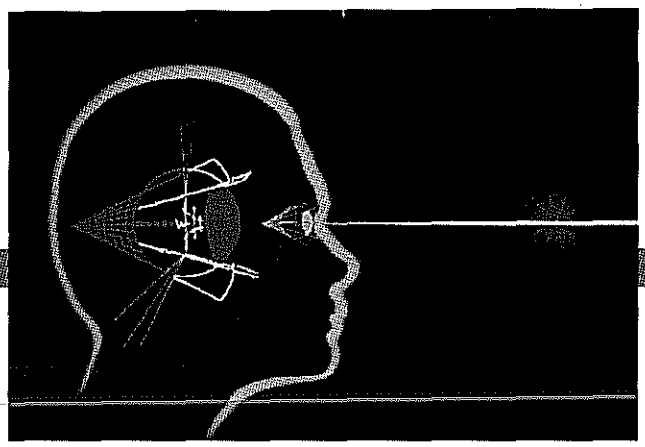
169007



Leaders Convene to Assess Correctional Technology Needs

Information-sharing, Officer Safety Stressed During Charleston Technology Conference

By Erin Dalton

When the Corrections Committee of the Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Advisory Council met in 1996, members were able to look back proudly at the progress they'd made since their first meeting a year earlier. At that time, JUSTNET, the National Institute of Justice's (NIJ) online technology information service for law enforcement, corrections and other criminal justice professionals, did not even exist. Today, JUSTNET provides connections and information exchanges to thousands of users. Teleconferencing also has become a hot communications tool during the committee's term. More conferences are occurring via satellite so that thousands of people across the country can participate in policy-implicating forums.

These advances make clear the wisdom of bringing corrections professionals together to recommend new technological priorities. The voices of these representatives, as well as those of speakers such as Assistant Attorney General Laurie Robinson and Jeremy Travis, director of NIJ, are essential to NIJ's Office of Science and Technology (OS&T), which sponsored the committee's three-day meeting at the National Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Center's (NLECTC) southeast regional site in Charleston, S.C.

The Corrections Committee shared the goals delineated in addresses given by both Robinson and Travis, and identified the following priorities for the corrections community:

- information-sharing and information technology,
- community corrections and the tracking and monitoring of offenders,
- concealed weapons detection,
- drug testing technology, and
- additional correctional officer safety problems.

Improvement in these key areas, the committee believed, would help the corrections community become "more efficient, more effective and more innovative."

Information-sharing

One of the attendees' top priorities was to be able to link one institution to another, not only within each state, but across the country. The Corrections Committee suggested that the U.S. government develop a model criminal justice information system and accompanying standards for state and local systems. This ambitious venture would require a range of approaches — from upgrades and enhancements to the replacement of entire communications systems.

Once created, members felt that such a system should become as accessible as America Online or other similar Internet services. As such, it would provide national coverage and accessibility to all federal, state and local law enforcement and correctional agencies through local telephone Internet access. The committee felt this type of system would be the next logical step on the road to nationwide interoperability, and NIC made the system its top priority.

Continued on page 84

Continued from page 82

Offender Tracking

In his keynote address, Travis discussed the need for improved community corrections. Robinson said that, because economic woes often prohibit the extensive prison construction needed to lock up every offender, corrections must discover new ways to manage them in the community.

To this end, work on global positioning systems (GPS) for more advanced electronic monitoring systems needs to move forward. Advances also should be made in monitoring sex offenders, who are an enormous concern to the public. Studies have found that sex offenders do not "age out" of their predatory behavior, and, as Bureau of Justice Statistics data show, are 10 times more likely than other offenders to re-offend. As such, many feel it is urgent to identify technologies to manage these offenders in the community.

Committee members suggested that a sex offender be required to wear a body alarm that would activate when he or she approached a school or other place of potential victimization. NIJ already is working to make this a reality. OS&T is exploring ways to apply the Soldier 911 system, a Department of Defense (DoD) personal alarm and tracking device, to the criminal justice arena.

In addition to community offender tracking, there also is a need for inmate tracking. The NLECTC's southeast regional site is exploring technologies such as the multi-technology automated reader card (MARC) and the fiber optic door hinge. Through an embedded computer memory chip on the card itself, MARC keeps track of medical information, demographic and biometrics data, booking history and other inmate information necessary to aid correctional officers in daily activities. In addition, research has produced the fiber optic door hinge, which can detect the slightest opening of a cell door — even as small as a quarter of an inch. Current detection technology can indicate only an opening of at least 4 ½ inches.

Detection Technology

Corrections officials are not alone in their desire for the improvement of concealed weapons detection. In fact, the NIJ-established Law Enforcement Advisory Committee identified concealed weapons detection as its top priority, and the NLECTC northeast regional site is slated to address this priority. Committee suggestions for future research and development included portable detection devices for facility shakedowns, as well as smaller X-ray machines which would assist in examining packages and suitcases that come into correctional facilities.

In late 1995, President Clinton issued an executive order asking the attorney general to develop a major drug testing initiative for federal defendants which also encourages similar efforts on state and local levels. The Corrections Committee recognized the same need, and eventually concluded that they needed to develop "a cheaper, more effective, nonevasive drug test that even the smallest jurisdiction could

afford." Indeed, drug detection devices also are needed to test correctional officers, and officer drug use detection has been identified as crucial to maintaining operational security. Steps are being taken to generate the technological advances that corrections and other law enforcement agencies require. A drug testing task force will be created to find better and cheaper ways to apply drug testing to criminal justice.

Prison Security

The Corrections Committee also recognized that the overall safety of correctional officers is a priority, and research and technology should continue to respond to safety needs in the future. Committee members have many ideas in the works which hopefully will achieve prison security for the law enforcement and corrections communities. These include:

Telemedicine. The Justice Department is working with the DoD and the Federal Bureau of Prisons on telemedicine technologies, whereby doctors examine inmate patients using remote cameras, computers and telephone lines. Once in practice, this new technology has the potential to reduce the costs and security risks associated with moving offenders to outside facilities for medical treatment.

Teleconferencing. Similar to telemedicine, teleconferencing would provide another means for conducting inmate visits and court hearings. This too would save time and money and reduce the risk of moving inmates outside the facility.

Laser Flashlights. The glow from these flashlights temporarily blinds inmates, who are thereby unable to detect staff or inmate movement. These devices could be useful in controlling inmate uprisings.

Puncture- and Slash-Proof Vests. These lightweight vests have been shown to prevent injuries to correctional officers.

As a result of the advisory council's meeting, corrections professionals now have a plan for launching new correctional technologies, including innovations in drug-use detection, offender tracking and contraband detection. Of course, technology will never be able to replace critical human interface. But corrections professionals recognize that the use of technology can still assist us in providing greater security and safety for correctional staff and inmates. It also can save money and time, both precious commodities in our profession.

Erin Dalton is a staff member for the National Institute of Justice's Office of Development and Dissemination.