for information on arson- and explosives-related incidents throughout the United States. The U.S. Bomb Data Center databases incorporate information from various sources such as ATF, the FBI and the United States Fire Administration. Information maintained by the U.S. Bomb Data Center is available for statistical analysis and investigative research by the law enforcement community and scholars.

The mission of the U.S. Bomb Data Center is to:

- Provide arson and explosives statistics utilizing all available sources of information to ATF; other federal, state and local law enforcement and fire service agencies; and the public.

- Provide intelligence information in support of arson- and explosives-related criminal investigations by maintaining a database that can be queried with data from all federal and as many state and local law enforcement and fire service agencies as possible.

- Provide information regarding current arson and explosives issues to federal, state and local law enforcement and fire service agencies. Compile data necessary to describe trends and patterns related to arson and criminal misuse of explosives.

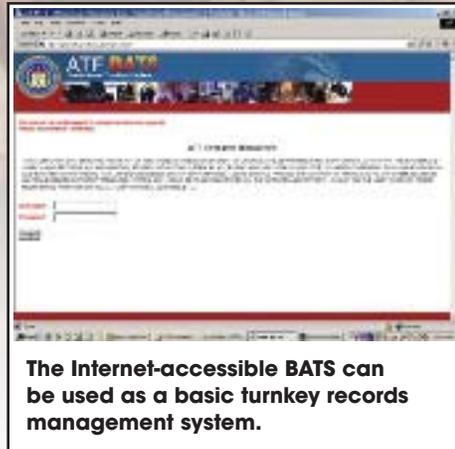
- Provide a method to increase/enhance communication among investigators working to solve similar arson and explosives cases and provide access to selected arson and explosives reference materials.

- Provide resource material to assist investigators with the identification of explosive material and techniques used to commit arson- and explosives-related crimes.

national information exchange model, he says, "We're hoping that as other arson and explosives systems are developed, we will be able to share information with those systems without format issues or import/export issues."

For legacy systems existing before BATS was available, ATF says requirements are being discussed that will allow information from legacy systems to be electronically "pushed" to BATS.

Other likely improvements, in addition to adding mapping functionality and an even more robust program, are more ad hoc reporting and data query tools, as well as the ability of users to customize BATS at the local agency level.



The Internet-accessible BATS can be used as a basic turnkey records management system.

Overall, the goal of BATS is to address the needs of its users.

"We're really pleased with it," says Assistant State Fire Marshal Joseph Thomas, who oversees the operation of BATS in Maine. "They've done a wonderful job putting this together. It's a tool that really has been designed for us as

an end-user, as opposed to being another type of records management system where we would be trying to drive a square peg into a round hole to make everything fit."

BATS is just another example of how well ATF works to support local law enforcement, says Jacobs, a fire investigator for 22 years. "At no cost to us, we have a pretty state-of-the-art RMS that we'll get a lot of use out of." ■

Rebecca Kanable is a freelance writer living in Wisconsin. A former associate editor with "Law Enforcement Technology," she has been writing about law enforcement for seven years. She can be reached at kanable@charter.net.

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