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## Features



# High-tech security threat: Corrections agencies fight contraband cell phones

Mobile phone technology has advanced faster and become more widespread than any technical innovation in history. In 1990, the number of mobile phones in use around the world is estimated to have been 12.4 million; today, that number has multiplied to approximately 5.6 billion. Around the world, people have come to expect and rely on cheap and easy access to mobile phones for personal and business use.

Those working in law enforcement and criminal justice, however, have learned that these developments in mobile communications technology pose a threat to both unit security and public safety. Contraband cell phones allow inmates to avoid using the offender telephone system, which can be monitored, so they remain connected to their former associates and can continue their criminal activity. Inmates may use cell phones to coordinate escapes, intimidate witnesses, harass victims and order the commission of new crimes.

Although the number of contraband

cell phones found in secure TDCJ facilities has declined in recent years, with 630 confiscated in calendar year 2011 (and another 274 cell phones intercepted prior to reaching the offender population), the number remains too high and a continuing challenge for the agency's zero tolerance policy. Of course, contraband cell phones are by no means an issue unique to Texas prisons. In 2011, the California Corrections and Rehabilitation system confiscated more than 15,000 phones. Even less-populated states with smaller prison populations are not immune to the problem; the state of Mississippi confiscated more than 4,000 phones from its inmates in 2010, and Maryland has discovered an average of 1,300 contraband devices annually over the last four years.

The challenge for correctional agencies nationwide is increased by technological advances which have made cell phones increasingly small and easier to hide, and less reliant upon metal parts in their construction. As these devices become smaller, it becomes easier to conceal them on a person or in a package, in work areas outside the secure

perimeter, or inside objects tossed over the perimeter fence.

Around the nation and the world, corrections professionals are working to develop ways to defend against security threats associated with contraband cell phones. This fight has been an important priority in Texas, and a combination of interdiction techniques has increased the number of cell phones intercepted before they enter a facility and a decline in cell phones confiscated from offenders.

Effective interdiction techniques include video surveillance, such as the entry-and-exit surveillance systems found on many units or the comprehensive video surveillance systems installed on some facilities. Since 2008, most individuals entering a unit have been screened using either a walk-through or hand-held metal detection device. Hand-carried packages and outerwear like hats, coats and shoes are searched visually and with a hand-held metal detector, or sent through an X-ray parcel scanner. Maximum security facilities supplement the metal de-

*Continued on page 2*

## *Continued from page 1*

tector search with a “pat search” of everyone who enters; all other units have expanded their program of daily, random searches of personnel on the property. All TDCJ facilities search offender visitors and conduct random searches of persons leaving the facility. Areas in and around the perimeter of the unit are searched regularly and all vehicles on agency property are subject to search as well.

The hunt for contraband phones continues inside prison, where search techniques include Body Orifice Security Scanner (BOSS) chairs, which use non-invasive technology to detect metal objects concealed within human body cavities, and Contraband Interdiction Shakedown Teams whose sole mission is to seek out and confiscate hidden illegal items. Search team members have been equipped with high-tech metal detectors and video camera scopes that can be snaked through small openings. Team members also carry tools needed to dismantle offender property if unit officials believe it contains contraband. Shakedown teams sometimes work with search dogs trained to detect the odor of niobium oxide, a material commonly used as a conductor in small electrical devices.

In recent years, increased funding provided by the Texas Legislature has paid for the installation of additional security equipment in TDCJ facilities. The Legislature has also increased penalties for offenders found

with cell phones and those who attempt to introduce contraband communication devices. For example, in 2003, the 78th Texas Legislature passed a law making it a criminal offense for an inmate to possess, or for an individual to provide an inmate with a cell phone. Two years later, a law passed by the 79th Legislature expanded this prohibition to other types of communication devices and component parts, and granted TDCJ’s Office of the Inspector General (OIG) authority to use the most sophisticated cell phone detection technology available to detect cell phone conversations on prison grounds. Subsequent legislative sessions have also expanded upon these statutory initiatives.

Federal legislation may play a crucial role in the development of an apparent technical solution to the problem: jamming cell phone signals on prison property. Phone jamming systems are already in use in Mexico, France, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand, but U.S. law prohibits anyone from interfering with radio communications. Federal lawmakers have introduced bills to ease these federal restrictions, but have met significant opposition from cell phone carrier companies and wireless industry trade groups who say that jamming technology could interfere with regular radio communications between unit security, emergency responders and anyone else who might be in the vicinity, since jamming signals aren’t restricted to well-defined borders. Technology

vendors counter that the jamming effect of improved systems can be restricted so as to not affect the public.

In an effort to resolve the situation, the FCC, industry trade groups and state correctional systems, including TDCJ, are exploring an alternative known as “managed-access technology.” Such systems route all calls coming from a certain area, such as a prison, to a third-party provider which checks each phone against a list of approved phones. Any phones which aren’t on the list are blocked. Since the technology is selective and doesn’t interfere with legitimate cell phone calls, its use is not prohibited by federal law.

Jamming or managed access may one day offer another technological tool to combat contraband cell phones, but they are no substitute for security measures preventing their introduction. While declining numbers of cell phones found in Texas prisons is a positive sign, the agency’s goal remains the complete eradication of contraband, regardless of how difficult achieving that goal may seem. For this reason, TDCJ staff must remain vigilant to prevent contraband communications devices from entering secure facilities. ●