The Rise of TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEES In Corrections

By Joe Russo

There can be no doubt that technology has and will continue to change society. And while the corrections industry has traditionally been slow to change, the impact of technology on the corrections field is unmistakable. It was not long ago that the use of technology in the nation's institutions was basically limited to such devices as two-way radios, chemical agents and metal detectors. Today, the corrections field is becoming more and more aware of the infinite possibilities offered by technology and is actually putting these technologies to use. Biometric systems are being used for access control; location and tracking systems are monitoring inmates' movements throughout a facility in real time; and, through telemedicine, inmates are receiving medical and psychiatric services without leaving the facility.

In a relatively short period of time, the industry has seen tremendous growth in both the depth and breadth of technological solutions available to corrections. The corrections field is seeing new technologies developed specifically for correctional use as well as the adaptation and modification of technologies originally created for other purposes. All of this new technology is exciting and holds great promise, but beware the double-edged sword. The opportunities created by the availability of new technology do not come without challenges. There has never been more technology to choose from and this is both the good news and the bad news. Decisions regarding if and how technology should be implemented are great challenges fraught with pitfalls, and the stakes only grow greater as price tags rise.

With the increased role of technology in corrections, it has never been more important for agencies to effectively evaluate, select and implement these tools. One mechanism becoming more commonly used by state-level correctional agencies is a formal evaluation committee. These groups may be known by several different names, including technology review committees, product evaluation committees and technology transfer committees. The names and the primary mission of these committees may vary from state to state, but there are several key, common purposes that they serve.

Internal and External Focal Point

Formal technology review committees can provide an agency with a single point of contact and a process by which all technology is introduced. The committee becomes the focal point for technology vendors and they are funneled through a centralized process so that individual institutions are not contacted on an ad-hoc basis. Internally, the technology committee serves as the point of contact for any staff member who recognizes a need area or potential technology solution that should be considered. One important side benefit from this approach is that the committee can serve to help protect the chief executive from being approached directly by vendors that may have political ties. Vendors also benefit from this approach as they can conserve their resources by making one single, focused "sales call" to the technology committee as opposed to several trips to individual institutions within a state.

Prioritization and Uniformity

One of the greatest benefits that can be realized through a technology review committee is a formal process for the prioritization of needs within an agency. Because the needs of individual institutions and wardens can vary considerably, it is critical to balance them against the overall needs and values of the agency and focus on technologies accordingly. Once an agency has set clear priorities, it can begin to use the technology review committee to establish uniformity in technology acquisition. Ideally, the process should be established in such a way that the committee makes recommendations to the chief executive on specific products that should be considered for approval, and individual institutions can only buy products from the list of ultimately approved products. Using this type of structure, important steps can be made toward continuity and consistency of technology products within a correctional system. One way this helps is that officers, civilian staff and maintenance crews will be more familiar with the technology with which they need to be working regardless of the institution

they are working in on a particular day. More important, a correctional system can reap major cost savings by buying items in bulk at volume discounts knowing that they will be used systemwide.

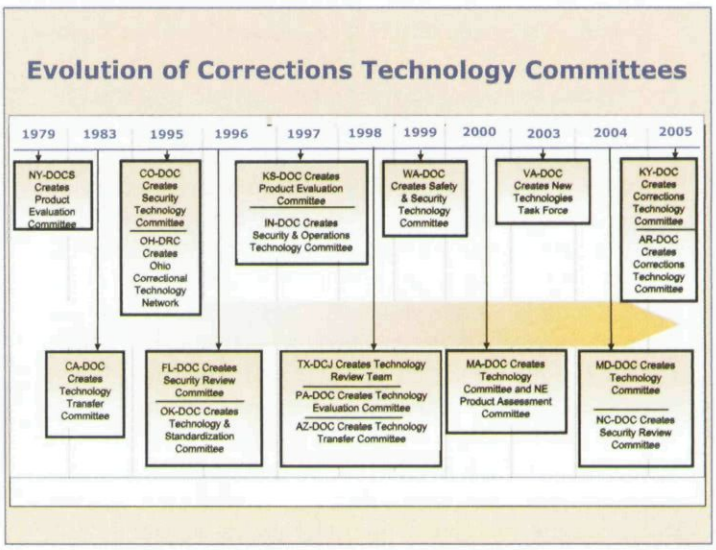
Better Decision-Making

Organized properly, a technology review committee can provide for better decision-making than could be achieved by an individual or small group. By using the vast expertise and resources within an agency, there is a far greater chance of effectively evaluating and selecting appropriate technology as well as anticipating any implementation issues that may arise. Each state committee has different membership criteria, but in general, committees consist of a blend of high-level decision-makers, line staff or end users, information technology experts, and depending on the type of technology to be reviewed, staff from the legal, training and medical departments. The resources of a technology review committee need not be limited to the agency itself. Several existing committees have proactively reached out and are tapping into the resources of such entities as Sandia National Laboratories, the U.S. Army Natick Soldier Center and the National Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Center (NLECTC). The basic premise of the committee approach is to bring together the best sources of information to make the best decision possible.

