Using Technology to Tackle Covid-19 in Corrections

Below are questions that were asked during our webinar 'Using Technology to Tackle Covid-19 in Corrections' which was held on Tuesday 19 May 2020 at 1600CET. Answers have been provided by the webinar the panellists Simon Bonk - CIO, Correctional Service Canada (SB), Russel Nichols - CIO, California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (RN), Håkan Klarin - CIO, Swedish Prison and Probation Service (HK) and CHEUNG Shu-yan (Eric) - Senior Superintendent Hong Kong Correctional Services Department (SYC).

1. **To all speakers: Do you agree that Technology should complement but not replace human contact as the latter is of primary importance for inducing positive change in a person in need of such a change and support?**

   RN - Absolutely agree. For most offenders in our system, technology should augment in-person visitation. Only in situations like the COVID-19 pandemic should it be a replacement. There may be situations, though, when technology provides the only mechanism for a family member to visit an offender. Examples would be family members in hospice care or job constraints that make normal visitation implausible.

   SB - Yes, Technology, especially communications and connectivity, afford us opportunities to significantly improve certain services, render others more efficient, and even offer services that would be otherwise infeasible. However, human contact is imperative in inducing positive change in a person and in ensuring their successful rehabilitation prior to release.

   CSC has a Video Visitation service which main’s purpose is to enable family visits in cases where the family members are located far from the institution or have travel impediments. The service has been expanded during COVID to address the demand. There are clear benefits to CSC, including security, cost, administration, etc.

2. **To all speakers: the technology used assisted with video visits, working from home etc. How it can be further expand to assist with education and training opportunities?**

   RN - Prior to the pandemic, we had an effort to create a digital learning environment. The pandemic has heightened our interest. We have not yet implemented the environment, but we are developing a proof of concept using thin-client devices and a Virtual Desktop Infrastructure.

   SB - Yes, the technology used to assist with video visitation, as well as other communications/connectivity solutions, are applicable to a wide variety of use cases. CSC is working to identify more urgent use cases and should continue to identify additional uses cases moving forward. For each identified use case, a solution will be identified, encompassing technology, but also processes, procedures, training, etc., to ensure successful adoption and effective service delivery. Security and privacy will continue to be key considerations in this space.

3. **When visits will restart, one might expect the number of positive cases in prisons to increase. Do you feel the need to put in place some kind of contact tracing measures for inmates and have you thought of any solution for this?**

   RN - Yes, we are implementing a contact-tracing program within our prison system that will address staff and offenders. We have not yet determined how to coordinate that with our State and local health organization contact tracing programs for people outside the prison environment (visitors).
SB - Yes, based on our understanding of the benefits of contact tracing, we believe this would be a good idea. CSC currently collects and maintains databases of information pertaining to offenders and employees, including their scheduled locations. A good next step may be to determine what information CSC currently collects about visitors, external service providers, and other individuals that may enter an institution once visits restart. This data may need to be augmented to fully enable contact tracing, which may require policy changes, etc. There will be a great opportunity to develop mobile applications that tackles social distancing and enables contact tracing within a CSC environment.

While an automated solution could be leveraged to facilitate contact tracing, a non-automated approach would also be effective.

4. I think we all agree that the most important transformation due to COVID is a cultural one. We are now pushed to see things with a different mind-set. How can we make sure that the positive changes that took place recently will stay post-COVID and we will not go to business as usual? Thanks.

RN - All leaders within our correctional organizations will have to be diligent to maintain the trajectory. I believe, as leaders in our organizations, it is our responsibility to continually mature not just technology, but the culture and practices of our organizations.

SB - We believe that transformation due to COVID was the push we needed to embrace and advance a new digital way to conduct our business in the public service. These are extreme times and some decisions and process from our pre COVID reality will no longer be appropriate post-COVID (e.g. we may decide to accept a higher level of risk to ensure remote service delivery during COVID, while these services could reasonably be delivered at a lower level of risk once COVID is over (e.g. in person, more time to assess and implement safeguards, etc.).

With people having to do their work remotely, it created a need to implement new digital strategies and simpler ways to enable business processes such as e-signature and digital workflows. This will need to be balance by such things as Security and privacy. These considerations are key imperatives for digital service delivery; if we can’t do it securely, then we shouldn’t do it.

We can ensure to keep the positive changes by promoting the value these new initiatives brought to the department such as improved information management processes and practices.

We will need to ensure that change management and focusing on people, communications and engage early and often. The new culture has to be universally encompassing, in that it needs to accommodate the preferred or needed approach for all (e.g. some people function well working from home 100% of the time, while others require more in-person interaction to function effectively).

COVID-19 is driving rapid innovation across the GC (‘necessity is the mother of invention’). The unthinkable is now doable.

5. In the use of technology, have you seen a decrease in staff and/or prisoner infections of covid-19?

RN - I believe our use of technology to enable social distancing has dramatically reduced the potential of spreading the COVID-19 virus in our prisons. We implemented telework for staff, connected offenders to family members with video calls, email, and additional phone calls in place of in-person visits.
SB - We believe the answer is ‘Yes’, although we do not have the documented empirical evidence on hand to back up this response.

