

## **Laptops Bring More than Technology to Squad Cars**

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Six years ago, Omaha police departments began a \$2 million effort to bring technology to the fingertips of officers. What they didn't foresee was poor ergonomics and possible safety hazards.

The plan sounds great; outfit squad cars with laptops so that officers will be able to run background searches, see mug shots and perform other high-tech functions from their cars, which essentially serve as their offices. What has actually occurred are complaints of awkward postures, back pain, possible public safety concerns, and hospital visits for 58 officers who have struck their heads on relocated gun racks!

In February, the Police Department's Safety Committee flagged more than a half-dozen such issues. According to the city's own safety inspector, the laptops have been installed in a way that creates a "future ergonomic nightmare".

Another big concern for officers is that the laptop's location may take their attention away from suspects and cars during traffic stops. The laptops are placed low to avoid potential airbag inflation. The monitor focuses an officer's attention toward the floor of the passenger side as opposed to out the windshield.

Other ergonomic concerns include:

- Emergency controls which were moved back about 16 inches with the introduction of the laptops. This puts them out of sight and requires shorter officers to bend their arms in a Z-shape.
- Officers have to twist their torsos 30 to 45 degrees and bend forward to use the computers.
- Glare and brightness may prevent the screens from being seen on sunny days.

The Safety Committee did recommend the type of computer that might be used instead. One solution might be a "mobile" computer that has the monitor mounted on the dashboard and a detached keyboard. This saves on space, keeps officers' eyes higher and allows them to move the keyboard. Since intensive typing is not usually required, it was felt the possible misalignment of monitor and keyboard would not be a significant concern.

The project to outfit cars with laptops is currently on hold until these issues are resolved. Half of the planned 121 computers have been purchased.