The Expansion of the Committees

As illustrated in the timeline in Figure 1, technology review committees have been in existence since the late 1970s, a time when the availability of technology was scarce when compared with today's standards. Eighteen states currently have a technology review committee (see Figure 2) and since 2003, five state committees have been

Figure 1



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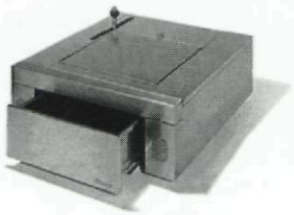

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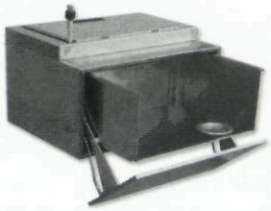

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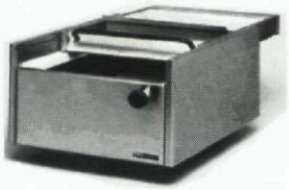

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established and two more are in the planning stages. Clearly, this is a trend that is gaining momentum for many of the reasons listed earlier. Again, while all technology review committees serve the same general functions, there are three basic types of committees currently in existence: product evaluation committees, technology transfer committees and regional technology committees.

Product Evaluation Committees

The most common form of committee is one that focuses primarily on the evaluation of existing technology. The first system to formalize the process in this way was the New York State Department of Correctional Services, which created the product evaluation committee (PEC) in 1979. The main goal of this committee was to address the issue of the lack of uniformity in New York state prisons. The PEC was charged with reviewing and approving the technology to be used in all facilities as opposed to each facility making individual decisions. The results have been the desired uniformity in the technology used across the state and, as a result, significant cost-savings to the state. When the PEC identifies a technology of interest, the product is typically loaned to the committee for a period of rigorous testing and evaluation. This evaluation process not only provides New York state with critical information needed to make better decisions, but other states benefit as well. The PEC regularly shares its evaluation data with other correctional agencies as a service to the field so that other states do not have to perform the same process and to provide the data to states that do not have the resources or expertise to conduct their own testing program.

Technology Transfer Committees

The concept of a technology transfer committee (TTC) was first developed by the California DOC in 1983. The TTC had a different focus than that of a PEC. In addition to reviewing and approving technology to achieve standardization across the state, this committee was unique in that it took the lead in two specific areas. First, it actively reviewed existing technologies with the goal of applying them or modifying them for correctional uses. Second, the TTC worked closely with technology developers to communicate the operational needs of the agency so that they could create a new product that met their requirements. In partnership with private enterprise, the TTC has helped to develop such innovative technologies as the Prison Inmate and Safety Management (PRISM) system, a less-than-lethal water restraint system, electrified fencing, multizone metal detectors and clear security products such as televisions, radios and personal hygiene product containers. California's TTC was unique in its role and focus as the initiator of technology development, and the entire corrections field has benefited from its vision.

Regional Technology Committees

One of the natural progressions of a state-level technology committee is a multistate committee. In this area, the Massachusetts DOC took the lead in 2000, when it developed the concept for a regional technology review committee to share information on experiences with existing technology and to evaluate the potential of emerging technology. Vision quickly became reality and the effort was dubbed the Northeast Product Assessment Committee (NTPAC).

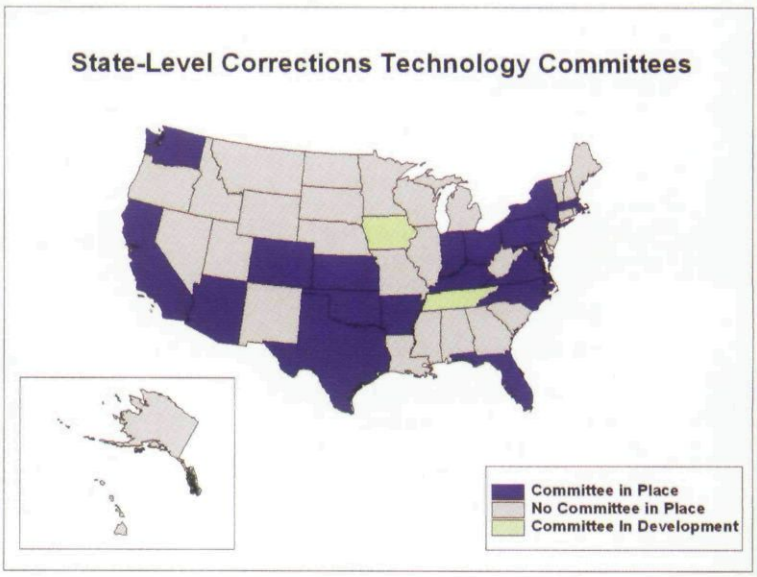
NTPAC comprises representatives from the Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, New York City and the District of Columbia DOCs, and the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

