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Lane F. Cooper

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Stephen Lee

# **Alaska Legislative Affairs Agency Supports Far Flung Operations With Unified Communication and Collaboration Solutions**

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-- Curtis Clothier, Information Services Manager, Alaska Legislative Affairs Agency

## Alaska Legislative Affairs Agency Supports Far Flung Operations With Unified Communication and Collaboration Solutions

### Summary:

*The Alaska Legislative Affairs Agency (LAA) has a tough job. With 21 geographically dispersed offices that must be connected and integrated in the largest—and arguably the most rugged—state in the union, reliable broadband connectivity has still not arrived in every community. Nevertheless, LAA must support legislative and administrative duties across vast distances under a variety of network and environmental conditions. Consider that when a map of Alaska is superimposed over a map of the lower 48 states, it stretches from Miami, to Denver, to Minneapolis. Adding further to the challenge is Alaska’s citizen Legislature. Elected officials spend most of the year in their districts, where they and their staffs must receive the full support of LAA. That support must seamlessly carry through during the legislative sessions that are held annually in the capital, Juneau, for 90 days.*

### Situation

The Alaska State Legislature has long relied on automation for its core business, and it has won awards for its pioneering use of the Web to reach the public. The Information Services (IS) unit of LAA currently supports some 550 users, 60 of whom are elected officials. Many users are employed by the Administrative Services and Legal and Research Services groups, as well as other LAA divisions, such as Legislative Finance, Legislative Audit, the Ombudsman’s Office, and the Office of Victim’s Rights. The LAA IS staff must be responsive to the demands of each of the 60 legislators and the leaders of the legislative support units.

Presently, Alaska’s lawmakers collaborate principally by using Microsoft communication software to pass documents back and forth. In addition to e-mail, legislators rely on instant messaging, to collaborate closely with each other, especially as specific elements of legislation reach their final form.

Automation also plays a major role in the actual legislative drafting process. Advanced Microsoft Office programming has been integrated into a workflow system that has been developed by LAA to circulate draft material among legislators and their staffs. Microsoft Office products are used to edit and process legislative content.

True to the state’s proud frontier tradition, Alaska’s Legislature is in session in Juneau for only 90 days per year. During the session, legislators move their offices and staffs to Juneau. When the session are completed, the offices—including IT infrastructure—are packed up and moved back to the home offices of legislators from Anchorage to Fairbanks and from Kenai to the Kodiak Island. LAA must ensure that they are reconnected to the wide area network for the next nine months, and the process repeats with the opening of a new session.

Beyond providing the basic services of IS support, the LAA is also tasked with training and ensuring end-user access to both full time staffers, as well as the seasonal staffers that balloon during the annual legislative sessions. Elected officials are fully staffed for 90 days a year, but

during the interim, some employees are let go because of the drop in workload. Moreover, the legislators themselves are in a constant state of turnover; House members serve 2-year terms, and Senators serve 4 year terms.

## **Solution**

The Alaska Legislature relies exclusively on Microsoft applications for desktop productivity software, and is increasingly relying on Microsoft communications products for e-mail, instant messaging, as well as connectivity applications for wireless devices. LAA is currently working with Microsoft to modernize the Alaska Legislature's backroom resources as well. Over the years, the Agency has successively upgraded to Microsoft Exchange editions 2000, 2003, and most recently, 2007. One current initiative is to migrate legislators and their support units away from an open source instant messaging systems to the unified Microsoft Office Communicator platform.

Curtis Clothier, LAA's Information Services Manager, says the move away from open source is driven by greater functionality with other Microsoft applications used by the legislature and staff.

"We're looking forward to Office Communicator 2007, especially being able to work with other public instant messaging systems like AOL, Yahoo, or Google," says Clothier. "Security is important to us, so we want products that are manageable and have security features to ensure authentication and keep out bad traffic, applications, and viruses."

In thinking about how IS supports the key business processes of the Alaska Legislature, Clothier likes to point out that the essence of how the Legislature works is communications. "We're keeping everybody talking to each other so that they can collaborate," he says.

