

California takes steps to reduce usage of cell phones in prisons

Posted At : March 28, 2011 9:18 AM | Posted By : Justin Spratley

Related Categories: Justice/Public Safety & Homeland Security

Ever since cell phones evolved from the expensive and bulky Zack Morris (of "Saved by the Bell") phones of the early '90s to the cheap and easily-concealed devices we are accustomed to today, they have, unfortunately, become commonplace in jails and prisons nationwide. It is both fascinating and somewhat depressing to watch this trend progress. As a justice and public safety analyst, it is fascinating to watch the convergence of technology, law, policy, lobbying and criminal justice play out in one issue. On the other hand, it is depressing because, while the issue has gained a tremendous amount of press over the years, corrections officials have been unable to effectively curtail the flow of cell phones into their facilities. However, this trend recently began to show positive signs of change. This month, the state of California began to fight the battle against cell phones on two fronts.

On the legislative front

This past week, California Senate Bill 26 (SB26) gained a significant amount of **media attention**. This bill introduced by State Senator Alex Padilla (D-San Fernando Valley), if passed, would make smuggling a cell phone a misdemeanor punishable by up to six months jail time and a \$5,000 fine. Inmates found possessing a cell phone would be denied or lose good-time credits.

Originally, the bill contained a provision to add serious time, up to five years, for any inmate found to have planned a crime via cell phone. This was dropped amid budget concerns. These concerns are not without merit as the average yearly cost of incarceration in California is "**\$44,688 per individual as of 2009.**"

The most obvious flaw of this legislation is that it does little to deter "lifers" from acquiring cell phones in prison. Take the infamous Charles Manson as an example. He created quite a bit of negative press for the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) after being caught in possession of a cell phone on two separate occasions. He will never set foot outside of a California penitentiary as a free man, so adding time to his sentence, or that of any other inmate serving life with no parole, is not much of a deterrent.

On the technology front

While the state legislature works to assign criminal penalties to those caught with contraband cell phones, the CDCR has taken some steps toward utilizing technology to render those phones useless. The CDCR has shown a continued interest in deploying a managed access system as the primary tool in its battle against contraband phones. For the unfamiliar, managed access systems detect all active cell phones within a certain area and determine which of those devices are authorized for use; only calls from the authorized devices are transmitted to the commercial carrier network.

The **CDCR describes** its managed access strategy as follows:

"CDCR has completed preliminary survey work with one of these vendors to pilot this technology at a CDCR prison in early spring 2011. Assuming the technology, which intercepts contraband wireless communication devices, is proven to be a good solution for CDCR in addressing its contraband cell phone problem, CDCR is working on several procurement and funding solutions that can fast-track the installation of this equipment statewide. CDCR hopes to begin installing this equipment in 2011."

It appears this project may kick off in the near future. In the recently released 2011 Statewide Five-Year ITCP Conceptually Approved IT Project Proposals, the CDCR listed "Cellular Telephone and Wireless Device Eradication Strategy" as a project with an estimated start date of June 30, 2011. The state has committed to releasing additional information about all of the projects in this report in April, and GovWin members can track the progress of this project via **GovWin Opp ID 57656**.

GovWin's Take

Reducing the number of contraband phones in California prisons will by no means be an easy or cheap task. The department employs approximately 30,000 peace officers, incarcerates 100,000+ individuals, and operates 33 adult institutions, 42 conservations camps, and 13 community correctional facilities. It also must balance the needs of law enforcement and the expectations of crime victims to maintain the integrity of the correctional system and the concerns of CDCR employees and their union. The state's strategy of utilizing policy to dampen demand, and technology to stifle supply, will no doubt be monitored closely by officials in other states. If the

managed access approach is successful in the country's largest state prison system, it will no doubt be replicated. At this point, the biggest X factor in terms of the success of this endeavor will be the cost to cash-strapped California. Some estimates have placed the cost of managed access systems at **\$1 million per facility**. Wide-scale deployment of a managed access system in the correctional environment is uncharted territory. Effective planning and project management will be essential in making this undertaking a success.

Additionally, GovWin has produced a detailed **Analyst Perspective** report that outlines CDCR budget figures for 2011-2012 and provides action items for vendors.