

Corrections Technology Committee:

A Valuable Resource for Practitioners

By Allan Turner

As corrections practitioners, we often feel overwhelmed or even intimidated by the constant barrage of technology information. Few of us have the time or knowledge to sort through and identify the current and emerging technologies that fit our needs. However, the inability to stay on top of technological developments can be costly, both in lost opportunities and misapplied resources.

In response to this dilemma, the American Correctional Association (ACA) established the Corrections Technology Committee in 1996 to help practitioners deal with the volume and rapidly changing nature of technological information. ACA's president at the time, Reginald Wilkinson, charged the committee with the following:

- Explore methods by which correctional and/or transfer technology can be shared with corrections practitioners.
- Identify and share technical assistance resources for corrections practitioners.
- Work closely with the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) and other public and private organizations to ensure that correctional technology requirements are effectively communicated to providers.
- Address the need to share critical information at forums, such as ACA workshops, and by submitting ideas and/or articles to be considered for ACA's publications.
- Work with other ACA committees and with affiliates and chapters that have related interests to address issues of mutual concern.

As incoming chair of the Corrections Technology Committee, my objective is to develop the committee as a more valuable resource for corrections practitioners. During the 2001 ACA Winter Conference in Nashville, Tenn., the committee reviewed the charges and discussed initiatives to capitalize on its potential and members' experiences. We came up with the following initiatives.

New Technology

Most new technologies are not originally developed for corrections, but they can be adapted effectively into correctional settings. The committee will explore what is available from a variety of sources, including NIJ's Office of Science and Technology, to identify new technologies that have potential in the corrections field. Developers will be invited to present and demonstrate their technology during committee meetings. Producers wishing to introduce their products to the correctional market will be invited to brief the committee. The committee, in turn, will provide feedback to the developers.

The committee also will explore concepts being developed by various research laboratories. The objective is to provide vendors with feedback from knowledgeable corrections practitioners while at the same time providing practitioners with direct access to the latest information about new technologies.

Sharing Experiences

ACA's Corrections Technology Committee will work closely with groups such as the Northeast Technology and Product Assessment Committee. Established by Commissioner Mike Maloney of the

Massachusetts Department of Correction, the committee consists of 13 northeastern states and identifies and evaluates emerging technological advances in products and services for corrections. Representatives from several states with strong technological initiatives also attend Corrections Technology Committee meetings. The committee will rely heavily on input from these representatives.

State, local and private correctional organizations also will be given an opportunity to present information on technology being used and technology anticipating approval for future use. An exchange of hands-on experience among various correctional agencies can teach us what no amount of workshops, presentations or demonstrations can.

Practitioner Workshops

The committee will work toward establishing a strong technology track at ACA conferences and congresses to give corrections professionals an opportunity to obtain information to evaluate technology based on their needs. Workshops will address a single technology topic and several vendors who produce that technology will be invited to discuss and demonstrate their products. This approach proved successful at ACA's 2000 Congress in San Antonio, when a workshop was presented on body alarms for correctional staff. Several vendors were invited to discuss their products. It quickly became apparent that there were various approaches to developing body alarm technology and that each product performed differently.

The committee also will sponsor workshops that objectively assess various technologies. Most practitioners learn what technologies can offer from vendors and developers;

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now they will learn from impartial third-party scientists. A workshop using this approach was conducted at ACA's 2001 Winter Conference. Speakers from several national research laboratories gave objective assessments of several technologies. Feedback from the heavily attended workshop indicated a strong desire for similar workshops in the future.

Committed to Improving The Use of Technology

The Corrections Technology Committee has established an ambitious agenda for the upcoming months. Several of the initiatives are under way, while others are in the planning stage. As committee chair, I firmly believe that the Corrections Technology Committee can be developed into a valuable source of information for the corrections community. We

have the support of ACA, NIJ's Office of Science and Technology and committee members who understand correctional technology. However, the committee also needs the support and participation of corrections practitioners. I am hopeful that the emphasis on providing the latest information on emerging technology will be an incentive for more participation by practitioners in the meetings.

Recently, I read a comment by a correctional administrator who aptly described the situation corrections practitioners find themselves in regarding new technology. He stated that he wanted to be on the cutting edge of technology — not on the bleeding edge. The Corrections Technology Committee can play a role in helping corrections practitioners avoid finding themselves on the bleeding edge. Through this participation, we will be able to adequately

provide the information needed by the corrections community.

Membership of the Corrections Technology Committee is open to any ACA member. As of Jan. 3, 2001, the committee had 32 members, who represent state, local, federal and private correctional organizations, as well as a number of technology providers. Meetings are held at ACA's annual winter conference and summer congress.

In addition to being chair of the American Correctional Association's Corrections Technology Committee, Dr. Allan Turner is a professor at George Mason University in Fairfax, Va., and a visiting scientist at the National Institute of Justice. He is retired from the Federal Bureau of Prisons, where he served in a variety of positions, including jail administrator and warden.