National Association of Legislative Information Technology

Inside this Issue:

National Conference of State Legislatures
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By Maryann Trauger
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The 2003 Professional Development Seminar at Harrisburg is past, but great memories continue and the taste of chocolate lingers. A very special thanks to Todd Jewell and his staff in Pennsylvania, to the planning committee members, and, of course, to Pam Greenberg, NCSL Liaison to NALIT. The NALIT Professional Development Seminars (PDS) are absolutely one of the best places to gain knowledge in our very specialized legislative environments and to network with others who have legislative experiences to share.

Maryann Trauger
NALIT Chair

As this year's NALIT chair, I am a member of the Legislative Staff Coordinating Committee (LSCC) of NCSL. Todd Jewell, Pennsylvania, as vice chair, is a member also. We attend quarterly meetings and participate on task forces. NALIT is particularly well represented in LSCC at the moment with Jim Greenwalt, Minnesota, as LSCC Staff Vice Chair and Sharon Crouch Steidel, Virginia, and Michael Adams, Colorado, as at-large legislative staff members. Does it get any better than this?

Michael Adams, Colorado, is also our Past Chair, so that current issues and concerns of NALIT members are uniquely represented at NCSL. The other members of the Executive Committee are Todd Jewell, Pennsylvania, who advanced to Vice Chair and Andy Kraus, Kansas, our new Secretary and Newsletter Editor. Three of our directors are in their second year of service: Scott Darnall, South Dakota; Gary Schaefer, Louisiana; and Gary Wieman, Nebraska. They are joined by three new directors: Rick Johnson, Washington; Jonathon Palmore, Virginia; and Janet Sullivan, Texas. These members are committed to NALIT and to serving you and their work is essential to the functioning of NALIT and very much appreciated.

No matter what the topic was, the presentations and training at the PDS really addressed change and adjusting to change. In information technology, as you are well aware, change is constant. Working in the field of legislative information technology means that we must initiate and manage change to the benefit of our individual legislatures.

The best place to find out how other states manage change is NALIT. I encourage you to use the listserv. You will have 200 advisors who can share their experiences, good and bad, and save you a great deal of time and money.

In addition, the NALIT web page has information that is absolutely invaluable. The technology survey, which will be revised and updated in the future to provide even more information, and the NALIT newsletter articles, are just two areas of information available to you without leaving your office and without spending hours of research. I also urge you to check out the handouts from the PDS that are now available on the web.

Your involvement, whether it is a listserv response, as a committee member, or as a director or officer, is what makes NALIT strong. Every member is important and every member is needed for NALIT to continue to be the successful staff section that it is. If you have any ideas, suggestions, questions, or anything that you think will make NALIT even better, or want to volunteer, please contact me. Looking forward to visiting with you in Salt Lake City, if not before.

Location, Location, Location. . .

Thoughts and experiences to contemplate before moving your server room

By Jim Schratz
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Four years ago, new heating and cooling air handlers, duct work and zone thermostats were installed to provide central heat and air for the basement through second floors of the south wing of the Arkansas capitol building. The system is computer controlled and supposedly state of the art, however, the software operating system, at version 1.0, is quirky and just a tad bit buggy, if you know what I mean. About two years ago, while the Arkansas Senate was undergoing an extensive renovation of its chamber and offices, a number of problems began to surface regarding the electrical power within the south wing of our capitol. An old fused and melted electrical breaker panel was discovered, with a metal fish tape in a conduit – and the panel was still "live!" Additional investigations revealed that the main power entrance for that wing was <u>not</u> grounded. A year and a half ago a contract was let to completely tear out and replace the south steps leading into the capitol building. Water had been leaking into the basement for more than 20 years and four or five attempts to "fix the flat roof" nearby had proved fruitless. During heavy rains, up to 1 inch of water would accumulate in the southeast corridor of the basement.

These real examples can showcase the problems of working in a 100 year old historic building, where form has often taken precedent over substance, when it comes to the health, upkeep and modernization of the building. Given the fact that the Arkansas General Assembly's

server room was located in the southeast corner of the basement, I became an avid hanger-on to any and all new construction and renovation projects about which I heard.

