

TPCN News



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Cyber Security Changes and Upgrades to the Call-Taking Platform

Change can be a good thing. Especially when it comes to protecting the assets of the Texas Poison Control Program and the hard-working individuals who make it work efficiently each and every day.

The Texas Poison Control Network (TPCN) has undergone significant changes over the last 36 months resulting in a complete refresh of the technology and underlying infrastructure supporting the six Texas Poison Centers. The most significant of the technology upgrades is the implementation of a new call platform that is capable of delivering the advanced features and functionality the center directors have requested.

CSEC team members have been working to enable these capabilities over the past four years. That is when CSEC's Chief Program Technical Officer Kevin Rohrer first sat down with the Poison Center directors and asked them for a list of what they needed in order to have a resourceful and capable poison control program throughout the state. Some items requested included the ability to work remotely, utilizing their own devices, web chat services and up-to-date capabilities of communicating with the public through the poison help line, such as texting and messaging. The Directors also made it clear how important it is that the Medical Directors be able to access the TPCN remotely in order to consult with emergency room staff at any time, day or night, regardless of

their physical location. This is helpful because these calls tend to be more serious cases and require time-sensitive responses.

"The future of the Texas Poison Control Network is imperative for the implementation of both remote agents and modern communication mechanisms like texting and messaging capabilities. We are an emergency service that should be available to the residents of Texas via their communication mechanism of choice," North Texas Poison Director Melody Gardner said. "We also must implement remote agent capability in order to remain competitive in the market place and for disaster response. In order to implement these two essential needs, we must ensure the network has a robust cyber security system."

Unfortunately, the old platform was not capable of supporting any of these capabilities therefore CSEC staff began working toward bringing these changes to fruition.

"Our goal was to build and implement a system that was capable of delivering advanced services and functionality now and into the future, and not be a technology "roadblock"," Rohrer explained.

Before staff can start rolling out these exciting new platform capabilities, CSEC will carry out cyber security assessments for each center in order to ensure compliance with IT industry standards, and state requirements.

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These assessments are starting to take place and will continue through FY 2018.

CSEC has hired the outside firm of Myers and Stauffer to conduct this assessment. The contract was procured through the Department of Information Resources (DIR) IT Services contract program, which prequalifies vendors that provide services such as this.

“The first requirement for them will be to do a physical assessment and gap analysis of each of the poison centers,” Poison Control Manager Mia Villarreal said. “This includes not only security of the technology but also the security of the center location itself.”

The information gained from these assessments will provide CSEC with the plans to build the necessary cyber security infrastructure, a process that is being planned in sprints through 2021.

“All these various communication capabilities will open up more cyber security challenges which is why we need to do these risk assessments,” IT Director Robert Cadenhead said. “We will be looking at these assessments to suggest recommendations on how to apply cyber security best practices to the new capabilities.”

Each one of the new capabilities will have the ability to be utilized once CSEC receives, analyzes and addresses the results from the cyber security assessments. CSEC will then work with TPCN Directors to craft these policies based on the findings moving forward to make sure CSEC and the TPCN are in compliance with cyber security rules.

“We have to look at this as a three tier approach that incorporates organizational processes, technology and people effectively,” Cadenhead said. “They all three have to work in unison for a project to be successful.” Over the next two months, CSEC will be working meticulously to get the security assessments completed and

DID YOU KNOW?

Did you know, available bandwidth to each poison center is being increased to 3 times more than before the platform upgrade project started?

start working through the recommendations from these assessments. The entire process is a phased approach that will ultimately benefit the State of Texas and the poison centers over the next several years and on.

“We are still on target to have implementation of the new platform working by the end of the fiscal year and are working diligently with service providers to have the capabilities available for the network as soon as cyber security assessments have been completed,” Villarreal said. “The new platform will work securely and smoothly for both the TPCN and the constituents who call poison control for help.”

How the Call Platform will Impact the SPIs

The TPCN call-platform is changing and in positive ways not only for the network as a whole, but most importantly for the SPIs (Specialists in Poison Information) who will be utilizing it every day to help save lives and keep the community poison-free.

With the change to the call-platform (called Finesse), SPIs will be presented with a GUI interface that will allow them to more efficiently manage their calls. The SPIs and Directors will receive training prior to implementing this new platform. There will also be testing of the network to make sure everything runs cohesively.

“I believe the SPIs will like the new look of the Finesse platform. It will look familiar, but it may take a little time to get used to,” Southeast Texas Poison Center Director Jean Cole said. “The best feature is the scoreboard function which will allow the SPIs to see if another specialist is at the desk and ready to take a call. The most challenging function is the phonebook, but hopefully that can be tweaked to a more user friendly form. I think this will be a big step in the right direction!”

The most significant change that the SPIs can expect to see to in the platform is the way the calls are presented to them on the screen. It will provide more details on the caller than the previous platform. SPIs will have the capability to see who is logged into the TPCN network from an individual basis, and whether they are ready or not ready to take a call.

“We realize that this tool is a critical component in the SPIs work flow. We asked very early on in the planning process leading up to this upgrade that TTEC (formerly Tele Tech) write a script to present this info on the SPI’s call screen.” CSEC’s Chief Program Technical Officer Kevin Rohrer said.

SPIs have a lot to look forward to when it comes to changes to the call platform. It will be an exciting process to see the improvement in workflow and call handling processes for the SPIs once the upgrades are in place.