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January 28, 2009

## County jail introduces video telepsychiatry

*Detainees can be evaluated at a central location; saves police time, money*

**BY JENNIFER AMATO Staff Writer**

**NORTH BRUNSWICK** — The Middlesex County Adult Correction Center unveiled its new video psychiatry system on Jan. 22.

The system enables psychiatrists to evaluate potential inmates via video conferencing equipment, thereby reducing the time local police officers spend transporting individuals from a local lock-up to a hospital or acute screening facility for evaluation.

"When officers are tied up transporting and monitoring these individuals, they are not patrolling our communities," said Middlesex County Freeholder Mildred S. Scott, the chair of the county's Law and Public Safety Committee. "This will especially help smaller police departments, who have fewer officers to fill these roles."

The pilot program, which focuses on individuals immediately following their arrests, is the first of its kind in New Jersey.

A municipal officer would transport an arrestee to the correction center and the individual would be brought to a small, secure room. By dialing into a centralized call center, the psychiatrist and the person can view each other via a television screen. The video transmission is in real time, and the picture and audio quality are clear.

The program is necessary because individuals who are arrested may need to be evaluated psychologically before being admitted to ensure they are not a threat to themselves or another inmate. Prior to this system, an officer would be assigned to wait with the individual, which became problematic after 4 p.m., on weekends or on holidays because of a lack of available services and the requirement of overtime pay.

Instead of taking eight or more hours, the new video system can be activated within about 30 minutes of a request, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, by on-call telepsychiatrists who are in a secure location in their own home or at a centralized site.

The psychiatrists can make an evaluation and can prescribe medication, if needed. They can also determine if a prisoner is exaggerating an unwarranted visit to a health center.

"This is long overdue. I think moneywise it is a savings, and I think safety-wise it is a savings," Scott said.

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"Prior to this system being in place, care and collaboration wasn't being given. This is a win-win-win situation," said Lee Paschall, the CEO of CFG Health Systems.

The video system officially took effect Nov. 7 in Monroe Township. In the first month of use, five prisoners were evaluated by medical personnel from CFG using the telepsychiatry services, resulting in an estimated savings in police overtime of \$16,000 to \$24,000, based on the average wait times that would have been experienced had the prisoners been transported to a medical facility for evaluation.

"In these tough economic times, government must find solutions that provide superior services at a reduced cost to taxpayers. CFG's telepsychiatry program comes through for Middlesex County police departments in both categories," said Freeholder Deputy Director Christopher D. Rafano.

Paschall also stated that his company has data showing that "there is nothing lost" by the system because the one-on-one evaluation is done remotely instead of in-person.

"There is a loss if there is a significant delay of care," he said. "I'd much rather have a person evaluated in 30 minutes than go sit in an [emergency room] for hours and hours."

Also, Brian Levin, the director of telemedicine for CFG, said that any detainee who needs more serious care would be transported to the appropriate facility. However, he said that to date, there has been about one inmate per week admitted under the program, but no one has been sent away from the facility for a higher level of care.

South Brunswick Police Chief Raymond Hayducka, who is also the president of the Middlesex County Chiefs of Police Association, was instrumental in bringing the county's police departments — including Rutgers University but not Piscataway because it has its own agreement with UMDNJ — on board.

"This program is ideal for municipal departments not only because it increases public safety, but it does so by saving the public money," he said. "In these economic times, if we can operate more economically and efficiently, I think we have an obligation to do so."

The total cost for the pilot program is \$20,000, which was divided among each municipality per capita and per expected use.

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