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**Prison Video Conferencing**

With the costs of running the nation's correctional systems and overcrowding at an all-time high, correctional facilities are looking for new and better ways to manage the needs of inmates while maximizing their available resources.<sup>1</sup> Implementing video conferencing systems in correctional institutions may be a viable means of replacing or supplementing traditional visitation occurring within the facility. Video conferencing technology can also be used to remotely conduct medical consultations, and for legal proceedings that would otherwise require transporting the prisoner and utilizing other staff resources.<sup>2</sup> Video conferencing refers to the two-way real-time transmission of audio and video signals between specialized devices or computers at two or more locations.<sup>3</sup>

Internet-based video conferencing software, such as Skype, is already widely available, relatively simple to use, and inexpensive, requiring only a computer with a webcam and the Internet.<sup>4</sup> However, internet-based software does not exist with the ability to monitor and exercise the oversight necessary for a corrections environment.<sup>5</sup>

There are a number of vendors already offering the specialty equipment and installation of video conferencing for correctional facilities. Many offer full video visitation services that can

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<sup>1</sup> Scott Baird and Timothy Eickhoff, "The Future of Video Visitation," American Corrections Association, accessed February 16, 2011, <http://www.renovosoftware.com/news/future-of-video-visitation>.

<sup>2</sup> John Gramlich, "States Expand Video Conferencing," Stateline.org, accessed February 14, 2011, <http://www.stateline.org/live/details/story?contentId=399298>.

<sup>3</sup> Business Dictionary, "Definition-Video Conferencing," accessed February 22, 2011, <http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/video-conferencing.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Skype, "How do I make a video call?" accessed February 22, 2011, <https://support.skype.com/en-us/faq/FA597/What-do-I-need-to-make-a-video-call>.

<sup>5</sup> Luke Whyte, "Internet video visitation: Why and how to make the switch," Corrections One, accessed February 14, 2011, <http://www.correctionsone.com/products/facility-products/inmate-visitation/articles/2075432-Internet-video-visitation-Why-and-how-to-make-the-switch/>.

be tailored to a particular facilities needs.<sup>6</sup> They can also enable a prison to assess user fees for the service to the convict or their family much like a phone call would work in the facility.<sup>7</sup>

A Minneapolis-based company Renovo Software appears to be a leading provider of video visitation services. The company offers a range of products and services specially designed for correctional facilities. Renovo currently has customers across 21 states, mostly local governments (counties), and some are individual facilities.<sup>8</sup>

The ability for incarcerated parents to virtually communicate with their children is a relatively recent development. Corrections administrators should be cognizant that traditional contact visitation is the best means of communication between children and their incarcerated parent; however, in many circumstances it is impractical for families to visit their loved ones in prison. Virtual visitation helps if the prison is too far, transportation is too expensive, or the prison environment is inappropriate for a child. In-person visitation is regarded as the most effective form of child-incarcerated parent visitation.<sup>9</sup> Virtual visitation should not replace in-person visitation but it could increase the overall contact between the parent and their child.<sup>10</sup> Video conferencing should supplement in-person visitation if the circumstances don't permit children to visit their incarcerated parents at the facility. Through virtual visitation incarcerated parents are given the ability to interact with their children in the child's own environment.<sup>11</sup> Prisoners who manage to maintain strong ties with their families tend to re-enter society with better success and have a lower rate of recidivism.<sup>12</sup> A number of states and counties have already implemented video conferencing in their jails and prisons for a variety of uses:

## **Pennsylvania**

The Pennsylvania Prison Society, in cooperation with the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, piloted a video conferencing program in 2001 in four of the state's prisons. This program was the first of its kind in the U.S. and has since been extended to facilities throughout

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<sup>6</sup> Lynn Marotta, "Beyond the boardroom -- how videoconferencing companies are using their solutions to benefit our society," accessed February 23, 2011, <http://www.video-conferencing-guide.com/videoconferencing-companies.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> Jessica Gresko, "Families visit prison from comfort of their homes," CorrectionsOne, accessed February 23, 2011, <http://www.correctionsone.com/products/corrections/articles/1852337-Families-visit-prison-from-comfort-of-their-homes/>.

