

Virtual Visitation Program Uses Video Conferencing to Strengthen Prisoner Contacts With Families and Children

by Melissa Crabbe*

In an office in the Spring Garden district of Philadelphia, a child blows out candles on a birthday cake. Next to her, her mother and sisters clap and sing. Her father, dressed in the "cocoa brown" overalls issued prisoners in Pennsylvania, smiles from the television monitor. So do a correctional officer and the office staff.

What's Going On?

Criminal justice policy makers, always on the lookout for ways to save time and headaches in dealing with offenders, have found considerable inspiration in the recent availability of video conferencing technology, sometimes to the dismay of prisoner advocates and civil libertarians.

In some jurisdictions, inmates attend court hearings by video conference, reducing the costs and risks of transporting them to court, while preventing them from attending in person, which, until recently, was considered an inviolable legal right. The possibility of video conferencing certain inmate medical examinations has also been discussed—something that might make specialist consultations available more cheaply and easily, but, nonetheless, not a happy prospect for those already worried about the quality of medical treatment in prisons.

And then there's the question of visits. For many prisoners, visits from friends and family are at the center of their emotional lives. Yet for staff in many prisons, at least some of the time, face-to-face "contact" visits are seen as a nuisance, providing opportunities for smuggling and other security breaches. I have heard from correctional officers, who have seen little visitation stations with small, low-quality monitors marketed at the American Correctional Association convention, who welcome the advent of video conferencing technology as a chance to do away with *all* contact visits.

Offenders, their advocates and family members argue that using video visits instead of contact visits snaps yet another

thread—the precious chance to hug and talk—among the few ties that bind prisoners to loved ones on the outside. Tilda Sosaya described vividly the frustrating experience of traveling hours through New Mexico for a conversation with her son over a small, blurry, black and white television screen in the Sept./Oct. 2001 issue of Offender Program Reports.

So corrections professionals and inmate advocates alike might meet with skepticism the suggestion that video conferencing can be used to *increase* inmate-family contact, including face- to-face visits, and to *strengthen* inmate connections to the outside world.

Pennsylvania Program for Virtual Visits

But that is exactly what is happening in Pennsylvania's Family Virtual Visitation Program, a partnership between the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (DOC) and the Pennsylvania Prison Society, the nation's oldest organization (founded in 1787) advocating on behalf of individuals and families in crisis due to incarceration. The program is funded through a three-year federal grant through the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency.

As in many states, the vast majority of Pennsylvania's prisoners come from a handful of urban communities. More than 45% of the state's 39,000-plus inmates are originally from the Philadelphia area; an additional 10% of inmates are originally from Allegheny County, where Pittsburgh is located.

Meanwhile, in recent years, rural communities in Pennsylvania have welcomed new prisons as sources of economic growth, while urban communities have resisted attempts to locate new prisons in their midst. Consequently, a trip to many state prisons requires a drive of from six to 18 hours round trip from Philadelphia or Pittsburgh, not including the actual visit. On top of the difficulty and expense of such a journey—prohibitive for many inmate's families—the drive is through countryside where the population is nearly all white, something that can make minority visitors from urban areas uncomfortable.

These facts—along with the DOC's former practice, reversed in 2001, of incarcerating inmates far from home and encour-

aging them to earn their way to less remote areas through good behavior—has contributed to a situation in which many Pennsylvania inmates, like inmates in many states, do not receive regular visits.

But since June 2001, at least some of them have had virtual visits. Mothers and fathers, husbands and wives, sons and daughters have been able to come to the Prison Society's offices and chat with their incarcerated loved one on a large television monitor, at no cost, in comfortable rooms furnished with sofas, easy chairs, books and toys. To date, 141 inmates have participated in a total of 620 virtual visits. In addition, the virtual visits have prompted personal visits to at least 30 of those inmates, using the Prison Society's low-cost bus service, also run in partnership with the DOC.

Helping Grow Family Relationships

Both virtual visitation and the bus service are part of a DOC effort, developed over the past few years, to help sustain and grow family relationships during incarceration. Also included in the effort are parenting support groups provided by Parents Anonymous, and parenting classes, provided by the Prison Society, DOC staff and other agencies.

Virtual visitation is currently available in four of the state's 26 prisons from a visitation site in Philadelphia. In the next few months, it will be expanded to include four more prisons and, then, a second visitation site in Pittsburgh. (Bus service is also available from Pittsburgh.) Both women's prisons and an institution for youthful offenders convicted in adult courts are included.

