

# Texas County Implements Video Conferencing in its Courts



Bexar County implements video teleconferencing system to increase efficiencies in judicial proceedings, saving county residents hundreds of thousands of dollars.

## Executive Summary

### Bexar County

- **Industry:** SLG
- **Location:** San Antonio, TX
- **Number of Employees:** 4500 Bexar County employees, 119 IT employees

### CHALLENGE

- Reduce risks associated with transporting potentially unstable inmates to and from court proceedings
- Increase efficiencies of court proceedings to offset delays and backups in legal system
- Reduce costs associated with judicial processes, including hearings and legal communications

### SOLUTION

- Upgraded old equipment by implementing Cisco TelePresence system across 20 strategic endpoints within county

### RESULTS

- Virtualized 1062 hours' worth of court proceedings in 2011 (comparable to 44 entire days)
- Saved county residents hundreds of thousands of dollars across multiple departments
- Decreased risks to public safety associated with court proceedings

## Challenge

Bexar County, Texas was officially established in 1837 as one of the original counties of the Republic of Texas. Its legal system has been in place as long as the county and the efficiencies of its legal proceedings needed to increase. Specifically, the Central Magistration, Children's Courts, and District Courts saw room for improvement for the efficiencies of their proceedings.

Throughout the courts, transporting incarcerated individuals to and from legal proceedings bore a significant cost to Bexar County taxpayers. For example, a single trip for one inmate to a Bexar County court from a state hospital required paying two officers to accompany the inmate, as well as fuel, and, if necessary board and room. With court cases occurring daily, the costs were adding up.

Beyond financial burdens, physically transporting all the relevant parties (for example, inmates, plaintiffs, lawyers, expert witnesses, interpreters) to the court proceedings was slowing the judicial system. Ultimately, this situation meant that fewer cases were being resolved than might have been possible.

Finally, Bexar County envisioned a safer way of accomplishing its legal and judicial processes. For example, in the Central Magistrate, some judges did not have a holdover cell in their courtrooms, increasing the risk associated with physically bringing in inmates for legal proceedings. In some courtrooms, holding inmates is particularly risky, given the courtroom's proximity to an exit, the crowded nature of the room, and the general hostility of the people in the courtroom.

Bexar County, and all of its courts, needed a system that would enable secure, unified communications and collaboration between justice and law enforcement departments as well as partner organizations. The county decided that integrating technology into its courtrooms was the key to increasing process efficiency. Increasing efficiencies and reducing costs were particularly needed following the 2008 economic downturn; The county had been forced to cut staff and freeze jobs, meaning doing more with less.

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37th Civil District Court with Cisco video conferencing technology

“The updated teleconferencing system has saved our county taxpayers hundreds of thousands of dollars.”

**Catherine Maras**  
CIO, Bexar County, TX

## Solution

Bexar County examined a variety of providers to implement a new communications solution. The county ultimately decided, however, to use Cisco for its “technological makeover.” This decision was primarily based on positive previous experience. Furthermore, it was well known within the Bexar County IT community that Cisco guaranteed network security in its technology. Security is crucial for court proceedings, because materials have the potential to be used for legal purposes. Compared to alternate providers, Cisco was deemed to be the more efficient, more secure, and more reliable provider for the revamping of the county’s courtroom technology.

Bexar County began using TANDBERG video conferencing technology 10 years ago for use in immigration issues. The goal was to update and expand on this initial technology. Thus, in January 2008, the county collaborated with Cisco to initiate a major deployment of new network and high-definition equipment, where the obsolete TANDBERG equipment was replaced with a Cisco TelePresence system, and new infrastructure was implemented.

In total, Cisco established 20 TelePresence endpoints throughout Bexar County to streamline communications for court processes and facilitate collaboration across different justice and law departments. Five of the video teleconferencing (VTC) units were intentionally installed in the county jail, all are in secure “inmate proof” encasings, to facilitate legal communications between lawyers and their clients (for example, for pre-trial hearings).

