Information-Sharing Increases Correctional Safety and Security

By Richard Baker, Rachel Hingst, James Howard and John Hoyt

Technology's vital role of providing physical safety and security has been established by the needs of correctional officers, administrators and institutions — especially during a time of escalating costs.

Extensive savings result when technology is integrated with existing systems and resources in order to address the unique operational requirements of a correctional environment. For example, the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) has demonstrated that the cost of transporting inmates for medical services can be greatly reduced by using telemedicine systems. New technologies for tracking and monitoring inmates within institutions and communities also have evolved and could offer more cost-effective means to address correctional administrators' needs.

The capacity of technology to permit seamless information-sharing among multiple users and systems also is being harnessed to benefit criminal justice agencies. The NIJ-sponsored information technology program, InfoTech, is one example.

InfoTech: Single-Step Global Access

InfoTech is demonstrating the impact and feasibility of sharing electronic data across jurisdictions and agencies. This program gives public safety agencies access to multiple data sources with a single Web-based query. InfoTech is being used in California, Florida and Oregon.

In Oregon, InfoTech enables critical information-sharing between the Department of Corrections, the state police laboratory, and the judicial department and youth authority. In Florida, InfoTech users perform a single query to obtain information from multiple jail and record management systems. State officials in Florida also have expressed interest in incorporating more than 50 of the state's jail management systems.

Cross-Institutional Information-Sharing

InfoTech allows correctional facilities and other agencies to easily share inmate profiles. As individuals pass through the system, resourceful information such as medical and behavioral histories and gang affiliations is collected. This information is valuable to other correctional institutions if the individual is reincarcerated. Sharing historical information about individuals is valuable in the classification process of newly incarcerated individuals. Such information-sharing also assists counselors in preparing cases for current inmates.

Since a uniform method for sharing inmates' historical information with subsequent institutions does not exist, any valuable information — a history of violence or addiction, or special medical needs, etc. — an institution learns has to be relearned by the next institution. Such information gaps may provide opportunities for violence since information does not transfer efficiently with inmates. InfoTech allows corrections officials to circumvent such information gaps. A single query into the system reveals an array of important information about current and past incarcerations.

Monitoring Court Dates and Release

Correctional employees are presented with another information tracking requirement when transporting inmates to court. Multiple inmates, with multiple charges, in multiple jurisdictions must be accurately processed for accurate hearing schedules. InfoTech allows officers to access current information on an inmate's hearing status via direct queries from the correctional facility to the court. Through such an exchange, agencies can track multiple inmates, release dates, charges and dispositions for all inmates at any given time. Correctional agencies also can track inmates serving time in other jurisdictions for separate offenses who are required to serve subsequent time in the agency's jurisdiction for another crime.

InfoTech also offers a tracking system for officers responsible for multiple supervised release cases. The system notifies a probation officer if one of his or her clients is arrested, involved in an investigation or comes into contact with a law enforcement agency. These same capabilities also allow case officers to contact victims when inmates are scheduled for release.

Law Enforcement Needs Correctional Information

Some information generated within correctional systems provides important insight for other members of the criminal justice community. Some examples of cross-system information use are: Visitation records may provide investigators with vital

leads; classification records may provide critical inmate information, such as behavioral or mental health needs; and interprison rivalries, both individual and gang-related, may be vital to safety issues for the institution.

States are finding solutions from information systems to meet their individual information-sharing needs. State needs may include: knowing whether an individual already is in jail when attempting to serve a warrant; identifying the incarceration status of parents of a juvenile offender; knowing whether an individual is in a work release program and the conditions of that program; knowing if an individual ever has attempted suicide when responding to a suicide call; and providing information on the physical appearance of individuals, from booking photographs maintained in jail management systems, to descriptions from officers in the field.

Individualizing InfoTech

InfoTech developers are increasing the use of the system by incorporating technology that allows operational users to tailor interfaces to their specific needs. Individual organization and management criteria can be created, modified and carried out by the individual user to meet his or her current information system needs.

Information Security

Because law enforcement information often is sensitive in nature, ensuring secure transmission of information is an important system requirement. InfoTech has investigated several technologies capable of providing secure data-sharing transmission, such as a rules-based certificate process, which incorporates encryption and multilevel permissions for conducting information-sharing. InfoTech ensures that each originating agency maintains complete control over access to their information.

Cost-Effective Technology Solutions

Programs such as InfoTech demonstrate NIJ's commitment to provide inexpensive information-sharing solutions to law enforcement and the criminal justice community. InfoTech's Web-based query system was developed to eliminate the time- and cost-consuming process of conducting multiple queries against various data sources, simply to retrieve information on a single individual or event. Currently, users are forced to conduct multiple searches, provided they even have access to all the required data. InfoTech's Web-based capability circumvents the need for multitask, cross-jurisdiction searches — users enter an individual's name and obtain all the available information from multiple sources. The streamlined process saves departments both time and money. This technology allows criminal justice professionals to share information more efficiently, impacting officer and institutional effectiveness and safety. The ability to share information between and across law enforcement and criminal justice agencies also fosters greater criminal justice cooperation, ultimately improving public safety.

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