Do you know the potential effects of improperly grounded electrical current on the transmission rates of packets over a TCP/IP network architecture? Listen for the sound of a toilet flushing for the answer! Temperature fluctuations of 25-30 degrees in a server room are unhealthy for the systems, especially fiber channel controllers. Pooled water in a corridor 20 feet from my server room door left me weak-kneed.

With about a million dollars worth of equipment on the line, I began to talk realistically with my director about finding a safer, more environmentally-friendly location, in which to move our main servers into – outside of the capitol building. Heightened security measures for capitol buildings following 9/11 gave additional weight to my arguments. The continuing expansion of our legislative research staff also has highlighted space constraints within a building where space is forever being fought over.

The biggest hurdle to cross was how to connect the servers, from an offsite location, back to the capitol. The security, reliability and cost of the connection were the three main

considerations for this part of my plan. A new state-owned office building a block and a half from the capitol was under construction. Our state treasury was committed to moving their item processing shop in there. The legislative audit division was planning to move their server room and computer system's auditors to the new building. Both of these agencies were looking for a way to maintain connectivity with their main offices in the capitol building. I met with deputy directors from both agencies and proposed a joint project to install our own fiber from the capitol building, through another state-owned building which sat between them, and into the almost finished new building. They agreed to the joint venture.

Eleven months, one engineering firm, two architectural firms, the massive headache of a bid and let contract process, and one contractor later, we had 48 strands of dark, multimode fiber available for connectivity. During this time, we also added our Secretary of State's office to the venture. They had personnel in the office building located between the capitol and the newly constructed one. The total project cost about $78,000. The three original agencies split this cost and the Secretary of State provided personnel and labor in lieu of money. [Our state's Department of Information Services – an executive branch agency – had offered their network for connectivity purposes, at a projected price tag of about $3,500 a month, per location, per agency, per connection. We chose to proceed on our own.]

Once the connectivity issues were solved, finding a new location for our server room turned out to be about the easiest step in the process. Space in the middle building, right across the street from the capitol, became available. There was just one slight problem, though; we

were about 10 weeks away from our biennial session. Was it possible to get the office space renovated, special air conditioners and an electrical upgrade installed, plan the actual move of the servers and have all systems ready for session?

I set a target date of Friday, December 13, 2002 as the drop-dead move date, giving us one month before the start of our session. After a furious three days of meetings with the building's leasing agent and engineers, it was decided that the target date was achievable, although there was no room for delays. I then met with my director. Having been kept informed of all progress during the previous year, he agreed to my moving of the server room, plus the networking and programming staffs into the available office space outside of the capitol building.
We signed the lease the first week of November.

Everything went according to plan. We located and hired a local moving company that had solid references from several companies whose computer equipment they had moved. At 5 p.m., 12/13/2002, we shut down the network, began unplugging what seemed like miles of cables, wrapped each network component in a blanket, loaded them into specially designed wooden carts, secured them with tie downs and loaded them into a moving truck. At 1:07 a.m., 12/14/2002, we turned out the lights in our new offices and left the building. The network was back up, with all servers functioning as they were supposed to function. It's amazing what a great job a well-trained and dedicated staff can accomplish even with short notice. I owe a tremendous kudos to my entire staff for a job most well done.

This move was really just the first step in a long range business continuity plan (BCP) we are working towards. And, it does highlight many of the problems and issues that we all may face when working within the confines of an historic and

Revive the NALIT Survey

By Sharon Crouch Steidel
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At least once a week, a question is posted to the NALIT listserve asking what states are using a particular product or how states are handling certain issues. Wouldn't it be great if we had a searchable database concerning technology uses for all 50 states at our fingertips? This line of thought is the genesis for NALIT's 50-state survey that was created in 2001.

In an effort to provide a comprehensive tool to NALIT members and others, the database was created and posted on the NALIT website. The survey itself is organized into nine sections: Contact Information, Software, Document Management, Hardware & Networking, Chamber Systems, Voting, Video & Media, VPN/PDAs, and Web Site.