Each VTC endpoint was designed to deliver high-quality, lifelike video communications to the users at a particular site. Furthermore, Bexar County’s VTC system included a variety of key features that facilitated the streamlining of judicial communications. For example, VTC’s multiway calling capabilities allowed courts to initiate three-way calling (useful in scenarios requiring an inmate, defendant, and judge to communicate). Furthermore, the technology allowed two streams to be sent simultaneously, meaning a camera plus PC could be engaged at the same time. Finally, the Cisco VTC system enabled all calls to be recorded, streamed on demand, and downloaded for future use.

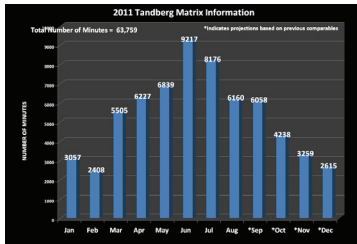
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Touch panel that controls the system from judge's bench



2011 VTC usage in minutes (total: 1062 hours or 44 days in 2011)

## Results

With the new Cisco TelePresence system, parties relevant to legal cases could be virtually dialed into court proceedings, which had an enormous impact on the county's docket (the official schedule of proceedings) speed. Communications between inmates, interpreters, expert witnesses, judges, and other parties in particular cases have been noticeably streamlined. In addition, the Criminal Magistrate Court praised the technology on having a key impact in jail populations: "Virtual conferencing has played a huge role in reducing Bexar County's jail populations by minimizing bench warrants and increasing the speed at which our court can process cases. It's been a phenomenal change."

VTC has increased efficiencies across two specific areas. First, VTC has allowed for remote testimony and virtual hearings. As such, the need for inmates to be physically present at the various courts has been substantially reduced, thus eliminating unnecessary transportation costs and decreasing waiting time. For example, the Central Magistrate now uses VTC for charge enhancements once the inmate has been moved to the jail instead of necessitating that the inmate be physically present.

Second, VTC has enabled courts to have simultaneous legal communications. For example, the Children's Court conference rooms, equipped with Cisco VTC, can be used by the Attorney General when trying to work deals with an inmate. These kinds of communications can now be done separately, while court is in session, so that cases can be disposed of more quickly.

VTC has also succeeded in reducing risks to public safety in the county, primarily by eliminating the unnecessary transportation of dangerous and/or mentally unstable inmates between courtrooms and the state hospital. Specifically, judges use VTC for mental competency hearings. Similarly, by allowing for virtual communications and subsequently decreasing the use and need for holdover cells, VTC has successfully reduced courtroom incidents. Court proceedings can unfold with lower risks, including flight risk, for all parties.

Another poignant result has been that, by facilitating remote testimony, VTC has decreased the need for confrontation in court proceedings, particularly in the Bexar County Children's Courts during child abuse and neglect cases.

Although each of the different courts in Bexar County utilizes Cisco TelePresence system in different capacities, the end results are the same for all: increased efficiencies, increased public safety, and saved resources. In 2011 alone, Bexar

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## Product List

### VIDEO

- Cisco TelePresence

To learn more about Cisco TelePresence, go to [cisco.com/go/telepresence](http://cisco.com/go/telepresence).

County used VTC for 1062 hours (or 44 entire days) worth of proceedings, resulting in phenomenal savings. Cisco VTC technology has, so far, saved Bexar County hundreds of thousands of dollars stemming from the resulting efficiencies. Over the next few years, the video conferencing system is expected to pay for itself because of the significant savings (for example, by eliminating expert testimony fees, which include transportation, board, and room).

## Next Steps

VTC has been so successful in Bexar County that plans have been made to take the technology further in the coming years. Currently, the county is implementing four new VTC rooms in the recently renovated Justice Center building. In addition, eight new criminal courts plan to have VTC capabilities by the end of 2012. Finally, Bexar County is planning to use VTC for video visitation in the county jail.

## For More Information

To find out more about the Cisco VTC, go to: <http://www.cisco.com/en/US/products/ps7060/index.html>.