<sup>8</sup> Renovo Software, "Customers: Video Visitation," accessed February 23, 2011, <http://www.renovosoftware.com/about/customers/>.

<sup>9</sup> "Connecting children with incarcerated parents," *Child Protection Best Practices Bulletin*, accessed February 17, 2011, <http://www.f2f.ca.gov/res/pdf/ChildProtectionBPBulletins.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> FindLaw, "Virtual visitation: New Jersey and the option to be a plug-in parent," accessed on February 22, 2011, <http://knowledgebase.findlaw.com/kb/2010/Mar/98169.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Jessica Gresko, "Families visit prison from comfort of their homes," CorrectionsOne, accessed February 23, 2011, <http://www.correctionsone.com/products/corrections/articles/1852337-Families-visit-prison-from-comfort-of-their-homes/>.

<sup>12</sup> Jeffrey M. Leving, "Illinois virtual visitation for incarcerated fathers," Leving's Divorce Magazine, accessed on February 22, 2011, <http://divorcemagazine.wordpress.com/2009/03/31/illinois-virtual-visitation-for-incarcerated-fathers/>.

the state. Families can schedule one 55-minute visit a month, with each visit costing \$20 to the inmate or their family.<sup>13</sup>

## Michigan

The Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) began experimenting with video conferencing technology in 1996. The MDOC implemented video conferencing technology to conduct doctor visits in 34 Michigan correctional facilities that hold more than 45,000 prisoners in custody. Today, video conferencing in Michigan has expanded to parole board hearing and a future project hopes to connect courts statewide to the system.<sup>14</sup>

Prior to the video conferencing technologies the state of Michigan spent an estimated \$10 million on prisoner transportation costs. Presently the return on investment of video conferencing for parole board hearings is two years. The “calculation is based on the number of cases the board can hear, how quickly the members vote on cases and how this results in prisoners staying fewer days in a correctional facility.”<sup>15</sup> The costs to correctional facilities to install the video rooms are between \$6,000 and \$8,000 for the MDOC. The MDOC has set up 144 Polycom systems, which include video-conferencing software for PCs and telepresence systems that transmit high-definition video and audio.<sup>16</sup> “The average cost to install the technology in a courtroom is \$22,800, but that it will pay for itself in about a year if it’s used a few times per month.”<sup>17</sup>

## Missouri

The Missouri Department of Corrections (DOC) is investigating the benefits of video conferencing. The Missouri DOC united with Sprint Communications and Kinko’s, Inc to provide “virtual visits” to family, friends, and attorneys. These videoconferences linked families to inmates housed in three correctional facilities in Missouri.<sup>18</sup>

In Cole County, Missouri courts are utilizing video conferencing on an unprecedented scale. Estimates of the use of video conferencing show savings to the taxpayer in transportation costs of the incarcerated to courts as they do not require corrections officers nor a vehicle to

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<sup>13</sup> Pennsylvania Prison Society, “Virtual Visitation” accessed February 14, 2011, [http://www.prisonersociety.org/progs/ifs\\_fvv.shtml](http://www.prisonersociety.org/progs/ifs_fvv.shtml).

<sup>14</sup> Elaine Pittman, Government Technology, “Michigan Expands Video Conferencing in Prisons,” accessed February 23, 2011, <http://www.govtech.com/public-safety/Michigan-Expands-Video-Conferencing-in-Prisons.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Elaine Pittman, Government Technology, “Michigan Expands Video Conferencing in Prisons.”

<sup>16</sup> Elaine Pittman, Government Technology, “Michigan Expands Video Conferencing in Prisons.”

<sup>17</sup> Elaine Pittman, Government Technology, “Michigan Expands Video Conferencing in Prisons.”