As time has passed, I must confess the survey has collected a little dust on it, which is why I am pleased that Maryann has created a Survey Committee and that Andy has asked me to write this article. The potential for this database is vast but it does require regular oversight by us all. Many of the survey responses have not been updated since 2001 and the survey form itself needs to reflect newer software versions. And yet, over the past month, we have had over 3000 hits on this database. Please take a few minutes and review the response(s) from your state. This will require a user name and password, which you can get from me at scrouch@house.state.va.us or from Pam Greenberg at Pam.Greenberg@ncsl.org.

I am excited about the potential improvements we can make to this tool in the upcoming months and years. If you have suggestions or thoughts about the survey, please share them or even better – volunteer to work on the Survey Committee!

The survey can be accessed from the NALIT home page (http://www.ncsl.org/programs/lis/nalit/nalithmp.htm), or directly at http://house.state.va.us/litsurvey.nsf.

Editor's Corner

By Andy Kraus
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I want to say a big THANKS to everyone who submitted articles for this edition of the NALIT newsletter. I feel very fortunate to have this opportunity to spread news from other states to the NALIT membership. I'm already starting to assemble the next newsletter, so if you would like to share any news from your state, please let me know! It's a safe bet that there will be somebody out here who is interested to read about your current goings-on. As a further bribe, in keeping with recent tradition I am offering a "gift from Kansas" to anyone who submits an article...don't worry, I won't send you any Kansas snow (or tornadoes)!

guarded state capitol building. I do love working in and around our capitol building and it definitely makes my work more interesting, although there are days I wish

it were newer, more modern and more open to the changes the information technology field can sometime hope for. It's all in location...

2003 NALIT PDS...

By Todd Jewell
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It's been well over two months since the end of the PDS and I must tell you, I am still recovering. But, more than recovering, I have to admit I am still beaming with happiness and overjoyed with the fact that everything went as planned and all my wonderful guests had a worthwhile experience.

For those of you who could not make it, I offer this tiny little article that will give you a small window of background and overview of the events of the week (and maybe make you a little jealous).

The process started over two years ago. I remember sitting in front of Michael Adams and Jim Greenwalt at the annual meeting in San Antonio. They blitzed me with tough RIGOROUS questions on why PA should be considered for the PDS…I barely escaped with my life. They graciously, and probably hesitantly, approved my bid to host the PDS in 2003. Once I heard the news it started my wheels spinning right away on what to do.

The 2002 conference was held in Reno

full of PA culture such as Hershey chocolate, Martins chips, Just Born candies, Tastycakes, and many other donated PA treats. Our hopes were to "addict" everyone to the chocolate so they would consider coming to PA the following year for a "fix." But how was I going to top a casino??

With the Reno PDS over, and my staff still sore from all the money they contributed to the casino owner's retirement funds, we had 365 days to prepare for our PDS. It seemed like FOREVER, but boy did the time fly. We started our initial preparation just days after returning. We began contacting and reserving many of the folks targeted to present and attend. Things really started to heat up in August and September and my staff did a PHENOMENAL job finalizing every detail. Then, it was here.

Joy of joy, the PDS was finally upon us! All of our planning finally coming to fruition. The conference was held October 1 – 5 and our guests began arriving on Wednesday, for the first day. My fellow IT friends from all over the USA and some new friends from Canada were in attendance. Even the staff from North Carolina made it back this year. Thanks guys! A BIG kudos to Tim Rice, he and his wife drove in from Springfield, IL (everyone remembers where

Ron Elliott (AL) and Trina Wasco (PA) pose for a picture with Ben Franklin.

NALIT members talk about technology during a lunch break.

Nevada, hosted by my good friend Allan Smith. As I strolled through the aisles of the Nugget Casino I could not fathom how I was going to build a better PDS than this. As many of you know we started "lobbying" for PA in Reno, by handing out goody bags

that is right?!) on his own dollar. Now that is commitment, or, that chocolate fix must have really gotten to him!

