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CHANGING THE HEALTH CARE FRAMEWORK

PROTECTIVE GEAR

MEETING UP

NEW VIDEO TECHNOLOGIES

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BY MICHAEL GROHS, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Meeting Up

VIDEO TECHNOLOGY FOR ON-SITE OR AT HOME.

Studies have found the support of friends and family is integral to inmates' well-being and improves the odds of them not reoffending. A report by the Vera Institute of Justice studying "the current landscape of video visitation in prisons" found that half of those surveyed had previously lived at least 129 miles from the prison where they were serving their sentence. The trips averaged nearly three hours' driving time each way. A third of those surveyed reported that their loved ones did not have access to the necessary transportation to make the journey to visit. Only a quarter of women with children had received a visit from them during the previous year. Almost all of them (95%) wished that they could receive more in-person visits. There has been a push in some facilities to make those visitations remote—and in many cases, solely remote. The technology offers benefits in the form of convenience, client/attorney communication, travel time and costs, security within the facility, and security outside the facility.

Donna Collins, senior account manager at Monroeville, Pa.-based Compunetix, which offers the Companion Suite, points out that virtual visitation can be used for connecting inmates with family, therapists, lawyers and priests. It promotes rehabilitation and addresses prison reform. It helps prevent contraband from entering the facility. It generates revenue for the prison, lowers prison staffing/costs, and allows loved ones who can't visit because of distance, disability, illness, or responsibilities at home.

The use is remarkably simple. The visitor makes an appointment, and the inmate is told when and where to accept the call. The caller then visits the facility to use the stations or log on via computer or

PHOTO COURTESY GTL

GTL's At-Home video visitation solution through VisitMe allows visitors to conduct visits through most PCs, laptops, and tablets without requiring a trip to a facility.

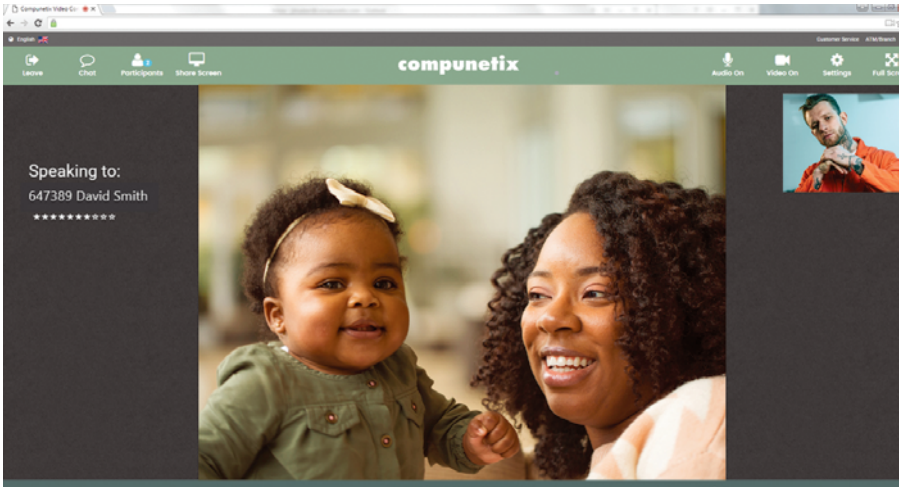
other device. The login requires a simple passcode, and the prison security officer connects the call. Calls can be monitored visibly or invisibly or not monitored at all for visits with attorneys and clergy. The technology is WebRTC (real time communication), which means it requires no separate downloads and can be used with a standard web browser such as Chrome or Mozilla. Says Collins, "Browser-based RTC has really opened the gates."

One advantage of video visitation is when it comes to legal matters, says Brian Deuster, product manager, Video Initiatives at GTL. Attorneys' hours are billable, and often correctional facilities are located in remote areas. Those hours traveling would have to be paid for, and the meeting might only last 15 or 20 minutes. Through video visitation, those hours and money can be saved by simply calling each other rather than commuting.