<sup>18</sup> Joel Samaha, *Criminal Justice* (Cengage Learning, 2005), p. 484, accessed February 23, 2011, [http://books.google.com/books?id=o0rjRPnO7K4C&pg=PA484&lpg=PA484&dq=communications+technology+%2B+prison+family+visits&source=bl&ots=GjvhFgghkq&sig=1s\\_sqfvKJ4JCp-5eTXU8jMiRs4&hl=en&ei=fvdbTfyaF4W0lQerw93lCQ&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CCoQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=communications%20technology%20%2B%20prison%20family%20visits&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=o0rjRPnO7K4C&pg=PA484&lpg=PA484&dq=communications+technology+%2B+prison+family+visits&source=bl&ots=GjvhFgghkq&sig=1s_sqfvKJ4JCp-5eTXU8jMiRs4&hl=en&ei=fvdbTfyaF4W0lQerw93lCQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CCoQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=communications%20technology%20%2B%20prison%20family%20visits&f=false).

transport a prisoner. “The Cole County circuit has paid for video conferencing in every prison in the state at no cost to Cole County taxpayers.”<sup>19</sup>

## Idaho

In 2009 a test on implementing virtual visitations in a prison was conducted in Boise, Idaho. In less than a year the program was able to be fully implemented and since then, Ida County has observed a 30% increase in inmate usage per week. The Ada County Sheriff’s Office invested around \$110,000 for the installation. Fifty thousand dollars went into providing the infrastructure, while the other \$60,000 went into purchasing the computers. Ada County opted to purchase \$300 laptop computers for the inmate visitations – which come complete with webcams – as opposed to the \$3,500 - \$6000 that would have been required to purchase the more heavy duty hardened units you would expect to be necessary in the jail environment. By using a local Blackfin Technology made in Boise, Ada County was able to avoid the need to work through a third-party vendor, thus saving a substantial amount of money in service costs.<sup>20</sup>

## Wisconsin

The Wisconsin Department of Corrections provides opportunities for inmates to maintain contact with families while in confinement in an out-of-state placement, i.e. a prison outside of the state they were convicted in. The Department offers videoconferencing opportunities at three facilities, Milwaukee Secure Detention Facility (MSDF), Columbia Correctional Institution (CCI), and Racine Correctional Institution (RCI).<sup>21</sup>

The Wisconsin Office of Justice Assistance published a cost-benefit analysis, “The Potential Cost Savings from Further Investment in Videoconferencing Technology with-in Wisconsin’s Justice Community.”<sup>22</sup> Non-financial benefits from the implementation of video conferencing technology enhance public safety, permit effective use of law enforcement resources, and promote productivity and processing efficiency.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Cole County Law Enforcement Advisory Committee, “Cole County Law Enforcement Needs Assessment Report,” accessed February 23, 2011, <http://www.colecounty.org/cole1/cole/LawEnforcementAdvCom/Final%20Report.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> Luke Whyte, “Internet video visitation: Why and how to make the switch,” Corrections One, accessed February 14, 2011, <http://www.correctionsone.com/products/facility-products/inmate-visitation/articles/2075432-Internet-video-visitation-Why-and-how-to-make-the-switch/>.

<sup>21</sup> Wisconsin Department of Corrections, “Out-of-State Televisiting Information,” accessed February 23, 2011, <http://www.wi-doc.com/televisit.htm>.

<sup>22</sup> Wisconsin Court System, “Cost savings from Videoconferencing,” accessed February 23, 2011, <http://www.wicourts.gov/about/committees/ppacvidconf.htm>.

<sup>23</sup> Wisconsin Department of Corrections, “Out-of-State Televisiting Information,” accessed February 23, 2011, <http://www.wi-doc.com/televisit.htm>.

