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LA jail latest to use radio tags to track inmates

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 Associated Press

SACRAMENTO - 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.

LA 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 LA 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 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."

LA 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.

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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 multi-year sentences so long that electronic bracelets can be locked on until the batteries die. For jails such as in LA County, it's had to develop a quick-release version.

Alanco estimates there is \$1.5 billion in potential sales for the technology if it were used throughout the federal, state and county prison and jail systems nationwide.

Singh praised TSI's product but thinks other technology could soon surpass the system's versatility.

He's intrigued by the Wheels of Zeus Inc. system developed by a Los Gatos firm headed by Apple Computer co-founder Steve Wozniak that uses radio frequencies indoors but switches to Global Positioning System satellites outdoors.

Though wOz is marketing its product for people who want to monitor the locations of people, pets or possessions, company officials met last month with Singh to discuss adapting the technology to corrections.

Inmates could be tracked not only within prisons or jails, or inside moveable electronic fences, but to and from courthouses or other locations, Singh said, providing more tracking mobility. Transmitters could be mounted on vehicles and shifted with work crews, letting them move freely while still being monitored by satellites.

Singh expects more correctional facilities to adopt tracking systems as the technology improves, and more competition as the market expands.

"They know we have the customers," he quipped.

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 underway 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.

ON THE NET

TSI Inc.: <http://www.tsilink.com/>


Alanco Technologies Inc.: www.alanco.com

Wheels of Zeus: <http://www.woz.com/2005/index.html>

Logan Correctional Center: <http://www.idoc.state.il.us/subsections/facilities/instaddress.shtml>

California Youth and Adult Correctional Agency: <http://www.yaca.ca.gov>

California Department of Corrections: <http://www.corr.ca.gov>

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