

# Galveston County

Modernizing evidence management across the county



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## Industry

Public safety / Cities

## Location

Galveston County, Texas,  
United States

## Products

Genetec Clearance



## The Galveston Sheriff's and District Attorney's Offices take control of their digital evidence with Genetec Clearance

Galveston County in Texas covers a combined area of 875 square miles and is home to 350,000 people. With more than 400 miles of beaches and shoreline, Galveston also welcomes an average of 2 million visitors each year. And, with its world-renowned medical facilities and thriving petrochemical and aerospace industries, the County is also a great place to live and work.

Like many municipalities, Galveston County law enforcement, which consists of over 20 different agencies, was experiencing some growing pains. With the rapid increase in the digital evidence being collected, it was becoming a challenge for the Sheriff's Office to manage all of its data.

In parallel, the Galveston District Attorney's (DA) Office was adapting to new discovery guidelines introduced by the Texas State Legislature in 2014. The new law stipulated that prosecution offices must share all items of evidence with defense attorneys prior to any plea or trial and must be able to prove what evidence was turned over and when. The DA's Office quickly realized that managing this new discovery process with traditional methods of evidence sharing would not work. They needed a solution to help maintain a clear and well-documented chain of custody.

To meet these challenges, the DA's and Sheriff's Offices jointly issued an RFP in 2018 to find an evidence management system that could effectively manage, store, and disseminate their digital

evidence. After listening to presentations from several vendors, the decision to go with Genetec Clearance was unanimous. As Captain Bell, Identification Division Commander at the Galveston County Sheriff's Office in Texas, explained, "The decision was based on a combination of factors, including usability, cost, and support. We knew immediately that these were good people with a good product that was going to do a great job."

### The growing challenges around collecting and storing evidence

Captain Bell oversees the Identification Division within the Sheriff's Office, which is in charge of all aspects of a crime scene. In addition to documenting crime scenes, the Division is also responsible for identifying, collecting, and storing every piece of evidence as well as managing all criminal records and incident reports.

Galveston County is not unique in the ever-increasing amount of data it's collecting. From body and car-cam videos to photos and interviews, the County has a potentially overwhelming amount of digital evidence.

The initial solution was to put all of the evidence in a folder on the Sheriff Office's network. However, officers quickly

discovered that this was not workable. One challenge was that the evidence itself could not be secured to the required levels because it was being stored on a multi-purpose, multi-user network platform. On top of that, keeping track of the contents of the folder was becoming more challenging over time. For example, if files were missing, it was impossible to determine if they had not been uploaded or were simply placed in the wrong location. And, as the Division continued to collect more digital evidence, the folder started to take up an enormous amount of server space.

Sharing evidence was also problematic. The Division would burn DVDs or use USB drives to make evidence available to the DA's Office or defense attorneys, but it could not ensure a clear chain of custody.

"The truth is we were having trouble keeping up," said Captain Bell. Adopting Genetec Clearance helped solve their problems one step at a time.

## The benefits of effective evidence management

When the Division first deployed Clearance in 2018, they had to migrate 7 terabytes (TB) of historical data to the Cloud, including all of the collected and stored evidence from past cases. To migrate the data, Genetec developed an automated program to upload everything in the existing folder to an identically named case file in Clearance. Due to bandwidth limitations, they ran the program at night and completed the migration in under one month with minimal problems.

Following the data migration, the Sheriff's Office went live with Clearance in 2019, and the Identification Division could not be happier with the outcome. "Clearance is now our overall case file with everything in it, including all of our evidence and case-related documentation. Where we used to keep paper records, we now store everything digitally in Clearance—including crime scene photos, interviews, patrol photos from cell phones, and all reports and records. We are currently storing over 80 terabytes of data in the Cloud. And, because we are using Clearance, when we have to work with case files for whatever reason, all of the data we need is right there at our fingertips," explained Bell.

