

**BILLIONS OF DOLLARS IN UNCLAIMED MONEY IS WAITING TO BE CLAIMED BY ITS RIGHTFUL OWNERS.**  
 CONDUCT A FAST, EASY SEARCH TO SEE IF ANY OF IT IS **YOURS!** [search now](#)

You are not logged in... [Login](#) / [Sign-up](#)

**chron.com** News, search and shopping from the **HOUSTON CHRONICLE**

TODAY'S WEATHER **NOW HIGH LOW**  
 Pt. Sunny **54° 57° 41°**  
[MORE](#)

[HOME](#) [NEWS](#) [SPORTS](#) [BUSINESS](#) [ENTERTAINMENT](#) [LIFE](#) [TRAVEL](#) [BLOGS](#) [JOBS](#) [REAL ESTATE](#) [CARS](#) [SHOPPING](#)

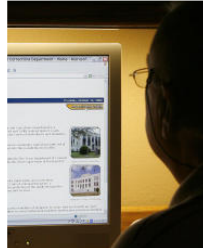
[Enron](#) | [Energy](#) | [Real Estate](#) | [Tech](#) | [Markets](#) | [Houston Stocks](#) | [World Markets](#) | [Currency](#) | [Your Portfolio](#) | [Legal & Public Notices](#)

SEARCH  IN

Subscribe to the paper now!

**Business**

Steve Swan, a probation officer with Liberty County, keeps in touch with low-risk offenders online with a computer program developed by Houston-based Circle7Software, ProbationComm.  
 STEVE CAMPBELL: CHRONICLE



▶ PLAY | ◀ BACK | NEXT ▶

Oct. 21, 2006, 9:14PM

**PUBLIC SAFETY**

**Company's software can keep tabs on low-risk offenders online**

Keeping close watch

By ANASTASIA USTINOVA

Copyright 2006 Houston Chronicle

In 32 years as a probation officer, Steve Swan has faced a growing caseload that brought with it a mountain of paperwork.

**TOOLS**

[Email](#) [RSS](#) [Get section feed](#)  
[Print](#) [Subscribe NOW](#)

Last year, Swan found money in the county's probation department budget to hire a consultant, Colin Mason, to help him break from the old-fashioned way of doing things. A program developed by Mason's company, Circle7Software, allows Swan to keep in touch with low-risk offenders online as he received reports and fees from them.

Swan said the system was a success in Liberty County.

"We are faced with a lot of offenders who are not a risk to the community, so now we can use a cheaper and more effective way of dealing with them," Swan said. "The software has a tremendous amount of potential."

Now Houston-based Circle7Software faces the challenge of tapping that potential as it tries to sell this service nationwide.

**Reluctant to change**

Experts in the field warn that potential clients are reluctant to change and don't have much to spend.

"The public dollar is a very scarce commodity when you are looking for new technologies," said John Armstrong, corrections project manager at the Justice Department's Office of Law Enforcement Technology Commercialization.

On the plus side, more probation officials are now willing to pay for services that could help them deal with crushing case loads.

The Texas Department of Criminal Justice estimates each probation officer must keep track of more than 100 people, ranging from low- to high-risk offenders. Last year the state allocated \$14 million to hire and train more staff to reduce growing caseloads.

Circle7Software's Mason said that with the help of his software, called ProbationComm, each officer could work with up to 500 probationers, which would leave them more time to handle difficult cases.

To reduce the upfront cost, Mason designed the program as a Web-based service, with users paying a \$10 yearly fee.

**Big potential market**

Texas offers a big potential market for Circle7Software. Texas leads the nation with 429,000 supervised offenders, who spend on average 66 percent more time on probation than the national average of 38 months, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

But Tom Jones, president of Arizona-based AutoMon Corp., which supplied kiosks to help track people on probation in Dallas County, said there's little margin for error in the public sector.

In business there is a financial reward if you take a chance on something and it works, Jones said. The reward isn't there in the public sector because "when a government agency takes a risk and it works out, that's what everybody expects."

Circle7Software's founders said they are used to taking risks. Mason met his partner and marketing director, L.J. Skibbe, at Houston's Sports Car Club of America, and the 7 in the name of the company refers to his car, a Mazda RX7.

In recent months, Mason and Skibbe have raised more than \$35,000 through friends and family and attended dozens of law enforcement technology conferences, looking for customers so they can roll out ProbationComm nationally.

"This is not the type of software that you can just pick up the phone and call and do the old-fashioned sales way," said Skibbe, who previously worked in public relations for Hewlett-Packard Co.

