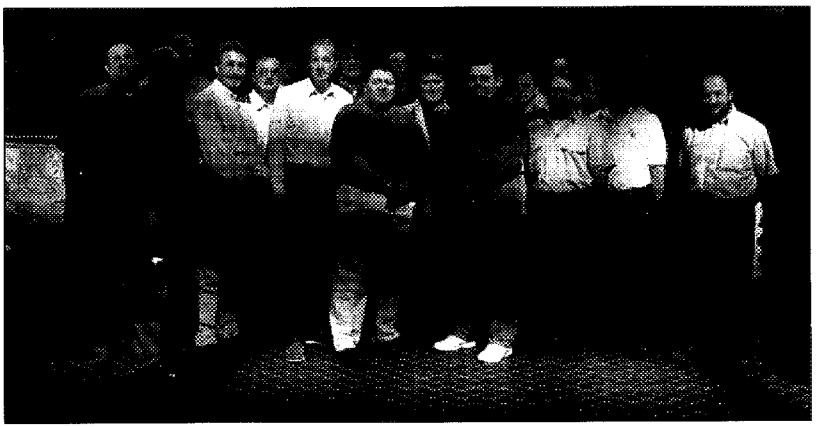
NIJ's Technology Institute for Corrections Is a Big Success

By Kevin Jackson

Tight budgets, lack of travel and training resources, inexperienced technical staff and lack of knowledge about where to find solutions for technology issues are some of the problems faced by correctional agencies throughout the country. Many of these agencies are being forced to purchase technology based on legislative mandates and have to rely on low-bid equipment. These same agencies receive input solely from vendors or manufacturers. In an effort to correct this problem, the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) sponsored its first Technology Institute for Corrections in July 1997. The ardent response from the field indicated that there is a strong need for this kind of interaction in the corrections community as well as the law enforcement community.



All photos by Kevin Jackson

Posed above are the participants of the National Institute of Justice's Technology Institute for Corrections.

During 1998, NIJ sponsored two institutes. One focused on law enforcement issues and the other focused on correctional issues. The objectives of NIJ's Technology Institute for Corrections are to provide correctional agencies with the following:

- A solid background on the various technology initiatives that NIJ is developing, testing or evaluating;
- Information on technology available to or being developed by other federal agencies, which could assist corrections;
- A problem-solving forum in which to present their respective technology challenges to their peers and NIJ staff in order to discuss possible solutions;
- A network of professional peers throughout the country from which to draw while dealing with technology issues in the future; and
- The knowledge of where to go to find technology information and assistance.

Planning and Selection

The six-day Technology Institute for Corrections was announced at major professional conferences and in other law enforcement publications and Web sites. Some of these included NIJ's Web site, JUSTNET; the American Correctional Association's (ACA) *Corrections Today*; and the American Probation and Parole Association's (APPA) *Perspectives*. An application and selection process was developed and advertised. Interested individuals or agencies submitted applications for consideration and selection. Twenty-three corrections practitioners were selected from throughout the United States to attend. Attendees ranged geographically from Oregon to Florida. They represented state and local corrections practitioners from state departments of correction, city and county jails, and county and state community corrections agencies.

The Federal Bureau of Prisons, the National Institute of Corrections and the Office of Justice Program's Corrections Program Office were invited to make presentations. Participants were recommended by the head of their respective agencies and were selected by a panel, which considered factors such as current duty position and that relationship

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to technology and specific technology issues facing the agency. Upon being selected, each participant was required to prepare a presentation on a technology issue or problem facing his or her agency to present to their peers during the institute.

Above and bottom left: Institute participants tour an under-construction adult detention facility in Fairfax County, Va.

A Successful Endeavor

The week was packed with activities that began Sunday evening with a welcoming reception. The goal of that first evening was to introduce participants to their peers and the particular technology issues that each would be working on during the week, and to foster teamwork and peer problem-solving throughout the week.

