



James M. Jeffords Center's  
*Vermont Legislative Research Service*



Prison Video Conferencing

With

be tailored to a particular facilities needs.<sup>6</sup> They can also enable a prison to assess user fees for the service to the convict or their family much like a phone call would work in the facility.<sup>7</sup>

A Minneapolis based company Renovo Software appears to be a leading provider of video visitation services. The company offers a range of products and services specially designed for correctional facilities. Renovo currently has customers across 21 states, mostly local governments (counties), and some are individual facilities.<sup>8</sup>

The ability for incarcerated parents to virtually communicate with their children is a relatively recent development. Corrections administrators should be cognizant that traditional contact visitation is the best means of communication between children and their incarcerated parent; however, in many circumstances it is impractical for families to visit their loved ones in prison. Virtual visitation helps if the prison is too far, transportation is too expensive, or the prison environment is inappropriate for a child. In person visitation is regarded as the most effective form of child incarcerated parent visitation.<sup>9</sup> Virtual visitation should not replace in person visitation but it could increase the overall contact between the parent and their child.<sup>10</sup> Video conferencing should supplement in person visitation if the circumstances don't permit children to visit their incarcerated parents at the facility. Through virtual visitation incarcerated parents are given the ability to interact with their children in the child's own environment.<sup>11</sup> Prisoners who manage to maintain strong ties with their families tend to re enter society with better success and have a lower rate of recidivism.<sup>12</sup> A number of states and counties have already implemented video conferencing in their jails and prisons for a variety of uses:

## Pennsylvania

The Pennsylvania Prison Society, in cooperation with the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, piloted a video conferencing program in 2001 in four of the state's prisons. This program was the first of its kind in the U.S. and has since been extended to facilities throughout

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<sup>6</sup> Lynn Marotta, "Beyond the boardroom how videoconferencing companies are using their solutions to benefit our society," accessed February 23, 2011, <http://www.videoconferencingguide.com/videoconferencingcompanies.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> Jessica Gresko, "Families visit prison from comfort of their homes," CorrectionsOne, accessed February 23, 2011, [http://www.correctionsone.com/products/corrections/articles/1852337\\_Families\\_visit\\_prison\\_from\\_comfort\\_of\\_their\\_homes/](http://www.correctionsone.com/products/corrections/articles/1852337_Families_visit_prison_from_comfort_of_their_homes/).

<sup>8</sup> Renovo Software, "Customers: Video Visitation," accessed February 23, 2011, <http://www.renovosoftware.com/about/customers/>.

<sup>9</sup> "Connecting children with incarcerated parents," *Child Protection Best Practices Bulletin*, accessed February 17, 2011, <http://www.f2f.ca.gov/res/pdf/ChildProtectionBPBulletins.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> FindLaw, "Virtual visitation: New Jersey and the option to be a plug in parent," accessed on February 22, 2011, <http://knowledgebase.findlaw.com/kb/2010/Mar/98169.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Jessica Gresko, "Families visit prison from comfort of their homes," CorrectionsOne, accessed February 23, 2011, [http://www.correctionsone.com/products/corrections/articles/1852337\\_Families\\_visit\\_prison\\_from\\_comfort\\_of\\_their\\_homes/](http://www.correctionsone.com/products/corrections/articles/1852337_Families_visit_prison_from_comfort_of_their_homes/).

<sup>12</sup> Jeffrey M. Leving, "Illinois virtual visitation for incarcerated fathers," Leving's Divorce Magazine, accessed on February 22, 2011, [http://divorcemagazine.wordpress.com/2009/03/31/illinois\\_virtual\\_visitation\\_for\\_incarcerated\\_fathers/](http://divorcemagazine.wordpress.com/2009/03/31/illinois_virtual_visitation_for_incarcerated_fathers/).

the state. Families can

transport a prisoner.

An analysis of the costs of County investments in video conferencing reveals a three pronged cost plan for the installation of units in courthouses and jails and for general maintenance.<sup>24</sup>

*Investment at the Courthouse*

**Total Cost of Court Unit \$16,750**

Mobile Videoconferencing Unit \$14,000

Wiring/Installation \$2,000

Setup of Phone/Fax Lines \$750

*Investment in the Jail*

**Total Cost of Jail Unit \$14,750**

Stationary Videoconferencing Unit \$12,000

Wiring/Installation \$2,000

Setup of Phone/Fax Lines \$750

Maintenance costs of a video conferencing unit are estimated at \$2,000 per unit per year. A one year maintenance package for the courthouse and jail represent a \$4,000 investment, making the grand total for a complete county system \$35,500 for the state of Wisconsin. The cost benefit analysis for video conferencing evaluates the returns on investment and the payback time of the video conferencing system. For the state of Wisconsin the expected returns for the installation of video conferencing systems in 72 counties is estimated at 159% in the first year. The expected payback time on the investment for all 72 counties would be 0.53 years or about 6 months. The data indicate the possibility for substantial savings for county and state program costs through the investment in videoconferencing in courts, jails, and correctional institutions.<sup>25</sup>

## Florida

In Florida, a program called Reading and Family Ties allows incarcerated mothers to read stories to their children using live video via the Internet. The program has been credited with enhancing family unity, easing inmates' transition back to society, and improving literacy for both parents and children.<sup>26</sup>

The cost to inmates and their families to use the video visitation service is typically cheaper than the rate of a collect call from the corrections facility. Rockville, Indiana prison inmates are charged \$12.50 for a 30 minute visit, compared to the \$15 for a 30 minute local call. Even the costs of that facilities' video conferencing equipment was covered entirely by the vendor,

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<sup>24</sup> Wisconsin Court System, "Cost savings from Videoconferencing," accessed February 23, 2011, <http://www.wicourts.gov/about/committees/ppacvidconf.htm>.

<sup>25</sup> Wisconsin Court System, "Cost savings from Videoconferencing," accessed February 23, 2011, <http://www.wicourts.gov/about/committees/ppacvidconf.htm>.

<sup>26</sup> Jeffrey M. Leving, "Illinois Virtual Visitation for Incarcerated Fathers," accessed on February 18, 2011, <http://www.dadsrights.com/resourcecenter/article/IllinoisVirtualVisitationforIncarceratedFathers.html>.

Florida based JPay. JPay covered the cost of the kiosks and installation with no expense to the state.<sup>27</sup>

### **Further Applications of Video Conferencing**

Other applications for virtual visitation in terms of correctional facilities and courts are but not limited to: telemedicine for inmates, expediting cases faster through the system, scheduling and conducting hearings more efficiently, arraignment proceedings, parole hearings, consideration of appeals, mental health hearings, attorney consultations, and inmate rehabilitation programs.<sup>28</sup> After implementing video conferencing technology in Cuyahoga County, Ohio it was reported that arraignments, sentencing, search warrants, judicial release, and pretrial conferences accounted for 70.6% of their total video conferencing use.<sup>29</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Implementing video conferencing programs may save prisons time and money. Video conferencing programs can pay for themselves and may help raise revenue over time for prisons through user (raise01Tf0.0005Tc0.2250Td(raise)Tj/C2\_01Tf0sion)4c1.460Tdj/(22Td(and)Tj/C2\_01hc0.2