The first day featured a full day of specialized training. Topics dealt with SPAM (Sean Johnson "wowed" the crowd as usual) and a Windows vs. Linux showdown. One of my hard working, outstanding local vendors, NetComm Solutions, sponsored the evening event held at the National Civil War Museum, which included a tour of the museum and a fantastic dinner which was complimented by a wonderful harpist.

The second day of the conference started with Craig Zablocki's Positively Humor seminar that is nationally applauded. That was a real treat. I was lucky enough to be "involved' in the presentation but that is another story for another article. The sessions for the day covered great technical aspects from customer service to IT Investments. Our guests were given time during lunch to talk with the different vendors and view their IT wares. The afternoon session featured a roundtable discussion of IT issues and solutions from around the country. Compaq/HP sponsored the evening reception at the Whitaker Center which included a tour of the Harsco Science Center and an IMAX movie called the Human Body.

On Friday, the day started with Ben Franklin regaling our guests with PA history and how his humble IT beginnings of technology were

...Still Recovering!

the catalyst for such huge strides in technology today. He made comparisons from what he saw during his time and what he sees now. Sessions on Friday included technology staffing and good organizational techniques as well as sessions on web casting and looks into the IT future. Lunch again allowed time for vendor exhibits from different companies. The afternoon Management Track provided time for sessions on institutionalizing IT as part of a "traditional" legislative staff structure. The Technical Track featured a session on tools and techniques with web design using different media including audio, video and different programs.

The Friday evening event, Taste of PA, was our "Crown Jewell" reception of the conference. It was sponsored by my good friends at Lexmark Corporation. The event was held in our magnificent Capitol Rotunda and our guests were treated to food and culture from around the state. Each vendor came with their specialized products. We offered cheese steaks from Pat Steaks in Philadelphia, the famous Primanti Brothers sandwich from Pittsburgh, confectionary delights from Hershey, local beers and wines provided by ABC Brewery and some Pennsylvania Dutch desserts from Hitz's Farm Market. Local Pennsylvania musicians and a magician performed as well. Of course, Ben Franklin showed up for the party; he can never turn down a cheese steak or to pose for a picture or two.

Saturday the attendees chose between a tour of the Gettysburg battlegrounds and the Hershey Gardens and Outlets. Everyone ended the evening at Hershey's Chocolate World were they were treated to the Hershey 3D movie, the famous Chocolate World ride and a fantastic dinner. Heaven forbid I let our guests depart PA without a visit to the "Sweetest Place on Earth!"

Sunday our remaining guests attended a session provided by Tony Stanco from the Center of Open Source and Government and then finalized their conference with a tour of our beautiful capitol and our IT facilities. Wow, what a week, but a wise man once said, "All good things must come to an end," and sure enough it did.

It is hard to believe that our PDS is over and we start preparing for the annual meet-

PA staffers pose for a sweet picture. Back: Joe Tarquinio, Tom Salonick, Carol Lynde, Nancy Porvaznik and Bryan Perry; Front: Joe Lombardi and Cathy Shaner.

ing in Utah and the PDS in Burlington, VT. Duncan Goss will be our esteemed host in Burlington and I very much look forward to visiting his beautiful state. He has some wonderful things planned for us that cannot be missed!

Lastly, I want to close this little window into our PDS with some thanks. To my staff, you were top notch (as usual) and I appreciate every one of you and everything you did. To Pam and Becky, our NCSL syndicate, thanks for EVERY-THING you did and continue to do to keep NALIT running like a well-oiled machine. To my PDS Planning Committee members, thanks so much for the ideas, insight

and incredible agenda we put together. To my vendors, thank you very much for helping me turn my vision into reality. Last but not least, many, many thanks to my guests. Without you, none of this was possible.

Have a great winter everyone and hope to see you in Utah!

Photos courtesy of Pennsylvania House Democratic Caucus

Brian Lewis (TN) and Susan Hansen (AL) dress in period costumes for the trip to Gettysburg National Park.

