NIJ's Technology Assistance For Corrections

By Gene Atherton and Joe Russo

The National Institute of Justice has an active corrections technology program that includes advisory groups that assess the technology needs of criminal justice agencies. NIJ conducts research and development to improve the safety and effectiveness of correctional technology, provides technical assistance to people in the field, and serves as an information clearinghouse. The institute also develops performance standards for critical equipment, such as stab-resistant body armor. And, it works closely with the National Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Center – Rocky Mountain Region (NLECTC-RM), in partnership with NIJ's Weapons and Protective Systems Technologies Center of Excellence.

Rocky Mountain Technology Assessment Committee

The Rocky Mountain Technology Assessment Committee (RMTAC), now in its second year of operation, helps correctional agencies anticipate technology needs, decide what technologies to buy, and learn how to use them. The committee consists of corrections professionals from jails, state prison systems and the Federal Bureau of Prisons. The group also includes scholars. Membership consists of individuals from Colorado, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Texas and Wyoming.

Modeled after the Northeast Technology and Product Assessment Committee (NTPAC), the Colorado Department of Corrections sponsors RMTAC activities in partnership with NLECTC-RM. Participating correctional agencies have agreed to be a part of RMTAC for two years, assigning at least one staff person as a member. That representative then acts as a source of technology information for his or her home jurisdiction.

The mission of RMTAC is to identify, evaluate and share information on emerging technological advances in products and services for corrections. RMTAC accomplishes its mission by:

- Identifying the needs and requirements of corrections professionals;
- Evaluating technology and sharing related information among the members;
- Sponsoring biannual meetings to network, share information, and to view products and services for corrections;
- Promoting ongoing partnerships among all correctional jurisdictions to share information and to help one another in solving problems; and
- Sharing technology information among corrections professionals.

Technology review is the first priority on RMTAC's agenda. Vendor and manufacturer representatives present their products to the committee and explain how the technologies work. The committee provides time for an exchange between presenters and RMTAC members. The discussions help RMTAC gain a better understanding of the technologies, and RMTAC, in turn, provides advice and direction to the vendors and manufacturers on how they can better adapt the technologies to corrections.

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At times, the committee discusses ideas for new products that could address RMTAC members' requirements. RMTAC also schedules educational presentations about related topics; for example, an architectural firm described in detail an overall security technology plan for a typical prison. On another, a specialist from Colorado Technology University gave a presentation about leadership strategies that ensure successful use of technology. The Colorado Department of Corrections is also launching an RMTAC Web site that will have information about the technology review process.

NIJ supports RMTAC, NTPAC and a similar technology assessment committee (TAC) in the NLECTC-West region. These groups give recommendations to several NIJ advisory groups that assess the technology needs of criminal justice agencies. Known as technology working groups (TWGs), these groups function within the NLECTC system. The Institutional Corrections TWG, for example, identifies the most important technology needs of the nation's jails and prisons, and has recommended developing new technologies in areas such as contraband detection and officer safety. The information gained from forums between TWGs and TACs assist the various technology portfolios within NIJ in the development of viable program plans. NIJ is also interested in the development of other TACs within the U.S. to support additional regional corrections technology activities.

Guidance on the Use of Green Technologies in Corrections

The Institutional Corrections TWG has requested publications that can serve as guides for agencies on how to evaluate, select, and use new and existing technologies. Consequently, developing user guides has become a priority for NIJ. The TWG recommended that the first user guide focus on "green technologies." Its members have observed increasing emphasis on environmentally friendly ways to design, construct and operate buildings. Key areas include human and environmental health, sustainable site development, water savings, energy efficiency, materials selection, and indoor environmental quality. Correctional agencies have started to capitalize on this movement. Last year, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation announced 16 new green retrofitting projects that it estimates will save $3 million in energy costs each year.

The green technologies user guide project will include topics such as new technologies, how corrections officials are using them, issues that arise when agencies adopt them, lessons learned and return on investment. Correctional agencies will benefit from the experience and knowledge gained by early adopters of new technologies.

To help launch this project, NIJ will coordinate a panel discussion on green technologies at the upcoming ACA Congress of Correction in Nashville, Tenn.