Positive Feedback

While the program, just entering its second year of operation, has not yet been formally evaluated, corrections administrators, prisoners, their family members, and Prison Society staff have no shortage of positive things to say about it. "This program has enhanced visits," said Janine Christ, former parenting director for the state prison in Cambridge Springs. "What virtual visitation does is provide a catalyst for contact visits, for telephone conversations. The inmates go out walking on a cloud because they've had a chance to be with their families."

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The Prison Society, with its history of providing services to prisoners' families, proposed the program because we believed it would be beneficial for both inmates, their children, and other family members. Research has shown that inmates who maintain strong family relationships during incarceration can be more successful in staying crime-free after release than those who become isolated. And we feel that, for children of incarcerated parents, virtual visits may help address feelings of abandonment and anger stemming from their parent's incarceration.

The DOC supports virtual visitation for many of the same reasons. "The program allows inmates to re-establish their family bonds, bonds that are vital to inmates' re-entry into society once they are released from prison," said Pennsylvania's Corrections Secretary Jeffrey Beard.

Program's Use as an Inmate Management Tool

The privilege of participating in the virtual visitation program may also be an effective inmate management tool. At any rate that is what DOC Research and Evaluation Analyst Bethany Gardner, is hoping. "We will be looking at the [participants'] number of misconducts and custody level, as well as the housing performance, work performance and program performance from latest reclassification," says Gardner.

Anecdotally, the program may already be having the desired effect. "Unit Managers are observing better behavior from those inmates involved in the program on the housing unit," said Jack Sommers, former corrections classification and program manager for the state prison in Coal Township.

Positive Reaction From Inmates

Evaluators will also be looking at pre- and post-visit measures of inmates' sense of loneliness and sense of connection to their families in the hope that they will be able to demonstrate that the program has enhanced their well-being. Again, early feedback from inmates indicates success. "I've been incarcerated eight and one half years and it has been a burden on my family maintaining a good bond with me," wrote one man. "From the \$15 per call phone rate, to the \$40 per person bus ride, it has been extremely difficult for my family and I to see and talk to each other. As a matter of fact, for about a year letters were our only form of communication. But since the cre-

ation of the Virtual Visitation Program and the Family Transportation Service, I've developed a stronger relationship with the people I love."

Another male inmate wrote, "I love this [virtual] visit because I have seen my granddaughter for the first time. I would like to thank you all for having this service."

The family members who come to our offices also have had positive things to say. "This is the best thing that happened to me in my situation," said one mother, whose son is serving a life sentence and who had not seen her son for three years prior to becoming involved in the program. "Virtual visitation helps my son because he lost his father, and it was his father who drove us for visits."

Virtual visits are taped temporarily for security screening, after which the tape is re-used. In one tragic instance, an inmate's daughter, whom she had not seen for two years, was killed in a car crash not long after a Virtual Visit. "We were able to allow her to watch that video. There are only five minutes left of the tape, and we keep it for her. She has thanked us numerous times."

As program director for the Prison Society, I can say that the response to virtual visitation has been even better than we could have imagined. Visitors at our office have included children who have never seen their parents; mothers who have not seen their incarcerated child for half a dozen years; aging parents and grandparents whose health problems prevent them from traveling; large families with many children; and people who don't have the means to travel or who are intimidated by the idea of visiting a prison.

How Participants Are Chosen

Consistent with the goal of strengthening family ties, priority for virtual visitation participation is given to inmates who have participated in parenting skills classes and other family-oriented programs available at the institutions. Also, since neither the Prison Society nor the DOC wants families to use the program instead of traveling to the prison, inmates who have not received visits in the past year are given priority when participants are selected. Moreover, virtual visits are not counted against the inmate's monthly quota of visits—an important point, since one of our hopes is that families, encouraged by a virtual visit, will find a way to visit in person.

The response from corrections staff and administration, from correctional officers on up, has also been enthusiastic. "Correctional officers [are] taking pride in their work

and doing everything they can to ensure the program is a success," Sommers said.

Not An Easy Start

Agreement among inmates and their family members, their advocates, and corrections officials is probably rare. The fact that there is such strong support for virtual visitation within all these groups might give the impression that the potential benefits of the program were obvious from the start.

Far from it. Though the Prison Society initially submitted its proposal for virtual visitation in 1998, it took at least two years for the project to be approved by PCCD and the DOC. As the program start date neared, anxieties emerged.