Nevada Legislature Develops Web Captioning System for the Hearing Impaired

While technology can provide some elegant solutions, cost is still a major factor

By Andy Harvey
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Arguably, the single biggest reason the Internet has grown so rapidly in the past decade is that it makes vast amounts of information accessible to people regardless of time or location. The challenge for the future is to make that information available to the broadest range of people, including those with various physical limitations. Because it can make vital information available to its citizens, government should be a leader in this field. The concept is obvious and important, but its execution can be complex and costly.

The Nevada legislative website has followed the Bobby guidelines for several years now, and is Bobby Priority 1 compliant. This standard, however, seems to favor the visually impaired, in part because the Internet is text oriented. As with most legislatures, a priority for the Nevada legislative website is the audio/video broadcasting of committee hearings and floor meetings. This can raise issues for the hearing impaired. This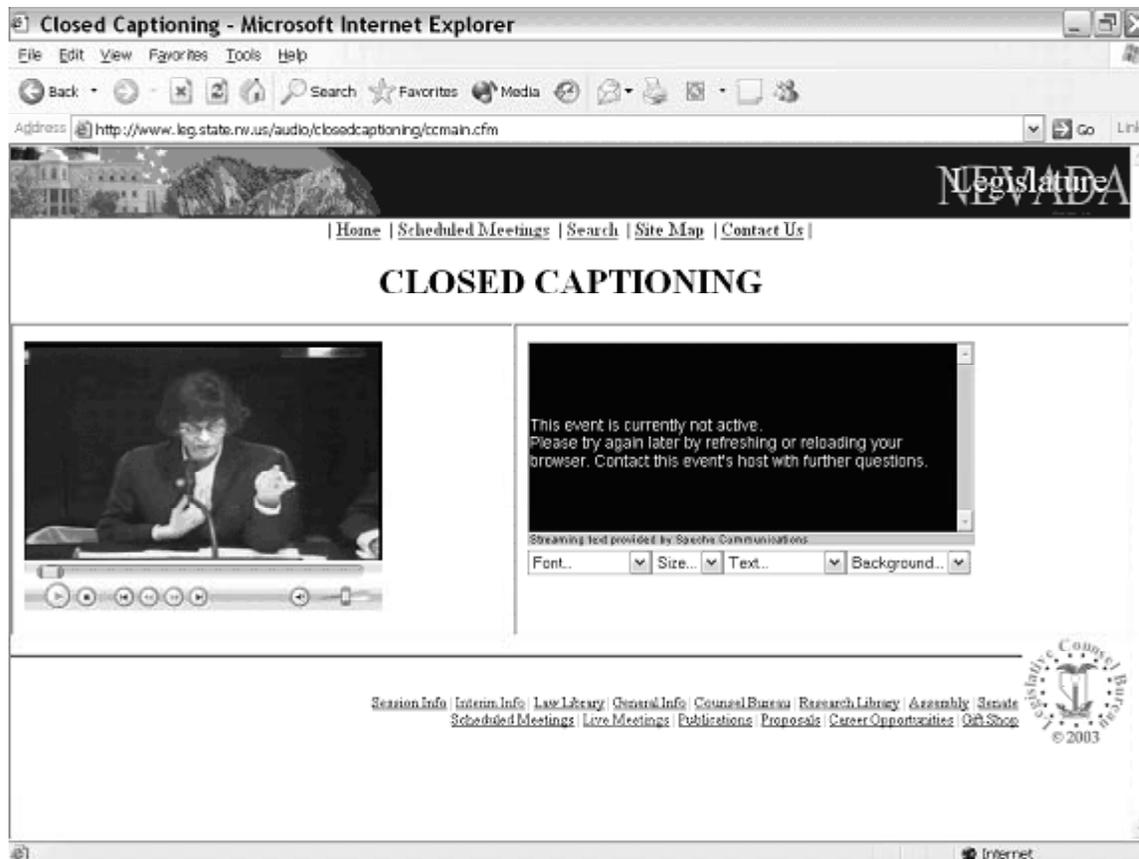 past year, we were contacted by the Nevada Deaf and Hard of Hearing Advocacy Resource Center asking if we would work with them to find ways to make our Internet broadcasts more accessible. This request led to the development of our new system.