Donna Hogan, sales and marketing assistant at Black Creek Integrated Systems, points out that from the correctional standpoint, "Video arraignment allows inmates to participate in the legal process without leaving the facility." This in turn saves travel time and personnel problems involved with transporting inmates between the jail and the courthouse. She furthers that an attorney can visit from the privacy of his or her office. Confidentiality is not violated because jails are legally prohibited from listening to or recording privileged video visits. Video visitation also offers attorneys the ability to visit with more clients and offer them more attention in a shorter time by reducing travel time. "There is no cost to the inmate or the attorney (at least under the Black Creek system), so attorneys can consult with clients as often as necessary." Video visitation units can be installed in private areas, so inmates don't have to leave the housing unit in order to consult with an attorney.

Remote Parole

At the other end of the inmate's sentence, Collins furthers that video visitation can be used in remote parole hearings. It eliminates the need for secure transport, and the fact that there are no travel logistics makes scheduling easier. Parole boards



The technology employed by Companion Suite from Compunetix is WebRTC (real time communication), which means it requires no separate downloads and can be used with a standard web browser such as Chrome or Mozilla.

can also preside over multiple jurisdictions, and the adoption of such solutions can lower overall costs.

There are benefits for friends and family visits as well. Says Hogan, "It is well known in the corrections industry that the more incarcerated people get to visit with their loved ones while they're serving time, the less likely they are to reoffend later on." While jurisdictions may make an effort to incarcerate inmates at facilities in proximity of their families, not all jurisdictions can or do consider distance to family when choosing where to house an inmate. For inmates incarcerated far from home, visits can be a rare event restricted by the family's financial situation.

"For families for whom traveling to visit an incarcerated loved one is cost prohibitive, video visitation can be the lifeline that holds the family together. Regular visits with family and friends, whether in person or via video visitation, help inmates remain socialized and aids in the eventual re-acclimation to civilian life upon release from jail." Furthermore, children also might be adversely affected by the jail atmosphere of a live visit, and for the elderly, a road trip to visit a loved one might be impractical or impossible.

GTL's system is called VisitMe. Using the on-premises solution available through VisitMe, services can be conducted at predetermined locations within the facility or from an adjunct location. Stations can be installed throughout each housing unit, so inmates do not need to be moved. A station can also be set up on a cart and used as a mobile solution for restricted classification offenders.

One trend Deuster and Hogan have both noticed is the request for more tablet and mobile phone options with fewer restrictions regarding time constraints such as limited times users can log on. Many inmates have tablets. Friends or family can log on to the system, and the inmate's tablet will ring. The At-Home video visitation solution through VisitMe allows visitors to conduct visits through most PCs, laptops, and tablets without requiring going to a facility. While it may sound strange considering the scourge that is cell phone use in correctional facilities, the calls are monitored and the tablets limited.

Another vendor, Securus Technologies, offers Video Visitation, a scheduling software available to the corrections market. An easy-to-use interface allows friends, family members, attorneys and other visitors to easily schedule visits from any Android or iOS mobile device or PC connected to the Internet. Before being able to schedule a visit, the visitor must first electronically submit their information and photo identification. This allows staff to control who is allowed to schedule a visit, thus giving the ability of restricting users because of behavioral issues.

The scheduling platform is completely integrated with the Jail Management System ensuring that a visit is only scheduled during available timeslots. Securus Video Visitation has the ability to monitor and record visits, creating new investigative opportunities that can also have a real impact on reducing violence within the facility. Furthermore, staff can identify visits for later investigative review and prevent recordings from being purged after the standard retention window expires.

New Mobile App

Another option, the Securus Mobile app for Android, allows users to manage communication with incarcerated loved ones anywhere. Users can fund a calling account so they are always ready to receive a call, check account balances, schedule or join a video visit. Apple users will have this functionality in the coming months, but can currently use the Securus Video Visitation app to enjoy existing features and remotely visit.