Our staff had to work with some of our board members to reassure them that participation in the program would not diminish our capacity to advocate on behalf of inmates, and that the Prison Society was not playing into a DOC plan to replace contact visits with virtual visits—a concern very much shared by our inmate constituency. In routine meetings with inmates on other matters, our executive director and additional key staff were barraged by questions from men and women fearful that their contact visits would be jeopardized. These were reasonable fears. At the time, broad new visiting restrictions had been recently implemented as a result of a case in which an inmate had, during a contact visit, sexually abused a young girl with the complicity of her adult guardian. Also, DOC had been looking at closing visiting rooms during under-utilized times to save on labor costs.

Three things reassured us: (1) the transportation program was being planned at the same time, (2) we were an integral part of the design and implementation of the program, and (3) the attitude of the corrections administrators we met with monthly in order to work out program details. As inmate advocates, we were surprised and impressed by the compassion and sympathy of the DOC staff who were part of the planning process, and by the fact that many of their concerns about the program were similar to ours.

Virtual Visits for Sex Offenders

For example, the planning group struggled over the question of whether to allow sex offenders to participate—a particularly sensitive question in light of the recent abuse case. DOC policy, of course, prohibits sex offenders from ever receiving visits from children they victimized. Under a more recent policy, they are further prohibited

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from having contact visits with any minors, even in cases in which the incarcerating offense was not against a minor and in which their own children may have been visiting for many years without incident.

Virtual visits, obviously, are not contact visits, but the planning group had difficulty deciding whether participation by sex offenders should be allowed. Prison Society staff and DOC staff spoke on both sides of the issue. On the one hand, some members of the group were concerned that even one incident would jeopardize the entire program. Others felt strongly that maintaining links to their family can be just as beneficial for sex offenders as for any other type of inmate, and that children of sex offenders, provided they have not been abused themselves, need contact with their parents as much as any other children. After much discussion, and an initial decision to leave sex offenders out during the pilot period, a high level DOC administrator ruled decisively that they should be included. In the end, the benefits of program participation outweighed the risks, given that no physical contact occurs, visits are supervised on both ends, and videos of visits are screened.

Biggest Obstacles Overcome

This experience helped develop trust on both sides, which was a good thing because some of the biggest hurdles were yet to come. Working out a suitable schedule taking into account the various prison's visiting hours, count time and staff availability turned out to be an ongoing struggle. On our end, the biggest challenge was finding a program coordinator with the

right combination of excellent administrative skills (to track service levels, communicate effectively with prison staff, and check visitors' identification and paperwork as they come in), warm personality, and the confidence to act as an enforcer when necessary.

Achieving our targeted number of visits has also been a challenge. During our pilot year, we arbitrarily set a target of 25 visits per week, for a total of 100 visits per month. So far most of our best weeks have only been about four-fifths of the way there, though we are improving. We needed a larger pool of participating inmates than we had planned in order to achieve the desired number of visits. Strengthening our communication with families has also been important; at first, some families thought the program consisted of viewing pre-recorded video messages. We are also expanding our hours to include more family-friendly evening and weekend slots, thanks to an increase in the grant amount as well as DOC support this year.

Still, between 10 and 20% of scheduled visits are cancelled, usually by family members due to transportation problems and schedule conflicts, and occasionally by the institutions because of short staff or security concerns. And, while the program has been remarkably free of technical difficulties, the virtual visits were unavailable at one prison for several weeks in July 2002 because the high-capacity communication lines necessary for video conferencing were unavailable due provider problems. Also, a prison in the northeast corner of Pennsylvania, originally included in the expansion

plan, was dropped because it was so remote that the lines could not be installed.

Planning for Future Challenges

Prison Society and DOC staff are working to plan for other difficulties that may emerge down the road, such as funding. The PCCD grant will run out in two more years, and at a time when even corrections is affected by shrinking state budgets, the future of a program that is more expensive than ordinary visitation, is not clear. The average virtual visit costs several hundred dollars, and more if DOC and in-kind costs are taken into account.

Part of the success of the program is that few, if any, negative incidents have taken place in the first year of operation. DOC staff who screen the visitation videos have noted minor security concerns—such as a family bringing a camera into a visit—but nothing serious has emerged. And in no instance has an inmate leaving a virtual visit created a disturbance in the institution.

"I can say that every woman who walked out of a virtual visit was happy and extremely grateful," said Janine Christ. "But at some point someone's not going to have a pleasant visit and will leave upset. What will happen then?" The concern is valid, since, in corrections, just one problematic situation can effectively cancel a resource for the entire population.

Meanwhile, we at the Prison Society take satisfaction in the laughter that our visiting room walls cannot contain, and in the fact that we have learned that video conferencing, as well as keeping people apart, can also bring people together. ■



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