Skibbe said the company is looking for \$250,000 in investments and plans to add capabilities to track juveniles on probation and to ensure the identity of those using the system with biometrics

**CHRONLINKS** [MORE INFO](#)

**Free Download of Java EE**  
 Download SAP NetWeaver Application Server Java EE 5 For Free Today!  
[www.sap.com](http://www.sap.com)

**Investment Banking Jobs**  
 Visit eFinancialCareers.com for capital markets jobs, news & advice.  
[www.efinancialcareers.com](http://www.efinancialcareers.com)

The Westin Getaway  
 Get 1 extra night free with any 2-night stay. [Book Now](#)

This is how it should feel.  
**WESTIN**  
 HOTELS & RESORTS

- MORE STORIES**
- IN BUSINESS**
- Energy policy, demand may keep oil prices high
  - Productivity growth slows; factory orders plunge
  - Oil prices rise as traders watch weather, OPEC
  - Ford to improve roof strength of some vehicles
  - GM side airbags to be standard for 2012 models
  - White House nixes greater foreign control of U.S. airlines
  - Consumers seem to be waiting for holiday bargains

- TOP JOBS**
- Category: Government, Social Services, Law, Education**
- ◆ **SAFE-WAY DRIVING CENTER** - driver ed instructor
  - ◆ **Confidential** - legal secretary
  - ◆ **BARBIZON MODELING** - modeling instructor
  - ◆ **BIG LITTLE SCHOOL** - teacher
  - ◆ **WESTSIDE MONTESSORI SCHOOL** - teacher assistant - part-time
  - ◆ **TEXAS HIGHER EDUCATION** - deputy commissioner for business
  - ◆ **SAFE-WAY DRIVING CENTER** - driver ed instructor
- [Search All Jobs](#)

**circul city**

**DEC 5**  
 Shop now!

identification.

## Creating a buzz

Joe Russo, program manager with the National Law Enforcement and Correction Technology Center, said after the software testing is over — if it is shown to be effective — Mason's company needs to create a lot of buzz among law enforcement professionals.

"It is very difficult to break in because the market is so fragmented," he said. "You have to make a lot of pitches; there is no agency that controls purchasing."

## Idea is not new

The idea of using technology to help monitor probationers is not new.

ATM-like kiosks that allow low-risk offenders to file reports and pay fees have been around for several years inside police departments and city halls.

To avoid cheating, the probationers must enter their personal identification numbers and have their fingerprints scanned. But it's been hard to convince the public that an online session is a good substitute for a face-to-face meeting with a probation officer.

Last year, the Dallas County Probation Department discontinued the use of the kiosks amid media reports that half of the offenders reporting to the machine were on probation for felonies such as drug dealing, burglary and repeated drunken driving.

According to Bonita White, director of the Community Justice Assistance Division with the Texas Department of Justice, judges decide which probationers are low risk. That would make them eligible to file reports at a kiosk or online.

"We are talking about humans here, and anything can happen anytime, no matter what the risk level says," Russo said. "That's just the nature of the business."

[anastasia.ustanova@chron.com](mailto:anastasia.ustanova@chron.com)

### CHRONLINKS

[MORE INFO](#)

#### Free Download of Java EE

Download SAP NetWeaver Application Server Java EE 5 For Free Today!  
[www.sap.com](http://www.sap.com)

#### Investment Banking Jobs

Visit [eFinancialCareers.com](http://eFinancialCareers.com) for capital markets jobs, news & advice.  
[www.efinancialcareers.com](http://www.efinancialcareers.com)

#### Learn About SAP NetWeaver

SAP NetWeaver: A Flexible, Fully Integrated IT Platform. Learn More.  
[SAP.com/NetWeaver](http://SAP.com/NetWeaver)

#### \$145,000 Loan for \$484/mo

Free mortgage quotes. Refinance and save \$1000s - Bad Credit OK  
[www.LowerMyBills.com](http://www.LowerMyBills.com)



**ADVERTISING:** [Contests](#) | [Fraudulent Ads](#) | [Information & Rates](#) | [Place An Ad](#) | [Singles In Houston](#) | [Yellow Pages](#)  
**CHRONICLE:** [Subscribe Now](#) | [Subscriber Services](#) | [Buy Photos](#) | [Chronicle in Education](#) | [Corrections](#) | [Public Affairs](#) | [RSS Feeds](#) [RSS](#)  
**SERVICES:** [Copyright Notice & Privacy Policy](#) | [Help](#) | [Registration](#) | [Report a Problem](#) | [Site Map](#) | [News Alerts](#) | [Newsletters](#)

Subscribe to  
the paper now!

REAL Cities

Donate to  
Good Fellows