Another trend vendors have noticed is that when a facility puts out an RFP, they have been asking to bundle technology, so providers will combine technology such as making the system to allow for video visitation and also be used for other aspects such as education or commissary. The systems are designed to be simple to use. Once completed, facilities can lay their own foundations because the system is open to adaptation. Unlike a phone installation, the implementation is a

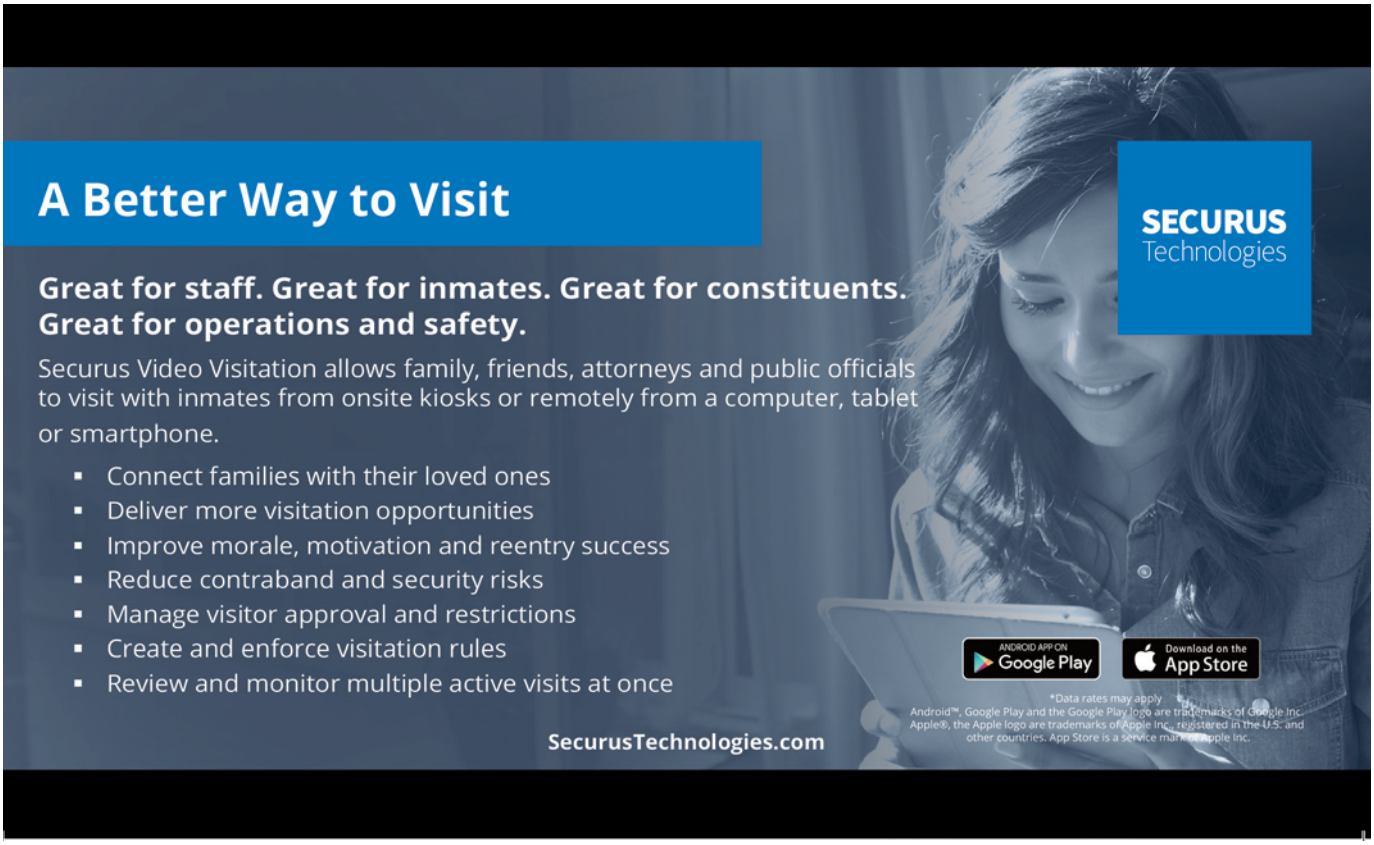
significant technological upgrade that can be multi-layered.

