

System Streamlines Managing TV and Training in Jail

Television in correctional facilities can potentially be used to modify and reward inmate behavior and keep inmates connected to the outside world. An Oregon county jail has tapped into technology that allows administrators to easily manage inmate television viewing, provide information and training to inmates, and present training to staff as well.

“I had a long-term vision to take control of the TVs inside the corrections facility,” says Sgt. Tom Graham of the Lincoln County Sheriff’s Office Jail Division. “Usually, correctional facility TVs have cable or satellite service and a remote with either staff members or inmates regulating the channels, depending on where they are housed. The new system allows deputies to make the channel selection from a Web browser anywhere in the building, thus eliminating the need for the remote to be in their hands. If the inmates have the remote, they can continue to select channels, but scheduled or unscheduled programming of the administration’s choice will override in cases where it is deemed necessary, again done from a Web interface. Basically, inmates can control the cable channel choice when we give them that ability; the rest of the time it will be media we choose for very specific reasons, such as self-help videos or announcements from staff.”

Graham is assigned to manage the Lincoln County Jail training system, the building, and all of its technology. He worked with vendors over 18 months to establish technology in the jail similar to that used in broadcast news and other businesses. It provides features such as a scrolling ticker at the bottom of the screen that jail staff can use to broadcast information to inmates. Staff can also interrupt a TV program at any time to provide training or other messages.

“We were able to take that technology and install it in the jail,” Graham says. “It allows us to stream in the video we want. If we want to allow inmates to watch cable TV, we can. Or, we can interrupt whatever program is on to

broadcast bloodborne pathogen training to inmates. We are controlling what they watch and we can also broadcast information on the ticker line about changes in the facility and changes in rules.”

The jail is in the process of compiling a large repository of educational and media sources that can be broadcast at any time. Also, on the side of the TV screen is a screen that displays information from the community on employment assistance and other programs such as treatment facilities, which provides inmates with contact assistance before they are released from the jail.

The jail, which is in Newport, Ore., has a capacity for 161 male and female inmates, and space for all security levels, from minimum to maximum. The facility has seven TVs in the housing units, and staff can direct information to a specific group of inmates.

“The system allows us to target the audience, so if I want to show inmates in maximum security a behavior video, I can send it to just their machine,” Graham says.

The jail is also building a web page from which staff will be able to change the viewing schedule and control the TVs. The web page could also be used to broadcast a lock down order or an “emergency in cell” alert.

The jail provides a commissary program for inmates to purchase additional hygiene and food items that are not otherwise provided. The \$25,000 cost of the TV system was paid for with funds from the commissary system, so there is minimal cost to taxpayers.

Tight budgets have reduced funds available for sending staff to outside training. Graham says the jail is also using the system to create an internal training database for staff, who can access the training from the jail briefing room TV or from a computer. Training topics include new hire videos on how to control contraband and how to communicate with inmates and training for all staff on bloodborne pathogens. Jail officials are also working with other agencies in the state to spark interest in building a

statewide system for online training that would reside on a common server.

“At the very core of it all is allowing us to do what we want when we want to do it and get the messages out to inmates,” Graham says, adding that the other aspects of the system such as staff training, “are like having your cake and eating it too.”

Graham says initially inmates were annoyed with the messages and information scrolling on the screen, but they began asking staff about the information, such as how to sign up for the GED (general educational development) program at the jail. Since the system was installed, the jail has seen an increase in communication between inmates and staff about resources and programs available inside and outside of the facility.

“We are adjusting to younger inmates, who are technologically driven,” Graham says. “We are adapting what we do to get their attention.”

Other informational and training topics for inmates include short videos on inmate behavior and jail rules and regulations. Using a webcam, jail staff can make

their own low-cost videos or short vignettes for training inmates, which saves time and money.

“I have not found any other correctional facility doing this,” Graham says. “When I first started I thought someone must have a managed correctional TV system, but all I found was cable or satellite tailored to prisons. What we are using is the same technology being used in other industries such as hospitals and hotels; we are just applying it to a correctional setting.”

“It’s been a partnership with the two companies that have provided a lot of the equipment at cost to us in order to break into the market and allow our site to be a test site,” he adds. “I really appreciated the effort the companies have put into it — just taking my vision and running with it.”

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