Technology has been used to facilitate service support and delivery, but is not a service in and of itself. For example, technology has facilitated measures like social distancing, allowing individuals to maintain social contact during periods of social distancing.

6. **Planned or current technology for Offenders to approve or consent digitally?**

RN - During the pandemic, we changed policies for staff signatures to allow digital submissions that were previously not accepted. We are now evaluating products to allow offenders to also apply digital signatures to documents.

SB - The implementation is much broader than just technology. Legislative and regulatory requirements must be met. Level of Assurance required for use cases need to be understood and solutions appropriate to these requirements must be used. Examples of additional considerations may include, access to devices, storage of files, legal requirements for paper documents, training, connectivity, new support models, etc.

Note that in some cases, changes to legislation, regulations, and/or policies may be required to enable modernization of service delivery to offenders.

Also, there are no offender WAN services at CSC to enable the centrally managed key management services required by most e-signature solutions. Some institutions with an Offender LAN could possibly host a controlled workflow, but currently it would not be possible to distribute to all institutions.

7. **From a strategical perspective, is there any collaboration with the judicial, police or any other non-correctional organisations that should not be missed when initiating the digital transformation?**

RN - While enabling a digitization of correctional processes, it will be essential to include stakeholders outside of correctional organizations. In the US, we receive our offenders from counties or parishes that conduct the actual hearings. The commitment information from the court in addition to the risk, needs, and behaviour information from the local jurisdiction are critical components that allow our prisons to correctly house and provide services to an offender. At the end of a prison term, transitioning an offender back into a local community requires transmission of training, education, and healthcare information to ensure continuity of services in the local jurisdiction. While transformation within a correctional organization is possible, transformation across the complete lifecycle of reintegration will generate better results.

SB - Yes, all partners and stakeholders need to be considered and included as part of the digital transformation journey. This is much broader than technology and encompasses the legislative, policy and cultural spaces as well. The Public Safety Interoperability Working Group (PSIWG) is an example of an early step along this journey.

Note that this may also include citizens where appropriate (e.g. victims).

Collaboration with OGDs will be key in sharing ideas and possible solutions to help digitize government services and transform our service delivery.
8. **How do you think technology fits in terms of rehabilitation? E.g. from face to face group based treatment to phone and video links now. Can any of that really be sustained or is face-to-face best practice for that?**

RN - Technology is a tool that should support rehabilitation, but should not be the only tool. There will be instances where technology can fill a gap that otherwise would provide a barrier. For example, an offender in an infirmary could participate in a group via technology.

SB - Technology must be part of the rehabilitation process, as offenders must be oriented toward the new/current technologies ‘of the day’ to facilitate their reintegration to society. This is especially important for offenders who have been in custody for longer periods of time, as the extent of technological change during their incarceration can be significant. Some examples of everyday technologies that have become integrated into everyday life over the years include ATM’s, the Internet, cell phones, online shopping, online job applications, and social media. Another example is that having a smart device is now arguably required to fully participate in modern society.

9. **To all speakers: Did you produced a kind of information-leaflet or such for the inmates, in order to inform about COVID19 and how this will influence the daily prison routines?**

RN - We produced posters that are placed within the housing units. We also produced video information that is presented via the in-prison television network.

10. **Has anyone successfully used technology to assist with staying connected with individuals post incarceration via a re-entry program?**

RN - We have not. I do know of two states using technology to connect their community-based officers (parole/probation) with their offenders. I would be happy to connect you.

SB - We do not believe a formal framework is in place at CSC; offenders are not provisioned with any CSC-issued IT equipment upon release. Parole officers do use cell phones and tablets.

11. **Video should not replace human contact but video can solve the old problem with offenders that have family on long distance. So use this window of opportunity for bringing prison service forward**

RN - We agree. Travel to visit an offender can be up to 900 miles within California. We plan to use video calling and electronic messaging to help increase the connections between offenders and family members when frequent travel is not feasible.

SB - Yes, CSC is exploring and deploying solutions. There are clear benefits to CSC, including security, cost, administration, etc.

12. **Are the robotic solutions in house, private sector or a hybrid?**

RN - We do not use robotics in California.
13. **How did you secure the computer terminals to prevent unauthorized access to the internet when using the zoom or tele-health?**

RN - We used Skype to implement video “visiting” during the pandemic. In that instance, we have staff members present to establish the connection, then we physically remove the keyboard from the machines (we used desktop machines rather than laptops). For our video court and telehealth, we have a similar process.

SB - IMS has information on this topic within our TRA’s, solution design docs, etc. (e.g. video visitation, OTN, WebRTC…) which we can discuss/share as appropriate.

14. **With increased remote work and new equipment in use… how much is cyber a concern? Not mentioned so far.**

RN - Absolutely a concern. We identified a significant increase in phishing and other cyber-attacks. Consequently, we improved our Multi-Factor Authentication process, implemented geo-fencing to limit access, improved our Data Loss Prevention solutions, and used VDI to enable access without the ability to download/print information.

SB - Very much so. In the short term, we are accepting higher levels of risk (e.g. employees homes not inspected, focus is more on getting things done and getting services delivered). In the longer term, there will need to be a sanity check and work on safeguards, etc. to ensure risk is driven down.