Our system is based on court reporters utilizing stenograph machines. The spoken words in a meeting are typed into a stenograph. The text is then sent over the Internet to an outside company that converts the stenograph text into electronic, Internet-ready text, and sends it back to us via the Internet. We are able to post that text next to the Internet broadcast on one web page as follows:

The font style and size can be selected and the font color and background color can be set by the user. This allows each user to select the settings that are most comfortable for them. Having the video and text side by side on one web page makes it easier for the reader to see (via the video) who is speaking. It also allows them to see any graphics that may be a part of the meeting that the camera can zoom in on.

This arrangement represents an ideal version for the captioning of meetings via the Internet, but there are significant issues that it raises. The primary issue is cost. A court stenographer can charge $100 - $150 dollars per hour. The outside company that coverts the stenograph text to make it Internet ready can charge $75.00 - $100 per hour. At these rates, it quickly became clear to us that a goal of captioning all meetings in their entirety would be cost prohibitive. But, at least in our state, it may not be necessary. At this time, the Nevada Legislature will provide a "signer" at any committee meeting at the request of a hearing impaired person. The cost is about $50 per hour. We have only a

NALIT Logo Competition Results in Tie

By Pam Greenberg
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At the suggestion of several NALIT members at the NCSL Annual Meeting this year, NALIT Chair Maryann Trauger posted a message to the NALIT listserv requesting the membership to submit new designs for the NALIT logo. Twelve submissions were received, and the logos were printed on ballots for members to vote on at the seminar. NALIT's current logo was also included on the ballot.

The voting resulted in a tie between the current (original) version (designed by Sharon Crouch Steidel and her staff at the Virginia House of Delegates) and one submitted by Guillermo Cordon of Louisiana. Given some basic similarities in the designs of both logos, Maryann Trauger appointed a committee to look at combining the best elements of each logo in a new version. The new logo will accompany a new look on the NALIT Web site, which is undergoing a redesign as part of an NCSL-wide Web site redesign.

The current NALIT logo.

Logo design submitted by Guillermo Cordon (Louisiana).

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few requests per year. Our first regular usage of the electronic captioning will probably work in a similar manner. We will only caption meetings that are requested. While this will greatly reduce the cost, cost will still be a significant factor. We hope to devise a plan that will see the legislature pay some of the cost, and we are open to finding a corporate or foundation sponsor that can pay some of the cost. We would be willing to put a sponsor's logo or mention on our website.

Another issue that has come up is timing the electronic text to the electronic video. The outside company that converts the electronic text can set it to be in sync with the video it sees on the Internet broadcast. That works fine. But the issue that can create a delay is the buffering of the broadcast on an individual's machine. Buffering can be affected by Internet data speed and the processing speed of the user's computer. While this can cause a sync issue of 10 or 15 seconds, the system still seems to work well enough.

We have also had discussions on whether we should allow users to save the electronic text that is sent to their screen. Having a transcript of a meeting that is instant and accurate to the level of a court reporter at first seems ideal. In Nevada, however, this will not be allowed. By statute, the official record of any legislative meeting is the minutes. The purpose of the minutes in Nevada is primarily to record the intent of a committee. An exact transcript of a meeting does not address intent. So viewers will be allowed to see the text over the Internet, but not save it.

Finally, the way the text is provided over the Internet and on our website is by use of JavaScript and a cookie. It becomes important that privacy policies indicate this.

One frequent question we are asked is if we have tested voice translation software so that a court reporter is not needed. We have. The issue with voice recognition is that it "learns" one person's voice to become more accurate. Obviously, in the legislative environment, there are many speakers in many meetings, so voice recognition software is not nearly accurate enough. We considered training one person who could repeat everything spoken in a meeting, but even then, the level of accuracy was not high enough.

Given all the issues this project has brought forward, we still think it is a highly useful system and testing with our hearing impaired users shows they agree. We believe it is a system that can be refined and made useful here and one that can be copied and used in other states as well.

Resources

Speche Communications (pronounced speech)
Mt. Prospect, IL
www.Speche.com

Captions Unlimited of Nevada
Reno, NV
www.captionsunlimited.com

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