

Keeping Inmates Honest (with Technology)

Colin Wood | March 19, 2014



The job of watching criminals is never over. For most of the public, prisoners are a non-entity, locked up and unable to perpetrate further crimes. But resourceful criminals are able to continue breaking the law and costing society more money even under lock and watchful eye.

Pennsylvania found that its prisoners were illegally receiving unemployment checks while incarcerated. And at the Baltimore City Detention Center in Maryland, cellphones were used by gang members to direct contraband smuggling schemes, transfer payments and alert one another of searches. New prison systems, however, have helped stymie these activities.

Pennsylvania reported the blockage of more than \$100 million in unlawful unemployment payments to prisoners. Inmates are not legally eligible to receive unemployment, so many have had family members or friends outside of prison fraudulently file for benefits and have the funds wired to the prisoner's account. Through the use of a cross-matching system, a partnership between the Pennsylvania Justice

Network (JNET) and Department of Labor and Industry is now able to block such payments.

JNET is a bureau that brokers messages between various agencies, explained Executive Director Dustin Rhoads. “Part of the JNET system is allowing what we call ‘event messages,’” he said. “When something happens, we send that message out to subscribed users, just as you would a weather notification or a traffic notification.”

In this case, the system is sending out confinement messages – any time someone is confined in one of the state’s 57 participating county prisons, the Labor and Industry Department knows about it. JNET receives special access to some of the department’s data so it can see if there’s a match between a prisoner and those who receive unemployment benefits. If there’s a possible match, Labor and Industry conducts an investigation to verify it’s the right person, and oftentimes, it results in cutting off those benefits for the inmate.

Two additional county prisons also participate outside of JNET using their legacy systems, and the remaining three county prisons do not participate.

“From a technology standpoint, it was relatively simple due to the fact that JNET is built on a service-oriented architectural platform along with global-reference architecture,” Rhoads said. “The data sharing that we do and the applications that we build, we build on those standards so that they are reusable.” In other words, the architecture for this functionality had been in place for a while, the agencies just needed to identify the way to use it.

The discussions of starting the cross-matching program began in late 2012 and the agencies soon discovered it would be relatively easy to implement, Rhoads said. “It took JNET a whole two weeks to provide this information to Labor and Industry,” he said, adding that once the initial data sharing was completed, they now need to only cross-match the information for newly confined prisoners.

In addition, there are likely benefits outside of unemployment data. “We’ve been working with our innovation office to explore potential opportunities to help other agencies identify fraud and abuse of services,” he said. “It is a success on one hand that we’ve done this with Labor and Industry, but I think the success comes from the ability to use this sort of data sharing to multiple agencies to allow them to do their work more efficiently.” JNET, for example, is now working with the Department of Public Welfare.

While Rhoads’ bureau’s primary concern is law enforcement and criminal justice, it’s nice to see that its data can help other agencies do their jobs too, he said.

Tech Helps Baltimore Reduce Contraband

At the Baltimore City Detention Center in Maryland, officials have spent the last few years looking for ways to cut down on the amount of contraband prisoners smuggle in. Inmates smuggle in cellphones, drugs and weapons, but new security practices and technologies have cut down on the amount by more than 60 percent since 2011.

The prison began computerized random searches of 30 prisoners and 30 guards every day, and expanded its K-9 unit to include seven new dogs that could smell drugs and cellphones. The facility bolstered its intelligence gathering efforts, hiring eight new detectives and four intelligence analysts. Through Senate Bill 114, the prison also streamlined intelligence, giving its internal investigative unit authority to coordinate across the department.

The Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services (DPSCS) created a forensic lab to investigate contraband cellphones and continues to work with the state's fusion center, state police and federal law enforcement to better understand how prisoners are using the devices.

The prison invested \$300,000 in the installation of a new surveillance system that includes 234 high-definition cameras, and \$4 million on a "managed access" cellphone detection system. Before the upgrade, officials said the use of cellphones was an integral tool for individuals like Black Guerrilla Family leader Tavon White, who used illicit devices to direct smuggling and warn others of searches.

But now that the cellphone system has been turned on, only authorized devices are permitted to dial or text non-911 numbers inside the prison, said Rick Binetti, spokesman for the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services. In the past, the prison was prohibited from using technology that stops cellphone operation because of a U.S. statute that only allows federal agencies to do that, but in 2009, the FCC gave the state permission following a congressional hearing in which Maryland's public safety secretary stated the case for the Safe Prisons Communications Act of 2009.

The new system doesn't block all cell signals, but catches and filters them based on whether the device is recognized as authorized. Hundreds of antennas are stationed throughout the facility to create an umbrella of localized amplification through which precise signal levels are needed to operate properly. Officials have so far been pleased with how the system is working, Binetti said, and they are considering expanding it to other prisons in the state.

"In one prison, the rate of usage of the authorized inmate telephone system increased by a whole lot," Binetti said. "We think it has been a very effective tool in the shed to thwart communications between gangs or organizations that would profit from the flow of contraband inside prisons. It is just one part of an overall strategy to stem the flow and use of illegal cellphones inside our correctional facilities."

<http://www.govtech.com/public-safety/Keeping-Inmates-Honest.html>