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Keeping track of inmates

County jail system to adopt high-tech radio-linked system

By Don Thompson, Associated Press

Inmates can run, but they can't hide -- not so long as a radio-linked wristband remains attached, pinpointing their location within a few feet.

Removing or breaking the bracelet sets off a computer alarm, alerting guards to a possible prison escape. It's an emerging technology that could transform the way convicts are managed, contained and monitored.

The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department announced Sunday it will adopt the technology for the nation's largest jail system, using an updated version of the devices tested at California's Calipatria State Prison, a remote desert facility 35 miles north of the Mexican border -- the first in the nation to track its inmates electronically.

The concept has since been exported to other states.

Los Angeles County will spend \$1.5 million to help control about 1,900 inmates and protect guards in one unit of the Pitchess Detention Center in Castaic, about 40 miles northwest of downtown Los Angeles, beginning early next year.

If it works well, it may be expanded to the 6,000 residents of L.A. County's Central Jail and then to other facilities, said Marc Klugman, chief of the sheriff's department's Correctional Services Division.

California state corrections officials may also consider increased use of the still-developing systems.

Beyond tracking inmates around cell blocks, the technology has the potential to create virtual prisons outside detention facilities that would let work release crews roam within an electronic fence easily moved wherever it is needed, said Harinder Singh, executive officer of the California Department of Corrections' technology transfer committee.

Michigan's Bureau of Juvenile Justice has had a \$1 million system at a maximum-security 200-ward prison since 2003, and is installing it at a second detention facility. The technology also is being used at a minimum-security prison in Chillicothe, Ohio, and at Logan Correctional Center north of Springfield, Ill., home to 1,900 medium-security inmates.

Calipatria spokesman Lt. Ray Madden recalls an assault two years ago when investigators retraced inmates' movements using the computerized system installed in the

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minimum-security unit. They soon centered on an unlikely suspect -- a disabled inmate who wasn't where he was supposed to be.

"He parked his walker outside the building, went in and stabbed somebody, then went back and picked up his walker," Madden said. "He was hard-pressed to say he wasn't inside, because we could track him through the building."

Los Angeles County jails' revolving-door population poses the toughest test yet for the technology. The facilities house about 18,000 inmates on a given day, but nearly 200,000 people pass through the system each year, some for a few hours, others for months. Several thousand each day must be moved to and from court appearances.

Last year alone there were an estimated 1,330 violent incidents that injured 88 jail employees and 1,742 inmates. Five prisoners were killed.

"It's just mind-boggling what these guys have to deal with," said Greg Oester, president of Technology Systems International Inc., which installs the TSI PRISM systems. The Scottsdale, Ariz.-based company is a subsidiary of Alanco Technologies Inc.

Previously, the company has worked with much more captive audiences -- prison inmates serving multiyear sentences so long that electronic bracelets can be locked on until the batteries die. For jails such as in L.A. County, it's had to develop a quick-release version.

California's increased use of technology has been stalled by several years of budget cuts and paralyzing turnovers in prison leadership, said both Singh and Youth and Adult Corrections Secretary Roderick Hickman. The prison system is now going through a sweeping bureaucratic reorganization that will take months, but Hickman and Singh say technology is a key to reform.

Singh's committee hasn't met since October 2002 because of the budget and bureaucratic uncertainty, but he anticipates efforts will get under way this fall to set priorities for which technology can best help transform the massive, troubled prison system.

"There's going to be opportunities for all kinds of new innovations. This might be one of them," Hickman said.

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