Each day, the institute spotlighted specific tools for accessing information about technology and assistance. The participants traveled to downtown Washington, D.C., to hear briefings from NIJ's Office of Science and Technology (OS&T). OS&T Director David Boyd presented an overview of OS&T's technology mission, the progress made in recent years and the vision for the future. Boyd noted that, "We have found that the technology institute concept, and its delivery to state and local criminal justice participants, has been one of the most successful ways to provide technical assistance and training to agencies in the technology area."

Presentations also were provided by NIJ's Technology Assistance and Research and Technology Development divisions on specific technology programs that support solutions to correctional issues. Institute participants learned about NIJ's National Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Center (NLECTC) system, which has established regional centers throughout the country to assist state and local criminal justice agencies with technology issues. Participants also received a comprehensive demonstration of JUSTNET (www.nlectc.org), NIJ's technology information Web site. JUSTNET affords open access to anyone interested in technology issues and serves as a "one-stop shop" for technology product information and a reference to other technology links of interest.

Participants came away from the first day with a solid understanding of NIJ's technology support structure throughout the nation and the status of many current technology initiatives. Presentations were made regarding continuous inmate and staff monitoring, surplus property, contraband and drug use detection, and NIJ's joint technology program with the military. One of the major highlights was the address given by the Honorable Laurie Robinson, assistant attorney general, Office of Justice Programs. Not only did she express her thanks to the participants and agencies for their valuable time, but extended her commitment to the corrections community in the area of technology assistance.

The group traveled to Fairfax County, Va., to visit the sheriff's office and jail facility. Sheriff Carl Peed officially welcomed the group and provided tours of his existing facility and of the unfinished new facility, which is incorporating many new technological advances. Capt. Sharon Stolting coordinated briefings on the Fairfax County Sheriff's Office's electronic monitoring program. Stolting had been a participant in the earlier pilot program, Summer Institute for Law Enforcement, and had volunteered to

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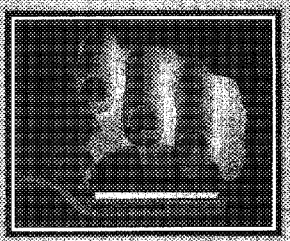

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assist NIJ during this institute. "My experience attending the NIJ institute was invaluable," noted Stolting. "I developed many key contacts throughout the country with whom I continue to dialogue on technology issues."

Most of the institute focused on the participant technology presentations and the peer problem-solving. As noted, each participant brought a problem or an issue related to technology (or one that may be solved by technology) from his or her agency. Each issue was presented and then followed by an open discussion and problem-solving sessions among peers and NIJ staff. "This is the most beneficial part of the institute," said one of the participants. "It afforded us the opportunity to gain from one anothers' experience, knowledge, successes and even failures." Not all problems and issues were resolved. However, the participants gained key insights from others on developing a plan of action or where to go for support and assistance. Several participants made commitments to assist one another collaboratively in the future.

Another highlight of the institute was the banquet on the final evening. Jeremy Travis, director of NIJ, visited with the participants during dinner and presented the keynote address. He expressed his thanks to the group for the time they invested during the week and pledged his agency's continued support to the corrections community and the technology institute concept.

Conclusion

A great deal of relevant technology information was presented in a short period of time. More important, an environment was established in which recommendations and solutions to the participants' problems were presented while expanding their professional support network. In addition, NIJ received valuable feedback from the participants on how to make next year's institute experience even more beneficial. Some of these suggestions included regional institutes that would bring back participants to evaluate their progress and share their experiences with future participants.

NIJ plans to sponsor the Technology Institute for Corrections annually. Information on applying will be listed on the NIJ Web site, JUSTNET (http://www.nlectc.org), and in ACA's *Corrections Today* and APPA's *Perspectives*. For registration information regarding NIJ's next Technology Institute for Corrections, contact Kevin Jackson at the NIJ at (202) 307-2956; e-mail: jacksonk@ojp.usdoj.gov.

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