

# HOME NEWS TRIBUNE



February 2, 2009

## Middlesex County jail installs video equipment for inmates' psychiatric screenings

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Local police departments have found the waiting periods long, the manpower costs high and the safety issues real.

Individuals who are under arrest at the Middlesex County Adult Corrections Center require psychiatric screening prior to admission if they pose a threat to themselves. In the past, arresting officers would need to monitor them until they were medically cleared or admitted to an acute care facility.

Video conferencing equipment installed at the county jail is now making the evaluation process quicker, cheaper and safer. The Telepsychiatry Pilot Program, which has been in place since November 2008, allows prisoners requiring psychiatric screenings to be seen and evaluated in real time by on-call professionals in remote locations.

CFG Health Systems has been contracted by the county to perform the evaluations. The Marlton-based company performs more than 3,500 telepsychiatric evaluations annually and provides similar services for other correctional facilities in the state.

Nearly all the towns in the county are participating in the pilot program and share its cost of \$20,000 on a per capita arrangement. Rutgers University police department is also on board.

"This effort arose in conjunction with the Middlesex County Prosecutor Bruce Kaplan and conversations I was having with Middlesex Chief of Police Jim Benson," said South Brunswick Police Chief Raymond Hayducka, who also serves as President of the Middlesex County Chiefs of Police Association. Hayducka noted that a typical psychiatric evaluation may take eight hours and at times much longer — especially after hours and on weekends. A psychiatrist is available at the county jail during normal business hours.

"We have an obligation to the taxpayer to do whatever we can to control costs, and this is a perfect example of a shared service," Hayducka said.

Les Paschall, CEO of CFG, said either a psychiatrist or another person deemed appropriate to do the evaluation, which could be an advanced practice nurse, would perform the screenings which consist largely of a series of questions consistent with American Psychiatric Guidelines as well as state law screening guidelines. Paschall said "there is nothing lost" in the effectiveness of the screenings in using real-time video as opposed to evaluations done in the actual physical presence of qualified professionals.

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"There is plenty of data available to show that that type of evaluation is just as viable an evaluation as any other," said Paschall. "Truthfully, what is lost is the liability the taxpayers, the county, the jail and the care system may experience if there is a significant delay in care for that person. The patient/detainee/inmate is in a much better situation and the litigious side of things is reduced significantly.

"I would much rather have a person evaluated in 30 minutes than sit in an ER for hours and hours."

Tom Rosenthal, spokesman for the state Office of the Public Defender, said his office is "reserving full judgment on the pilot program until it can be fully evaluated." Rosenthal said the pilot program is "an innovative approach to providing an initial interview" and that his office was cooperating with county officials to support the program thus far.

"This is not to be construed as a full-fledged endorsement, it is a pilot program and we want to see full results," said Rosenthal. "It is not a substitute for someone who needs full service who is at risk. I'm sure we're not going to be the only ones reviewing the results."

The telepsychiatry system was recently unveiled to the press at the county jail where several county police chiefs, county freeholders and Warden Edmund C. Cicchi gathered to talk about its benefits. In the first five months of its use at the jail, five prisoners were evaluated. The estimated savings in police overtime was between \$16,000 and \$24,000 based on average wait times that would have been experienced had the prisoners been transported to a medical facility for evaluation.

Chief Hayducka noted that South Brunswick paid \$1,300 as its share of the pilot program which he said could practically pay for itself in just one extended visit when overtime costs are factored in over several shifts.

Freeholder Millie Scott, chairperson of the county's Committee of Law and Public safety, harkened back to her days as a sheriff's officer when she did prisoner transport for evaluations.

"When it comes to safety, we are very concerned about a person being around (an officer) and that person acting up," said Scott. "Money-wise, it's a savings. Safety-wise, it's a savings. This is long overdue."

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