Community Supervision: Monitoring Offender Computer Use

About 70 percent of all sex offenders are supervised in the community, and almost all of them have access to computers and the Internet. Managing and monitoring sex offenders' computer use is important because, for example, it can alert authorities of a new crime such as possession of child pornography. Monitoring computer use allows probation and parole officers to enforce conditions that prohibit access to sexual material, dating sites and chat rooms. It can also give treatment providers important information about the types of sexual material the offender may view on the computer.

NIJ funded development of a free software tool called Field Search, a powerful computer preview and evidence gathering tool. Field Search allows probation and parole officers to scan an offender's computer and document the findings. Field Search supports the supervision process in two main ways. First, an initial computer scan notes the

offender's true sexual interests as evidenced by the material he or she has viewed. This information is invaluable to treatment providers because most offenders are hesitant to reveal this in individual or group therapy. Second, the stage can be set for specific conditions of supervision concerning computer use, and Field Search can monitor compliance with these conditions from that point forward.

Field Search is easily downloaded onto a USB flash drive. At the offender's home, the software runs on the target computer. In about 30 minutes, Field Search does an Internet history search, an image search, a media search and a keyword search. The officer can then view the results. The program can also create a document that includes each item's associated path along with the date and time each Web site and file was accessed. For images, a thumbnail is included in the report. Reports can then be used to brief the treatment team about what was found on the offender's computer. If necessary, the reports can be used as documentation in a revocation process or other corrective action.

Since NIJ introduced Field Search in 2005, more than 4,000 criminal justice personnel from around the world have downloaded the software. Some have shared copies of the program, and NIJ estimates that about 10,000 are in use. Although the software has not been subjected to a scientific evaluation, reports from the field suggest that it is a very valuable tool because of its cost-effectiveness, features and ease of use. In addition, evidence captured by Field Search is regularly used in violation proceedings and in some cases in furtherance of criminal prosecutions.

The original versions of Field Search work on computers with Windows operating systems. The new FS-MAC version, released in September 2008, allows for scanning of Mac computers. For more information or to download Field Search, visit www.justnet.org/Pages/fieldsearch. aspx.

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Development of Standards for Offender Tracking Technology

The development of standards for criminal justice is of critical importance because of the nature of the work. The right tools allow people to perform an often-dangerous job as safely as possible. Standards help to set minimum performance requirements for these tools. Moreover, potential purchasers have a way to evaluate vendor or manufacturer claims.

NIJ has been involved in the development of standards for more than 30 years. Most notable among these efforts has been NIJ's work in testing and developing body armor and performance standards for ballistic and stab resistance. Current projects include work in the area of handcuffs, retention holsters, and chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) protective ensembles for law enforcement.

Based on a recommendation from the Community Corrections Technology Working Group, NIJ will develop standards in the area of offender tracking technology; currently, there are none. NIJ will convene a special technical committee made up of people who use this technology, as well as scientific experts and those well versed in standards and testing protocols. An advisory working group, comprised of representatives from national organizations such as the American Correctional Association, will review the committee's work.

These efforts will result in an equipment standard, conformity assessment requirements and a published guide covering selection and application of the equipment. The equipment standard will cover the design and performance requirements and the related test methods that will verify performance. The conformity assessment requirements will detail the process used to ensure that equipment meets the standards or specifications.

The selection and application guide will be an easily understood description of the standard and conformity assessment program. It will include information on the types of technology available, and guidance for selection. The guide will also cover maintenance and care of the equipment, applicable codes and regulations, training issues, and sample procurement language. The effort will begin in the summer of 2009 and is expected to take at least a year to complete.

These projects represent just a segment of NIJ's overall corrections technology work. NIJ supports corrections and strives to develop this portfolio with input from corrections professionals. With the help of these groups, NIJ will continue to work to meet the technology needs of the field.

Gene Atherton is program manager for institutional corrections for the National Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Center – Rocky Mountain Region, in Denver. He can be contacted at gene.atherton@ nlectc-rm.org. Joe Russo is assistant director with NLECTCRM. He can be contacted at joe.russo@nlectc-rm.org. For more information on the National Institute of Justice's corrections technology portfolio, please contact Jack Harne, physical scientist for NIJ, at jack. harne@usdoj.gov.

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