

COLLABORATING FOR TECHNOLOGICAL Success

By ALEXANDER FOX

Although individual correctional agencies across the country and the way they operate may differ from state to state with their core values uniquely and proudly sculpted to emphasize their individuality, state priorities and philosophy, their fundamental public safety mission and purpose remains consistent within a balanced criminal justice system. Consequently, there are many significant reasons for these agencies to collaborate and form partnerships.

As economic and budgetary issues remain a prime public and political focus on both the national and state levels, the correctional community has been forced to re-examine its practices and adapt through the implementation of many creative and cost-saving initiatives. The introduction of technology into correctional systems often has been viewed as one of those progressive and necessary initiatives. To some, however, technology is perceived as a costly, unnecessary luxury. In some respects, those sharing this opinion may be correct. Purchasing and introducing costly technology is not a cure-all for every logistical, operational or systemic problem facing corrections. In some cases, there are alternative solutions that are less expensive. Simple process changes, conceptual shifts and more fundamental changes to the operation may adequately solve the problem and should be strongly considered first. In many cases, however, technology truly is the answer to the problem and provides a significant means to improve security and efficiency within the organization.

SELECTING NEW TECHNOLOGIES

The successful introduction of a new technology into a correctional environment is a process that requires much deliberation, research and planning. If not well researched, technology can be a double-edged sword. Although it promises benefits, it may instead result in high maintenance costs, labor relations conflicts, inmate climate issues, political concerns, health and safety issues, and potentially devastating, embarrassing and costly lawsuits. Given these potential ramifications, the introduction of technology should be undertaken with great attention to all the possible gains and losses.


The financial cost of technology should not always be the deciding factor. Often, the operational and public safety benefits overwhelmingly outweigh the initial monetary considerations. When this is the case, it is critical that significant effort be invested up front during the decision-making

process. The introduction of new technology must not only be well thought out, it also must be supported at the top of the organization for it to be successfully integrated into the operations.

Historically, many individual correctional systems have made these monumental decisions in isolation. Recently, however, there has been a fundamental shift in the approach to technology acquisition among correctional agencies, which embraces collaboration and partnership. Given the wealth of knowledge and experience across the country, this shift provides a welcome and necessary mechanism to assist correctional administrators in making prudent and informed decisions. In order to correctly identify which technologies to introduce into a prison system, most states have now adopted both the concept and a formal process for committee evaluation of products. The fundamental practices of these "technology transfer" or "technology review" committees throughout the country are very similar, and they play a major role in the identification, assessment, introduction, education and acceptance of technology. These committees are usually governed by policies and procedures that reflect the agency's mission. Committee representatives usually consist of multidisciplinary practitioners — departmental staff from the maintenance area, engineers, correctional officers, attorneys, fiscal personnel, technology specialists and wardens. These individuals are the front line of defense and often become the cheerleaders for technology. A key element to the makeup of the committee is that the members have a well-rounded knowledge of day-to-day institutional operations and that they are creative and forward thinkers. Such committees usually meet on a monthly or quarterly basis to discuss the different security technologies demonstrated by the product vendors. These products include staff safety items, inmate accountability systems, tactical equipment and video surveillance systems. Some products are quickly eliminated from consideration for correctional application; others are recommended for operational pilot testing in an institution.

It is interesting to note that some of the products are not traditional correctional applications; that is, they are not initially designed for prison use, but with some modifications,





The collaborative sharing of information — successes and failures — is the key to the successful introduction of often lifesaving technologies that will help the correctional community realize a better future for staff, inmates and the community.

may be quickly and easily adapted to a correctional environment. For example, inmate locator systems are designed to identify a nearly exact location of an inmate by using wireless communication between a transmitter tag worn by the inmate and a transceiver in a control room that displays the inmate's location in real time. Originally, these systems were actually designed as a nursing home application to monitor geriatric and Alzheimer's patients. These days, companies have come to realize that there is another market for these types of technologies.

