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Worms crash county network

Computers made useless by assault as Rensselaer County workers return to paper, pens

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TROY -- Pencils, pens, telephones and shoe leather were Rensselaer County workers' tools this week as most desktop computers have been off-line since Tuesday.

Work to fix the county's e-mail servers, infected by the worms w32.ircbot and irc.bot.jen, is continuing, and as a result most of the county's 200 computers are inoperable, officials said.

"We don't have any computer problems here," said Undersheriff Pat Russo, referring to the county jail. "We don't have computers."

It has many people commenting on how modern offices now are so dependant on computer networks that the work cannot get done any other way.

"It's like the tub is running over and we can't turn off the tap," said another county official.

The jail's computers came back up Thursday but went down again later in the day and were still down at noon Friday.

Just about every county office is unable to communicate by e-mail or print documents while the problem is being worked on.

"Our system for retrieving documents is run by a outside company, so we can serve the public," said Deputy County Clerk Gregory DeJulio. "We just have no e-mail, so we have to communicate the old-fashioned way."

In some cases that means documents that could be e-mailed now have to be delivered by hand.

The problem has hit the District Attorney's office particularly hard.

County Judge Robert Jacon was trying to set a return date for pre-trial motion in a manslaughter case Friday morning when Assistant District Attorney Jessica Hall asked for more time.

"We've had computer problems now for a couple of days and no one is telling us when it will be fixed," Hall told Jacon. "Some people are saying it could be more than a week."

Jacon gave the office about a week's extension.

County spokesman Chris Meyer said officials were hoping to have the problem solved sometime later Friday.

"The experts are telling us that they will be soon coming closer to the end of this problem, knock on wood," Meyer said.

Meyer said the county's 911 emergency system is on a different network and unaffected. "That would be a nightmare if that went down," Meyer added.

Meyer said a power outage last week brought down virus protection software and open the door for the worms.

Worms are malicious self-replicating computer programs that usually attach to e-mails and use a network to send copies of themselves to other computers on the network. The particular bugs that have infected county computers are called Trojan horses by experts in that they get into the system

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and allow the sender to then manipulate infected computers from afar.

Meyer said experts first have to find the bugs in individual desktops and erase them. But the problem with worms is if they miss one, the whole system immediately will be infected again when re-booted.

"Then we have to start all over again," Meyer said.