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The Evolution of Corrections Technology

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Since the dawn of civilization, mankind has been involved in a game of trying to out-do nature, his environment and other humans. The tools and skill sets that have provided the best successes and have elevated certain civilizations above others have always been advances in technology.

Early technological advances were primarily the crude mastery of tools and implements readily available in nature (i.e., digging and cutting tools). Civilizations that had such tools and furthered these technologies were more adaptive to adverse conditions than civilizations that did not have the knowledge to build these technologies. And so it has been throughout the millennia: man’s struggle against nature has been benchmarked by substantial technological advancements and a culture’s ability to embrace and use the “newest technology” of the era.

In the corrections world, technologies in policing sciences, communication and other disciplines have experienced numerous advances in the past 100 years, most in the past 25 years. Early prisons and jails were quite simply an amalgam of bricks, mortar and steel fashioned in square boxes called cells. These square boxes comprised larger square boxes, called cellblocks or cell houses. Cell houses were grouped behind a common source perimeter to form a prison or jail complex. The earliest and most basic forms of technologies found in these facilities were hand-operated locks and keys, hard-wire radios or communication devices, lethal

weapons, non-lethal weapons or compliance tools, and transportation. Small or rural facilities tended to be less technologically equipped than their urban counterparts. But one thing has always been certain: Where there are prisons and jails, there are people designing and implementing new technologies to give law enforcement the “upper hand” in correctional management.

One of the biggest challenges in designing creative and effective crime management technologies is that the high level of sophistication of the end user and client group is usually higher than any other profession. The law enforcement personnel who use these tools, and the offenders who thwart them, comprise a very large and impressive think tank. The time period between bringing a faculty technology to market and its technological downfall is extremely short in the law enforcement profession.

Prison and law enforcement museums are filled with examples of technologies that were quickly defeated by the mastery of the criminal mind. Such examples include pneumatic door actuators, touch-screen electronics and lethal fences. These systems were not very successful as they were either defeated by inmates or were prone to fail for no apparent reason. Companies that bring new products to the corrections market are challenged by failures of the past, both their own and others. Some do quite well and “strike it rich.” Examples include high-security glazing, hollow-metal doors, precise and steel cells, and metal detection devices. All of these tech-

nologies were immediately embraced by the corrections field and have enjoyed success from their first installations. For these reasons, including profitability, correctional operators are being inundated with new generation technologies that promise to revolutionize the business and significantly enhance the safety and security of prison operations.

How do correctional experts analyze and evaluate all the corrections-related technologies that are available to the industry? Most jurisdictions have formed a three-pronged approach to evaluating the tools/implements of the trade:

- In-house expertise — staff who either come to us with a technological background or have expertise that is developed “on the job”;
- Security technology committee — facility- or jurisdictionwide committees that are trained to evaluate new products and their use; and
- Vendor-provided information — information that informs correctional operators of new products and technologies that are geared toward law enforcement use.

As you can easily surmise, each approach has its benefits and risks. Hopefully, when evaluated thoroughly and appropriately, we find the right solution for the right problem, at the right time and for the right price. ♦