NTPAC is similar to other technology review committees in that it convenes regular meetings dedicated to vendor presentations of various technologies. One unique aspect of this committee is that it provides practitioners from several different states an opportunity to review a technology from their own perspective and share their thoughts about the applicability of the technology for operational use. This real-time information sharing across jurisdictions is extremely valuable. Another unique aspect is the second day of the meeting, which is dedicated to educating participants through presentations from recognized independent experts in such fields as biometrics, wireless communications and physical security systems. The NTPAC model is also valuable to vendors as it provides them access to several states at one time as well as an opportunity to learn more about the needs of the field and to examine how the product might be modified to make it more useful.

This model for information sharing has been very promising, and the National Institute of Justice has dedicated funding to help support the work of NTPAC. The National Institute of Justice, through NLECTC, has been working with states across the country to support existing committees and to educate others on the value of establishing technology committees and networking to get the best information possible on technology before making purchasing decisions.

With this goal in mind, in June 2004, NLECTC hosted a symposium on corrections technology review committees.

Figure 2



Source: Survey of State Departments of Correction, 2005

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and to modify these parameters on a dynamic basis as dictated by the application requirements.

Significant reductions in recording costs have been realized during the past several years and it is anticipated that there will be further cost reductions and increases in the performance of digital video recorders. With the development of closed-circuit television cameras equipped with Internet capability, the use of a personal computer with high-capacity storage units may be used to store and retrieve video images in lieu of the packaged digital video recorder for selective applications.

Access Control Systems

In the 1970s, access control technology applications[2] within a correctional facility were limited. Reader technology was primarily the magnetic card type. By the early 1980s, card readers were developed that employed proximity technology. This technology provided a higher security level than most magnetic card systems, and the readers were less prone to vandalism than the magnetic card readers.

In addition to card reader technology, development efforts were directed toward biometric readers, which could be integrated within the access control system. Biometric devices development includes readers based on hand geometry, retina patterns, iris patterns, facial patterns and fingerprints. These technologies provide opportunities to select access control devices as required to support the security objectives of a correctional facility.

Technology's Impact

Technological developments as related to control systems, operator interfaces, networks, perimeter detection systems, closed-circuit television systems, video recorders and access control systems have significantly impacted the structure and functional performance characteristics of electronic security systems for correctional facilities. Current technologies enhance the integration of security systems to achieve operational effectiveness and provide for a more secure environment for correctional staff than was realized in correctional facilities of the 1970s and 1980s. Technology is constantly in a state of development and, therefore, provides a continuing challenge to those entrusted with the responsibilities to select and integrate the appropriate technologies into new or renovated correctional facilities.

ENDNOTES

[1] For purposes of this article, controllers are those system components that provide monitoring and control functions for the security systems.

[2] For purposes of this article, access control systems are defined as those systems that employ card readers, key pads and biometric readers as devices for facilitating access to a space or area.

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The event was designed to share best practices and information on evaluating technology and to begin networking on a national level. Invited speakers described the process of technology review in their states or regions, successes and challenges, tips for dealing with vendors and lessons learned. Practitioners responsible for evaluating technology in their agency were selected to attend the symposium, and 25 states and the Bureau of Prisons were represented.

In April 2005, NLECTC-Southeast hosted the first meeting of the Southeast Technology Assessment Committee, which brought together 11 states to review new technologies. The meeting focused on intelligent video surveillance systems and was very successful. Additional meetings are planned, which will have a specific technology theme and will rotate around the southeast region. Other NLECTC regional offices are working on facilitating similar committees across the country.

The Future

During the past 10 years, the corrections field has witnessed a dramatic increase in the amount and type of technologies available to corrections and, in turn, the role of technology has changed accordingly. Several states have determined that technology selection and acquisition decisions are important enough to warrant the resources of a dedicated committee. In the future, more and more states can be expected to formalize the process by which they review technology. These committees have sufficiently proved their value over time, and it is likely that in the near future the majority of states will have established formal committees. In addition, by using the NTPAC model, more states will band together, either formally or informally, to review technology together and share information and experiences. Ideally, these groups will be linked to form a national network of professionals who can learn from one another, establish best practices and save resources by using the collective knowledge to put information to use.

In the future, a national knowledge database will likely emerge that provides quick and easy links to correctional practitioners with experience or information about a particular technology or vendor. With a few mouse clicks, practitioners will be able to identify which of their colleagues across the country has information about a particular technology, who has conducted a pilot study, who has evaluation data, etc. Not long from now, perhaps the corrections field will be at the stage where technology demonstrations are conducted by vendors at a central location and transmitted via video-teleconference to individual state committees that can review the technology, ask questions and provide information to one another in real time. These ideas will become reality if there is the need and the will to make it happen.

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