

NIJ's Corrections Technology Center of Excellence:

Addressing Cutting-Edge Corrections Technology Issues

By Brian R. Higgins

Author's Note: Points of view expressed in this article do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

The National Institute of Justice's (NIJ) Corrections Technology Center of Excellence (CoE) helps corrections professionals transition into using new technology that can make their operations safer and more effective. According to CoE Director Joe Russo, "Our mission is driven by practitioner needs."

The NLECTC System

The establishment of the Corrections Technology CoE is just one aspect of the reorganization of the National Law Enforcement Corrections Technology Center (NLECTC) system. The system was formerly organized into a national center and regional centers along arbitrary geographic lines. The reorganization still includes a national center (which serves as the hub of the system and administers NIJ's equipment compliance testing program) and three regional centers, but now also includes technology centers of excellence aligned with NIJ's technology investment portfolios.

The regional centers are organized to support agencies with similar jurisdictional and regional issues. The first regional center focuses on state, major city and county criminal justice agencies (those with 50 or more sworn officers). A second regional center focuses on small, rural, tribal and border agencies. A third center focuses on the needs of agencies in Alaska. This reorganization allows the new centers to more clearly focus on a single set of similar issues shared by the agencies in their region, rather than the old structure that sought to support agencies with disparate needs.

The topic-specific centers of excellence conduct research, development, testing and evaluation efforts. The CoEs are: Corrections Technology; Communications Technology; Criminal Justice Electronic Crime Technology; Forensic Technology; Information and Geospatial Technologies; Sensors, Surveillance and Biometric Technologies; and Weapons and Protective Systems Technology.

The Corrections Technology CoE

The Corrections Technology CoE supports NIJ's research, development, testing and evaluation by:

- Developing evidence-based performance standards;
- Conducting tests and evaluations of new technologies;
- Coordinating technology working groups (TWGs) for institutional and community corrections to help identify practitioner technology needs and requirements;
- Introducing new technologies to practitioners, providing practitioner requirements to developers and assisting developers in commercialization;
- Developing and promulgating guidelines to help correctional agencies select and implement new equipment and technology; and
- Conducting relevant, focused studies about programs and technologies.

The following are key elements of the CoE's research agenda:

- Improve the safety of the public, staff, offenders and visitors within correctional facilities;
- Improve the safety and efficacy in community corrections through enhanced offender reentry;
- Improve the allocation of resources within correctional agencies to reduce costs, enhance staff management, and reduce injuries to staff, offenders and visitors; and
- Improve the collaboration between federal, state, local and tribal correctional agencies and other criminal justice agencies through the integration of technology information.

Current CoE Research Efforts

Develop a standard for offender tracking technologies. Many states have passed laws that require monitoring of an offender's whereabouts, and more categories of offenders (e.g., sex offenders, domestic violence offenders and gang members) are being monitored. The length of time an offender must be tracked varies by type of offender; in

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some cases, sex offenders are tracked for life. Many jurisdictions now consider offender tracking to be an important option in the collection of alternatives to incarceration. As a result, corrections professionals believe more types of tracking technologies will become available. Research produced solid evidence that electronic monitoring reduces the likelihood of failure under community supervision compared to other forms of community supervision.¹ Such evidence is likely to further bolster its usage.

As monitoring technology increases, corrections administrators need a reliable way to select these tools. One of CoE's primary initiatives is to develop and promulgate a standard for technology to track offenders. In the past, NIJ standards have addressed a specific product, not a technology system. The new standard will address the basic elements of the whole system of tracking technology, such as the physical attributes of equipment, robustness of the system, ability to detect circumvention attempts, software requirements and technical operations. The CoE's work will include producing a Selection and Application Guide to help corrections personnel better understand the standard and the test methods used to measure the equipment's performance. By providing a minimum set of requirements for all offender tracking products, the standard will probably lead to the development of more efficient, more cost-effective and consequently more informed procurement decisions by corrections administrators.

The CoE expects to release the standard by 2012. A workshop was held in May 2011 for manufacturers, certification bodies and testing laboratories to provide a preview for the industry and vendors. A workshop on the development of the standard was conducted in June 2011 at the 12th Annual Innovative Technologies for Corrections Conference (see "Outreach Projects and Conferences" below for more information).