An analysis of the costs of County investments in video conferencing reveals a three-pronged cost plan for the installation of units in courthouses and jails and for general maintenance.<sup>24</sup>

*Investment at the Courthouse*

**Total Cost of Court Unit \$16,750**

Mobile Videoconferencing Unit \$14,000

Wiring/Installation \$2,000

Setup of Phone/Fax Lines \$750

*Investment in the Jail*

**Total Cost of Jail Unit \$14,750**

Stationary Videoconferencing Unit \$12,000

Wiring/Installation \$2,000

Setup of Phone/Fax Lines \$750

Maintenance costs of a video conferencing unit are estimated at \$2,000 per unit per year. A one-year maintenance package for the courthouse and jail represent a \$4,000 investment, making the grand total for a complete county system \$35,500 for the state of Wisconsin. The cost-benefit analysis for video conferencing evaluates the returns on investment and the payback time of the video conferencing system. For the state of Wisconsin the expected returns for the installation of video conferencing systems in 72 counties is estimated at 159% in the first year. The expected payback time on the investment for all 72 counties would be 0.53 years or about 6 months. The data indicate the possibility for substantial savings for county and state program costs through the investment in videoconferencing in courts, jails, and correctional institutions.<sup>25</sup>

**Florida**

In Florida, a program called Reading and Family Ties allows incarcerated mothers to read stories to their children using live video via the Internet. The program has been credited with enhancing family unity, easing inmates' transition back to society, and improving literacy for both parents and children.<sup>26</sup>

The cost to inmates and their families to use the video visitation service is typically cheaper than the rate of a collect call from the corrections facility. Rockville, Indiana prison inmates are charged \$12.50 for a 30-minute visit, compared to the \$15 for a 30-minute local call. Even the costs of that facilities' video conferencing equipment was covered entirely by the vendor,

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<sup>24</sup> Wisconsin Court System, "Cost savings from Videoconferencing," accessed February 23, 2011, <http://www.wicourts.gov/about/committees/ppacvidconf.htm>.

<sup>25</sup> Wisconsin Court System, "Cost savings from Videoconferencing," accessed February 23, 2011, <http://www.wicourts.gov/about/committees/ppacvidconf.htm>.

<sup>26</sup> Jeffrey M. Leving, "Illinois Virtual Visitation for Incarcerated Fathers," accessed on February 18, 2011, <http://www.dadsrights.com/resourcecenter/article/IllinoisVirtualVisitationforIncarceratedFathers.html>.

Florida-based JPay. JPay covered the cost of the kiosks and installation with no expense to the state.<sup>27</sup>

### **Further Applications of Video Conferencing**

Other applications for virtual visitation in terms of correctional facilities and courts are but not limited to: telemedicine for inmates, expediting cases faster through the system, scheduling and conducting hearings more efficiently, arraignment proceedings, parole hearings, consideration of appeals, mental health hearings, attorney consultations, and inmate rehabilitation programs.<sup>28</sup> After implementing video conferencing technology in Cuyahoga County, Ohio it was reported that arraignments, sentencing, search warrants, judicial release, and pretrial conferences accounted for 70.6% of their total video conferencing use.<sup>29</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Implementing video conferencing programs may save prisons time and money. Video conferencing programs can pay for themselves and may help raise revenue over time for prisons through user fees. Video conferencing also allows inmates a much easier way to communicate with family members if they are incarcerated in a place where it may be impractical for their loved ones to visit them. Although traditional visitation is the preferred means, incarcerated parents who take advantage of video conferencing programs show a decreased rate of recidivism after leaving prison. Video conferencing can be applied to more procedures other than incarcerated parenting including doctor visits and arraignment proceedings.

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Disclaimer: This report has been compiled by undergraduate students at the University of Vermont under the supervision of Professor Anthony Gierzynski. The material contained in the report does not reflect the official policy of the University of Vermont.

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<sup>27</sup> Jessica Gresko, "Families visit prison from comfort of their homes," CorrectionsOne, accessed February 23, 2011, <http://www.correctionsone.com/products/corrections/articles/1852337-Families-visit-prison-from-comfort-of-their-homes/>.

<sup>28</sup> Tandberg, "Judicial and legal opportunities," accessed February 23, 2011, <http://www.tandberg.com/video-conferencing-case-studies/judicial-legal.jsp>.

<sup>29</sup> Carolyn Marsan, "Courting video conferencing," StateTech, accessed February 23, 2011, <http://www.statetechmag.com/issues/december-2009-january-2010/courting-video-conferencing.html>.