Monroe County Correctional Facility has adopted the technology. The call is paid for by the friend or family member calling, and costs about $6.00 for 20 minutes. According to the *Pocono Record,* among the reasons for the adoption was to "help control inmate behavior." Warden Garry Haidle noted that when an inmate has family members out of the area, the technology brings them into the area, which helps the inmate "handle their incarceration better." A terminal was hooked up at a nearby Children and Youth office so as to keep children out of a correctional environment.

Cutting the Miles

The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) has realized significant success by using the technology for arraignments. In Kern County, those involved perform arraignments of inmates who commit a crime while incarcerated at one of the county's five prisons. The inmates appear on a large monitor inside prison court while remaining housed in the facilities. The tactic has been efficient since arraignments are brief appearances that only involve charges being read, court dates being set, counsel being assigned, and setting bail. Video arraignments in Delano have been used for years, but in July 2017, CDCR expanded the use to all of its 35 institutions.

Kern County Superior Court Judge David Wolf recalled when a mere two years ago when the facilities had CDCR vans from all over the state, and inmates sitting in those vans until 5 p.m. "It was a hot and miserable way of doing business, and now we have a far more humane process that is better for attorneys, inmates and the transportation officers. Working together we have provided a higher level of service, enhanced public safety, and done with greater efficiency." In one year, the Kern County Prison Court hosted 318 video arraignments. Of those, 41 eased the strain on CDCR's transportation team at nearby Corcoran. Public safety benefits and cost savings were dramatic as the use of video arraignments extended across the state. During that same period, officers at Salinas Valley State Prison avoided driving 39 trips of 352 miles as well as 29 trips of 386 miles for California Health Care Facility in Stockton, and 27 trips of 530 miles from California State Prison, Sacramento. Add to that Pelican Bay State Prison, California's northernmost correctional facility and one known for housing a large population of maximum-security inmates. They avoided 34 round trips of 1,324 miles. In total, CDCR saved over 134,690 miles of travel for arraignments, which only take



"Browser-based RTC has really opened the gates."

