Getting a Handle on New [illegible]y

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By Alex Fox and Lee Mockensturm

***Authors' Note**: Points of view expressed in this article do not necessarily represent those of the U.S. Department of Justice.*

Implementing a new technology can be confusing, expensive and time-consuming. Corrections professionals often must rely only on their own experiences and information from vendors when deciding what and whether to buy. On a good day, you work with a vendor you trust and a technology with which you are familiar. On a bad day, you may work with a vendor you have never heard of on a technology that sounds great but you know nothing about. There is one group, however, that is working to make sure there are more good days than bad.

Massachusetts Steps Up

The essence of the problem was the lack of a "mechanism to share among jurisdictions what technology was emerging and what potential applications were out there for corrections," according to Michael T. Maloney, commissioner of the Massachusetts Department of Corrections. No one was learning from anyone else's experience.

After discussing technology implementation issues with fellow members of the technology committee of the Association of State Correctional Administrators, Maloney volunteered to organize a group of corrections professionals to assess the applicability and effectiveness of existing and emerging technologies. Maloney and other officials from his department got commitments from 13 other states, municipalities and federal agencies. All 14 members then signed a memorandum of understanding and the Northeast Technology and Product Assessment Committee was born. The committee members include Connecticut, Delaware, the District of Columbia, the Federal Bureau of Prisons, Maine, Massachusetts, the Natick Soldier Center, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York state, New York City, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island and Vermont. Maloney was surprised at how quickly the committee got off the ground. "I knew there was a need to share information, to archive information for people to retrieve," he says, "but I didn't think that states would jump on so quickly."

How It Works

The nuts and bolts of how the committee works is simple: Representatives from each state meet quarterly, and vendors and technology developers are invited to present their products for 30 minutes each. This is followed by a Q-and-A session. The vendor then leaves and the group candidly discusses the technology presented and their personal experiences with the vendor or technology.

Committee meetings take two days. On day one, an average of 10 vendors are present. On day two, the members meet to discuss what technologies they would like to see at the next meeting, and to hear from special guests, such as Sandia National Laboratories, NASA and the Department of Defense Counterdrug Technology Program Office. To date, the committee has met five times.

Why It Works

More important than how the group works is why it works as well as it does. First, participant selection was critical. Maloney has seen similar committees of experts try to do the same thing but get nowhere. Those people knew the business of corrections and they knew the technology, but they did not necessarily have access to the head of the agency. "If it's going to work ... the people selected have to have access to the head [of their agency], be knowledgeable [illegible]nnolo- [illegible]lains. NTPAC works because the right people are at the table.

Second, participants have to be ready to actively share information — with the other members of the committee and with their own agencies. Their attendance would be meaningless if they kept the knowledge they gain to themselves.

Benefits to Practitioners

Committee members benefit in three key ways: shared information, meaningful interaction with vendors, and open and honest discussion.

Shared Information. Through their first contacts and meetings, members learned there are people in the corrections community who have information about the products they were considering. Often, neighboring states knew something that they did not and vice versa. Before NTPAC, there was no consistent way for any of the states to take advantage of that.

Vendor Interaction. The forum gets the participants away from the pressure of meeting with vendors one-on-one, during which time vendors can run through a well-developed sales pitch and practitioners are on their own, questioning or challenging certain points. That interaction can too often be one-sided. In the committee meetings, the practitioners can easily establish an open dialogue with vendors.

Open Discussion. After each presentation, when the vendor has left, participants are able to discuss issues with a hands-on perspective. "Other correctional administrators are going to tell you whether [the technology presented] has real benefits to you in the course of your duties, and whether there are any drawbacks," explains Maloney. "Now we are not taking as big a risk when buying a product. The committee has changed our decision-making

process on how we purchase technology. We're a better-educated consumer."

Benefits to Vendors

This also is a good opportunity for vendors; many become frustrated at conferences and trade shows because they often cannot talk to the right people who can influence the introduction of technology into a state or facility. At NTPAC meetings, vendors speak to a roomful of the right people. They can showcase their technology and answer pointed questions. Many technologies presented are extensive systems and require considerable resource commitment to implement; NTPAC gives vendors a chance to get past the price tag and show and discuss the benefits.

NTPAC also looks at technologies that are still being developed, and vendors can benefit from the committee's experience and input. This guidance can steer the vendor away from developing a product that, no matter how technologically advanced, no one in corrections wants.

The first vendors were invited by the committee; now, vendors are the ones reaching out. The committee organizers receive three to five calls from vendors per week — strong evidence that vendors see the advantages of presenting to the committee.

The Third Group

Vendors are not the only technology developers in the room. Also sitting at the table, watching the vendors and listening to the practitioners, is one of the largest research and development entities in the world: the U.S. military. Rita Gonzalez of the National Protection Center, Natick Soldier Center, sits on the committee to see what her organization can bring to the table.

NPC examines how defense technologies can be used in other areas of public safety. However, according to Gonzalez, NPC has not traditionally worked with corrections. Through the committee, she is developing a better appreciation for correctional officers' requirements for protection. "It gives us a better appreciation from an engineering standpoint what the needs of a correctional officer are versus a law enforcement officer." Gonzalez uses body armor as an example: "Correctional officers face threats from blunt trauma and stabbings, whereas law enforcement has a higher threat of bullets. You really don't get a good appreciation for that until you're put into a position of talking to people who have to deal with that on a daily basis." (For more information about NPC, visit www.natick.army.mil/soldier/npc/.)

Next Steps

One of the visions of the project is to connect the committee to others across the country through an annual meeting and a secure Web site. There is support for this idea in other arenas as well. Allan J. Turner, chairman of the American Correctional Association's Corrections Technology Committee, wants his committee to work closely with groups such as NTPAC to share ideas and experiences — one of the Technology Committee's main initiatives, according to the August 2001 *Corrections Today* article, "Corrections Technology Committee: A Valuable Resource for Practitioners." For example, NTPAC would refer selected technologies to the ACA committee for review.

NTPAC also provides an opportunity to establish technology test beds. Technology developers could place their technologies in a committee member's facility to have it evaluated in an operational environment. The facility would benefit from access to advanced technology, the developer would benefit from the practitioner's feedback, other committee members would benefit from shared information on the technology, and the entire field of corrections might benefit from a product developed to meet its real-world problems.

When practitioners can effectively communicate with one another and with technology developers, everyone wins. That is exactly what NTPAC allows by presenting a venue for information-sharing that can lead to the selection of the most effective and suitable available technology and the development of even better technologies in the future.

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