Technology review committees have also seen their share of technologies that are poorly designed, unsafe and do not perform to the company's stated specifications and standards. In some respects these committees are like filters, sorting through the quagmire of products, identifying those that will contribute to the mission and improve work performance, and weeding out the rest. Throughout the evaluation process, there are important questions to ask and consider. The most important are:

- Is there a legitimate need for this product?
- Is there an operational problem that this technology can correct?
- Will this technology enhance the safety of the inmates in the agency's care?
- Will this technology enhance the safety of staff or the public?
- Is this technology compatible with other systems currently being used or planned for use?
- How complex is this technology in terms of ease of use and staff trainability?
- Could this technology free up staff who could be redirected to meet other agency needs?
- What are the maintenance costs and how easily upgradeable is the product?
- Can the technology improve staff and/or inmate accountability?

INFORMED DECISION MAKING

The question of, is there anyone else using this technology, is perhaps the single most important question that

should be asked. The need to partner with other states in this endeavor cannot be stressed enough. Although most technology review committees are formed within a particular state, many have developed networking relationships with other states and regularly consult with them when evaluating products, recognizing the valuable information they provide.

In one region, the Northeast Technology Product Assessment Committee (NTPAC) is a collaboration among 13 states and other agencies that have worked together for the past three years to evaluate promising products and emerging technologies. In the evaluation and decision-making process, communication is perhaps the most important tool, and luckily it is free. It is common sense; so simple, yet so profoundly effective. There is a wealth of information and experience across the nation. Whether a correctional system has been successful or not in using technology, there likely is not one that has not purchased some type of technology during the past several years. Perhaps it is the same technology another state is considering purchasing. Perhaps one state's experience can help another to be more successful in its introduction or avoid a bad decision altogether. Sharing best practices does not just make sense, it should be the industry standard.

Beyond the all important decision of whether to introduce a new technology is the consideration of culture. Can the simple fact that technology exists within the system facilitate cultural change in the organization? Certainly not by itself. Proactive leadership and a comprehensive understanding of the systemic problems inherent in the process can positively influence the outcome. On the other hand, technology can be a powerful tool that helps agencies promote cultural change. For example, the introduction of computer information systems and their ability to provide real time performance data can help make staff more accountable. The use of fingerprint or hand geometry in place of timecards for attendance purposes can also enhance accountability. These are only two of many examples of how technology has been used to effect such changes in staff.

In some cases, the use of technology can liberate staff from performing tasks that would be better served through

a technological approach or free them up from time-consuming activities. Technologies such as video conferencing and distance learning have allowed for the delivery of staff training in an efficient and cost-effective manner by providing training in remote locations and at any time, thus, eliminating the need for major disruption to the institutional operation and staff transportation needs. Operational and security benefits are numerous. Metal detectors frequently used in prisons lower the number of metal weapons. X-ray machines are now widely used and have significantly decreased the amount of contraband being introduced into the facility. Officer duress systems have become a commonly used technology that ensures a quick response in an emergency. Digital video surveillance equipment now keeps a silent but watchful eye. Two-way radios have long been commonplace to ensure that staff have the ability to remain in constant contact with one another. Information systems also are evolving and proving to be valuable tools for improving security.

ENHANCING CORRECTIONS' FUTURE

Most experts and practitioners alike agree that technology has tremendously improved the quality of correctional life and will continue to have a profound effect on the evolution of correctional systems. As advances are made, the realization of how it can optimize what correctional agencies do and how they do it will grow. There are a number of very promising technologies that will be available in the near future, if not already integrated in some systems, that merit serious consideration and close monitoring. They include the use of biometrics for staff and inmate accountability, wireless staff and inmate locator systems, active global positioning systems to monitor offenders in the community, contraband detection systems that will detect nonmetallic contraband, access control systems and active digital video surveillance systems.

Technology, it seems, is here to stay. It is increasingly an integral part of society and how well corrections responds to this and optimizes it is up to each correctional agency. Private industry and many governmental entities have fully embraced technology, making them more efficient, accountable and creative in deploying their staff assets to more strategic locations in an effort to improve customer or human services delivery. In keeping with this trend, it is important that the correctional community takes full advantage of the many state and regional technology review committees to formally and informally communicate and solve problems. By promoting networking and partnerships, departments can make more informed decisions that will clearly impact the agency in a positive manner. The collaborative sharing of information — successes and failures — is the key to the successful introduction of often lifesaving technologies that will help the correctional community realize a better future for staff, inmates and the community.

Alexander Fox is director of technology for the Massachusetts Department of Corrections.