## Simplifying data collection with the mobile app

One feature in Clearance that has streamlined the evidence collection process and increased accountability is the mobile app. Now, instead of having to call the Division out to every crime scene, patrol officers can take photos with their cell phones and upload them directly into Clearance. This allows for better use of law enforcement resources, and, since Clearance keeps track of all data uploaded into the system, it also ensures that evidence does not get lost or misplaced.

The mobile app has also benefited detectives who no longer have to carry around and set up video recording equipment for conducting interviews. When they need to get a statement from a witness at a scene, they simply use their cell phones to record the interview and then upload it directly to the Cloud.



Photo © Galveston County Sheriff's Office Facebook page

## Uploading and sharing data made easy

In addition to securely storing and tracking all that data, Clearance also makes it easy for the Division to locate information and share it with third parties. Bell explained how they use Clearance to respond to Public Information Act (PIA) requests: "When we receive a PIA, Clearance allows us to quickly locate the requested information. Then, we give the requestor access to the information by sending a link that can be used to download the material." In this way, the Division can ensure that only the relevant information is shared and, at the same time, limit how long a requester has to access the information.

Another important factor in the success of this project has been the support that the Sheriff's Office has received from Genetec. "The team at Genetec has been awesome. Whenever we have had an issue with the system, they have taken care of it very rapidly," said Bell.

For example, when they began using Clearance, there were limitations on how many items could be uploaded or downloaded at a time. This posed a problem since the Division is likely to take 200-300 photographs when working a crime scene. This meant that they initially had to upload photos in batches, which interrupted the workflow and led to delays. "When we told Genetec about the problem, they worked with us to find a solution. Now, we can upload and download all the files we want at any time," explained Bell.

## Data management for the District Attorney's Office

The Galveston DA's Office was also part of the decision to implement Clearance. In addition to the new law governing the sharing of evidence with the defense counsel, they were also dealing with increasing amounts of digital evidence being collected by law enforcement. As Kevin Petroff, the First Assistant DA for Galveston County, explained, "All of a sudden in 2014, the DA's Office got hit with a massive amount of discovery, and we were struggling, as were most Texas DA Offices, with how to deal with that."

For the DA's Office, the lack of software compatibility between law enforcement agencies in Galveston was a major issue. It meant that all evidence related to a discovery request had to be transmitted in physical form.



“When a request came in, we sent an officer out to pick up the evidence from the agency connected to the case. The officer would make a physical copy of the evidence, either on DVDs or flash drives, and then we would make copies of our copies to share with defense attorneys. What’s more, we had to keep careful track of what we shared, when we shared it, and whether or not the defense had actually received the evidence,” explained Petroff.

The DA’s Office began using Clearance in 2019, and the changes to its discovery process have been dramatic. Overall, in addition to allowing them to establish a clear chain of custody, Clearance has also saved them countless person-hours copying disk after disk of video evidence.

Now, when the DA’s Office receives a discovery request from the defense counsel, they simply ask the agency involved to submit the required evidence using a link. “One of the things we like about Clearance is that it doesn’t cost agencies anything to submit evidence to us. Agencies do not have to subscribe or purchase any additional software. All they have to do is upload the files to Clearance and then send the files to us. It’s that easy,” said Petroff.

Clearance has also greatly simplified the process for sharing evidence with the defense counsel. “With Clearance, we simply send links to defense attorneys for all of the items related to a case. We are also able, with the click of a button, to generate a list of everything that has been turned over, when it was turned over, and when the evidence was downloaded or viewed by the defense counsel. This is invaluable when we have to prove that our office did, in fact, send counsel all the required evidence,” explained Petroff.

Implementing Clearance has streamlined both the evidence collection and discovery processes in Galveston County. It has saved countless person-hours and helped with the prosecution of criminal cases. Looking ahead, the Sheriff’s Office is interested in using their new evidence management system to build stronger ties with their community. “We are looking at implementing a camera registry through Clearance. This would allow businesses and private citizens to easily upload surveillance video footage related to ongoing investigations. It’s just another example of how we can use advanced technologies to serve our people with respect, fairness, and sensitivity,” stated Captain Bell.



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