An Offender Tracking Standard Special Technical Committee and an Advisory Working Group are guiding the work involved in developing the standard. The Advisory Working Group includes representatives of the American Correctional Association, American Probation and Parole Association, National Sheriffs' Association, International Association of Chiefs of Police, the American Jail Association and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

Develop green technology guidebook. A groundbreaking initiative for institutional corrections is the Green Technology Guidebook for correctional institutions, which is expected to be released in early 2012. Many large prisons are like small cities, housing large numbers of offenders

and maintaining critical infrastructure elements such as electricity, heating and cooling, sewage and water use, food service and preparation and garbage collection and disposal. Like cities, they can reap financial benefits from energy conservation.

The technology guidebook will address the application of green technologies in construction, renovation and operation of correctional facilities. It will discuss cost-saving measures in areas such as lighting, HVAC systems, plug-in appliances, materials flow, water and general energy. The guide will also cover the importance of human capital — the knowledge and abilities needed to implement green technologies. In addition to the main chapters, the guide will contain an appendix describing financing mechanisms that agencies have used to provide funding for green technology projects. The technology guidebook is being written in an easy-to-read style geared to correctional practitioners without specialized knowledge of green technologies.

Manage the electronic monitoring resource center.

The Corrections Technology CoE also manages the Electronic Monitoring Resource Center, a secure website that provides a "one-stop shopping" site for information about electronic monitoring programs (see <https://emresourcecenter.nlectc.du.edu>). The site contains information about legal issues and legislation related to electronic monitoring, news articles, reports and research (including field-test reports on specific monitoring systems, descriptions of program administration, and procurement help such as requests for proposals that other jurisdictions can use to determine their own specifications for an electronic monitoring system).

The CoE is expanding the site into a more comprehensive resource that will be a password-protected, Web-based forum for providing information on current and emerging technologies, vendor contact data, and practitioner information for both institutional and community corrections.

Other Activities

Field search support and training. The CoE continues to support technology to monitor an offender's computer use. Field Search is a free software program that allows probation and parole officers to quickly and easily search offenders' computers for evidence of access to pornography and other prohibited websites.

In August 2010, the CoE offered a two-day Certified Field Search Instructors course in both Field Search Windows (FSWin) and Field Search Mac (FSMac) products/competencies for experienced Field Search users.² Students who completed the course are now certified to teach fellow officers how to use the software. The CoE has

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also created a training video that provides basic instructions on how to navigate Field Search that is available to criminal justice personnel through the NLECTC website. For more information, visit www.justnet.org.

Outreach projects and conferences. The Corrections Technology CoE sponsors two major conferences each year. The first, the 12th Annual Innovative Technologies for Corrections Conference, offers workshops and presentations related to electronic monitoring technologies. This year's topics included automated telephone reporting, using GPS to supervise domestic violence offenders, GPS and crime scene correlation, and using social networking sites to enhance supervision and apprehend fugitives. Other topics covered were: evaluating protective equipment for correctional officers, combating inmate cell phone use through managed access, delivering limited in-cell access to Internet content in high-security settings, contraband detection using low-dose X-ray technology, integrating newer energy-saving technology into older prison sites and automated victim notification.³

The second conference, the Technology Institute for Corrections, provides a forum for professionals to discuss technology initiatives and issues affecting the corrections community. Participants share ideas about existing and developing technologies, problem-solving strategies, and lessons learned.

In addition to these conferences, CoE staff routinely make presentations on technology issues at national and state conferences, including those of the American Jail Association, Texas Probation Association, American Probation and Parole Association, Correctional Security Forum and Association of Paroling Authorities International.

ENDNOTES

¹ Bales, William, et al. May 2010. *A quantitative and qualitative assessment of electronic monitoring*. National Institute of Justice, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, D.C. The article was posted to National Criminal Justice Reference Service in January 2010 and is available at <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/230530.pdf>.

Philip Bulman. 2010. Electronic monitoring reduces recidivism. *Corrections Today* (December). Retrieved from <http://www.faqs.org/periodicals/201012/2272834051.html>.

² For more information on Field Search software, including links to information about software features and how law enforcement agencies can request the software, see www.justnet.org/Pages/fieldsearch.aspx; also see Higgins, Brian R. 2010. Field Search: A tool for monitoring sex offenders. *Corrections Today*, (April). Retrieved from <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/230461.pdf>.

³ For more information, visit http://www.justnet.org/Pages/ITCC_2011.aspx.

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