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DNA Technology to combat multi-million dollar DOC contraband problem

INDIANAPOLIS – Noting that personnel costs alone are about \$8M a year to check inmates, visitors and supplies for illegal contraband, Indiana Department of Correction Commissioner Edward Buss plans to use DNA technology to fight back.

Beginning this month, Touch DNA technology will be used analyze trace DNA samples from prison contraband through a pilot project with Indianapolis-based Forensic ID. The grant-funded project, believed to be the first of its kind nationwide, will be used at all Indiana DOC facilities.

Correctional facilities across the country are combatting the escalating price tag of illegal and dangerous contraband in prisons. They are using everything from high-priced, cell-phone sniffing dogs (New Jersey, Maryland and Virginia) to millimeter wave, a full body scan technology that can spot small amounts of drugs (Philadelphia).

“Illegal cell phones are a growing problem for prisons everywhere; Indiana is no exception,” said Commissioner Buss. Earlier this month, 19 people were charged with conspiracy to distribute methamphetamine; their alleged ringleader is a DOC inmate in New Castle who is accused of running the operation from inside prison walls using a cell phone. (Wesley S. Hammond is serving a 15 year drug dealing sentence.)

Prison officials estimate the cost of a black market phone can range from \$300 for a simple cell phone up to \$1,000 for a smart phone. “An inmate with a cell phone that is basically a mini-computer with Internet access can do great damage. Their connection and communications with the outside world is unfettered. They can and do continue to commit crimes ranging from drug dealing to witness intimidation,” Commissioner Buss said.

In February, two Indianapolis women were charged for allegedly attempting to smuggle marijuana, cocaine and three cell phones into a Pendleton DOC facility to an inmate serving a 40-year sentence for cocaine dealing. (Charles Westmoreland began serving his sentence in October 2009.)

Other heavily trafficked items include tobacco and weapons, or materials to make weapons, commonly known as shanks. And there is a huge health care price tag for the state due to illegal cigarettes and weapons.

34 state prisons, including Indiana, ban smoking by inmates and employees. It is undisputed that smoking increases health care costs at state prisons. Ohio officials tracked health costs the first year it banned smoking at its correctional facilities and point to a \$90,000 savings over a three month period by lowering the need for inhalant drugs for smoking-related respiratory problems such as asthma, emphysema and bronchitis. (The Columbus Dispatch, *In prisons, tobacco now contraband*, 2/28/10)

While tobacco bans save the state money in health costs, they also increase trafficking. Prison officials say that cigarettes sell for as much as \$10.00 each or \$200 for a pack. Loose tobacco can sell for as much as \$300.

Reducing illegal weapons can potentially reduce costs associated with assaults -- inmate on inmate and inmate on correctional officer -- that include the health care cost of physical injuries, cost of the investigation and prosecution of offenders, and personnel costs related to down time from injuries. For 2009, DOC had 111 inmate on inmate assaults with serious injury, 54 Inmate on staff assaults with serious injury and seized 990 illegal weapons from inmates.

In January a Pendleton inmate was charged with allegedly murdering a fellow inmate using a homemade shank; he was previously charged in 2009 with possession of a “knife-like” weapon. Two shanks were found hidden in a light fixture in his cell.

Madison County Prosecutor Thomas Broderick, Jr., noted that possession cases in prisons can be problematic, as in the case of the hidden shanks, as the prosecution must prove the inmate had knowledge of the illegal contraband.

"DNA evidence removes any doubt of knowledge," said Vincent I. Perez, a former police officer and vice president of Forensic ID. "It will aid in the successful prosecution of inmates and the successful prosecution of anyone who attempts to smuggle illegal contraband into our state prisons," he said.

Perez will begin training Indiana DOC Correctional officers this week in the use of its DNA recovery kits. "Even the smallest amount of DNA left on the contraband can be analyzed, including skin cells, saliva, and perspiration," he said.

Perez noted that Indiana law allows for DNA to be collected from anyone convicted of a felony. "We have the DNA in a database, we have the contraband, and we have the technology to potentially identify the source of the contraband. We expect the results in the coming months to show we've decreased smuggling, reduced operating costs related to contraband, and created a more secure and safe correctional environment for inmates, visitors and personnel," he added.

Types of Prison Contraband:

- Alcohol
- Cash (that can lead to drug deals, extortion, gambling, bribery, violence, robbery and pre-planning for escape)
- Cell phones and smart phones
- Drugs (including illegal and prescription drugs)
- Escape items (ropes, plans, tools, money and street clothes)
- Flammable liquids
- Handcuff keys
- Lighters and matches
- Tobacco
- Weapons and materials that can be used to make shanks, including non-metallic items made of wood or glass

Forensic ID is an Indianapolis-based technology company that specializes in Touch DNA recovery products and services that aid law enforcement, prosecutors and correctional officers in reducing crime. Trigger ID™® and 1st Responder ID™® are innovative recovery products developed by the company that collect trace DNA evidence from guns and property crime scenes. For more information go forensicid.net.