—Donna Collins, Compunetix

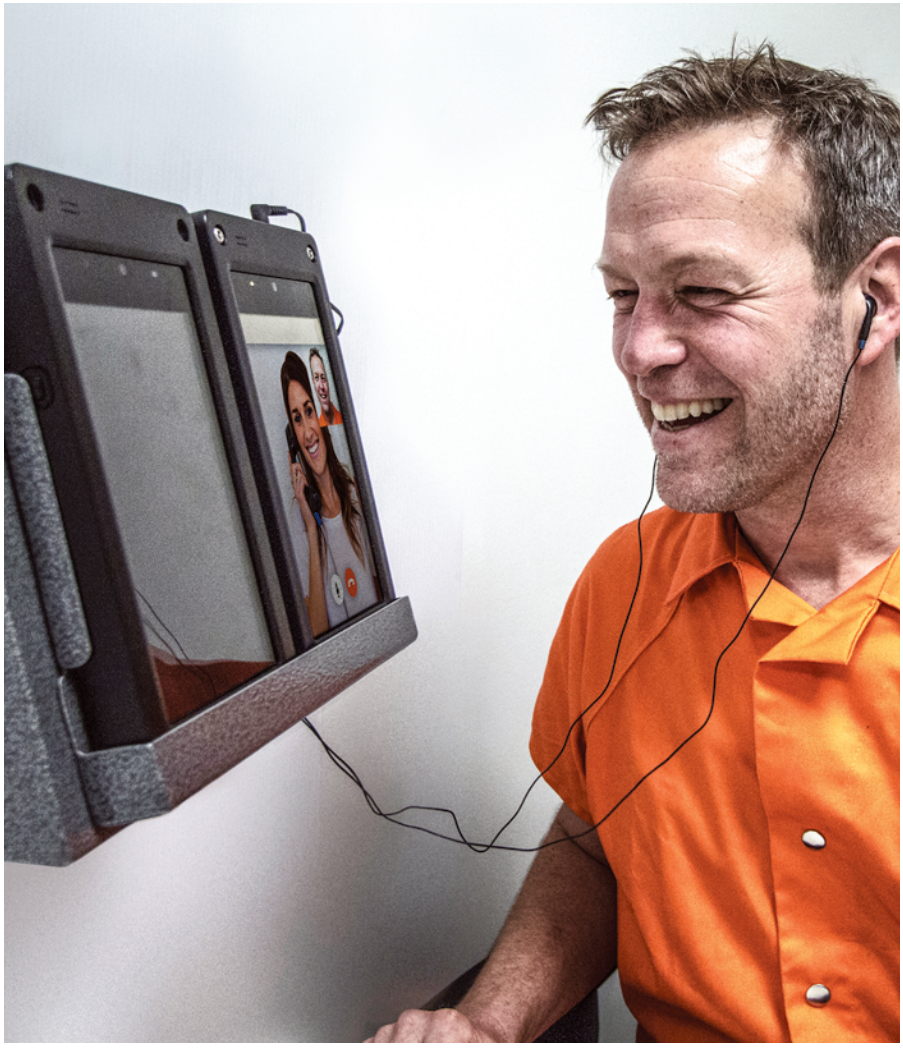


PHOTO COURTESY GTL

about 15 minutes each.

Not all visitation needs to be conducted via video or phone. Considering the drive for more mobile options, services such as Securus's eMessaging allows family and friends to communicate with an incarcerated loved one using messaging similar to e-mail. The system allows users to send a text-based message, take a photo on a mobile device or send a photo from the user's gallery, and receive a text based message from an inmate (if the loved one purchases a reply). The solution requires a Securus Online account and login. Messages are sent and received from the user's eMessaging inbox from the website or on the Securus mobile app and are paid for by purchasing a book of "stamps." Stamp pricing varies by facility. Once the user selects the inmate he or she is going to message, the stamp price will be shown. The user then finds the inmate, purchases a book of stamps, and writes the message. A photo can be attached for an additional stamp. As with the video visitations, the message is monitored.

While the conveniences and cost are certainly attractive for all parties involved, video visitation has not had all positive reviews. Some complaints such as audio artifacts and echo seem inevitable to be remedied as technology is perfected. Some facilities, Hogan points out, might charge what in some cases has been considered to be exorbitant fees. "Individual providers set their own fee structures, so the cost to the user will vary depending on which service is offered at the inmate's jail."

The other controversy seems to stem from when facilities make video visitation the sole option. A 2015 study by the Prison Policy Initiative found that 74% of jails banned in-person visits when they implemented video visitation. The value of physical attachment might be inconsequential between an attorney and the client, but the value of attachment with loved ones is meaningful. Virginia Casper, a developmental psychologist and senior faculty member in the Graduate School at Bank Street College of Education in New York, wrote in a piece as a guest writer for the *Huffington Post,* "Mother and child have an opportunity to touch each other's faces, feel the weight of each other's bodies, take in each other's smells and sounds, and figure out who they are and who they are becoming. For the incarcerated mothers, these experiences become memories. For the infants and toddlers, these visits serve as building blocks for their growing brains as they develop their sense of self in relation to others. Those moments together define the child's relationship to the person they're learning to call "mama."

The key takeaway from the Vera study was: "In theory, video visitation presents an opportunity to help bridge the distance between incarcerated people and their loved ones, and to complement in-person visits. In practice, it can be expensive for incarcerated people and their families, and there are many opportunities for improvement to the technology." ✪