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Promotional

Sunday, July 31, 2005

Bands improve tracking inmates

By Edith Brady-Lunny
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LINCOLN -- There is Advertisement
 literally no place to hide at
 the Logan Correctional Center in Lincoln.

The medium-security facility is the only prison in Illinois participating in a \$3 million pilot program that monitors every movement of the facility's 1,900 inmates.

"It's been very helpful for us for two reasons -- the inmates all wear wristbands that track their movements and a PAL system for staff has a three-way safety feature," said Warden Greg Firkus.

The PAL system, activated in April 2004, outfits employees with a small, pager-size device that activates an alarm if staff members find themselves in trouble, or they fall for any reason. When the alarm goes off, a computer screen in the prison's armory shows their exact location.

The TSI Prism systems were installed by Technology Systems International, a subsidiary of Alanco Technologies Inc. of Scottsdale, Ariz.

In addition to helping staff know the exact whereabouts of inmates, the radio-linked wristbands also are an added tool for inmate-related investigations, said Firkus.

"When there has been a fight, we can zero in right away on who's in the area. It's another tool we can use in our daily job," he said.

Inmates also have learned how to use the system to their advantage in some circumstances, said Firkus.

"If an inmate thinks someone has stolen their property, they say, 'Check the monitor, see who was in that area,'" he said.

While no statistics have been compiled yet on the impact the system has had on overall discipline and safety at the facility, state corrections officials are confident the wristbands have been helpful.

"We have a planning and research unit that collects all types of statistics. I'm certain we'll be able to see a significant difference because this is a deterrent," to unacceptable behavior within the prison, said Dee Dee Short, spokeswoman for the Illinois Department of Corrections.

The inmate unit is about the size of a man's wristwatch. A

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battery lasts about a year before it needs to be replaced. If the device is tampered with or broken, an alarm is activated.

The monitors are designed to follow an inmate inside the facility. When they leave for reasons such as court appointments, the device is disconnected.

The tracking mechanism has a boundary of about 20 feet beyond the perimeter of the prison, said Firkus.

Since the system was installed in Lincoln, the manufacturer has added several updates, including a longer term memory for the units; a 30-day storage capacity has expanded to more than 50 days.

Prison officials also are interested in new advances in technology that may improve the way the inmate population is monitored and controlled, said Short.

Logan's system has attracted visitors from other countries and states interested in the technology. Officials from the federal Bureau of Prisons, Arizona prisons and two groups from Japan have scheduled visits to Lincoln.

Illinois prison officials followed several other states that reported success with the monitoring devices. Earlier this year, the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department announced plans to use the technology in the nation's largest jail system.

Michigan uses the system for its juvenile justice facilities and Ohio has installed the units at a medium-security prison.

The Associated Press contributed to this story.

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