Microsoft products are enabling new communication processes to replace manual systems used by or in support of the Legislature. In a trial effort, Clothier deployed Microsoft Share Point within Information Services, with an eye to eventually deploying it to Alaska lawmakers.

"We use Share Point internally in our support agency and we're hoping to roll it out to legislative offices over the next year," Clothier explains. "As we use it, we can understand the technology better. And we have an opportunity to convince the other legislative offices that Share Point is something that they can use."

Another new initiative is aimed at improving communications between legislators, their staffs, and their constituents, who are often hundreds – or even thousands – of miles apart. LAA is currently rolling out small webcams around the state and to test the performance of video conferencing and video IM.

Eventually, LAA plans to host video conferencing on the Office Communicator Server. But it is working with Microsoft to overcome the limitations of underdeveloped infrastructure in the more remote reaches of the state.

Clothier elaborates: “The biggest hurdle we have in Alaska is that we are so spread out and our communication systems are everything from standard circuits to satellite. We have a lot of latency and limitations with bandwidth when we’re linked with places like Barrow, Kotzebue or Tok.” Nonetheless, the Alaska Legislature is committed to deploying video teleconferencing over the long term, and is determined to roll out better communications services to even the most remote villages and communities.

Another future communications improvement that will be deployed in 2008—and which will also face the challenge of threadbare bandwidth—revolves around integrating desktops into a Voice Over IP (VOIP) solution. In a move intended to achieve economies of scale and savings of scarce taxpayer dollars, the Legislature is working jointly with Alaska’s Executive branch on the VOIP initiative.

The joint VOIP project is fraught with political—though not partisan—complications: as a Legislative agency, LAA is required to maintain and control a separate data network from the Executive and Judicial branches of government. Nonetheless, LAA is committed to the project because of the potential payoffs. LAA is enthusiastic about integrating VOIP capabilities into Microsoft Office Communicator suite. “We’re looking for more convergence on the desktop,” says Clothier.

In preparation for the VOIP initiative—as well as the previously mentioned videoconferencing—LAA is rewiring legislative facilities around the state with Category 6 wiring to meet expected office bandwidth needs for the next ten years. Clothier and other LAA managers anticipate that the savings in travel and lost time will more than pay for the infrastructure investments the Agency is making to enable video streaming and other communications technologies.

## **Benefits**

LAA managers estimate that savings in travel, and productivity gains are the most significant justifications for the cost of new upgrades. LAA participates in an enterprise agreement concluded between Alaska’s Executive branch and Microsoft four years ago. As a result, the Legislature gets access to the latest Microsoft Office software products and operating systems in exchange for an annual fee.

The most visible returns on LAA’s investment in Microsoft Enterprise technology are evident in two areas:

- The quality and responsiveness of Alaska’s Legislature, and
- The quality of life for legislators, their staffs, and support personnel.

Thanks to Microsoft communications solutions, individual Legislators and their staffs can count on a minimum baseline level of connectivity that allows them to do their jobs and serve their constituents. For example, Microsoft’s mobile products allow lawmakers to do a lot more of their work on the road. Outlook Web Access is a critically important tool that provides Legislative branch personnel with a simple and reliable way to work from hotels or on the road, even with minimal bandwidth.

This robust capability is especially important in rural Alaska, where communication infrastructure is often 10 or more years behind the current state of the art.

“Some things that seem downright easy in Seattle or Los Angeles,” observes Clothier, “are a lot tougher when you get up here.”

In addition to improving the efficiency and effectiveness of Legislators and Legislative employees, reliable remote access and the familiarity of Microsoft products have improved quality of life. Remote access allows employees to be on call, rather than in their workplace. “We have actually had vacationing employees on the beach in Mexico answering emails,” muses Clothier. Without remote access, those employees may have been called back from leave early, or a critical service stopped. Microsoft products have also allowed LAA to save money and morale-busting training time.

“These are applications that people use at home and when we get them in the office, we expect most office workers to know how to turn on a computer, and use Word and Excel,” says Clothier.