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Re-Entry & Recidivism

Not a luxury: How technology can protect inmate mental health

Digital technologies allow prison-involved individuals and their families the tools they need to maintain close relationships despite physical distance

December 12, 2023 12:16 PM



Florida Department of Corrections

By Christopher Ditto

Mental health is one of the biggest obstacles for those serving time. Studies show that about two in five incarcerated individuals have a history of mental illness — approximately twice the national average. Many of the hallmarks that define the modern incarceration system experience, including disconnection from family, loss of autonomy, boredom and lack of purpose, are the same conditions that are linked to negative mental health outcomes.

But instead of being prepared for success post-release, many prisoners are left to navigate crucial reintegration elements, such as securing employment and housing on their own — while struggling with mental health challenges that may have been exacerbated during their time in the incarceration system. However, a growing awareness of the [positive impact](#) that technology can have on incarcerated individuals is beginning to change this narrative.

The impact of isolation

Incarceration is an intrinsically isolating experience. Individuals are removed from their homes and families, all but erasing the social support and community. These connections are a prominent factor in an individual's psychological well-being, and losing access to them all at once when entering the penal system can be a very difficult transition. Separation from family and friends has emerged as a major stressor for incarcerated individuals and is associated with psychological distress. Many describe this separation as the most difficult part of incarceration.

This disconnection can be further strained by the lack of accessible communication options. Family members may not have the time or resources to travel to the correctional facility during visiting hours, and difficulty communicating and coordinating can add stress to inmates' relationships with family and friends. Traditional communication avenues are limited to onsite visits, which may be limited to specific time windows on just a few days of the week; outbound-only calls from shared correctional telephones; and facility-reviewed postal mail, which can easily take a week for a single exchange. Justice-involved individuals are all too often left with strained relationships to the very support network that is crucial for successful reintegration.

The benefits of digital technologies

Digital technologies, such as text and video messages and video visitation, offer prison-involved individuals and their families the tools they need to maintain close relationships despite physical distance. Tablets allow prisoners access to a range of virtual communication options, which provide the flexibility and consistency needed to maintain strong ties with their support network. These opportunities are especially important for prisoners with children, providing them the opportunity to be more actively involved in their children's lives. Messaging options also allow for easier communication with family members who have tight schedules or who work jobs which they are unable to accept

phone calls during. Shared photos and video messages can help to remind incarcerated individuals that they have loved ones who care about them.

With traditional options, incoming mail is the only means of communication that can be initiated by the incarcerated individual's family or friends. Both digital messaging and some of the new video visitation systems allow communication to be initiated by the family member, which can have a tremendous impact on mental health. Knowing that a message could arrive at any time introduces an element of hope into the daily experience of incarceration.

In addition, and sometimes as a corollary result of their isolation, incarcerated individuals often face crippling boredom and purposelessness that contributes to poor mental health. Prisoners often have nothing with which to fill long hours, days or even years. This can lead to an increase in aggressive behavior due to a dilated perception of time as monotonous days blend into monotonous months.

Providing prisoners with access to tablets filled with applications tailored towards their needs is a powerful way to mitigate boredom and instill purpose, creating safer, more productive facilities for inmates and staff. Facilities that have implemented tablets, for instance, have recorded a [reduction in violence](#) among prisoners.

Applications include entertainment offerings that allow incarcerated individuals the opportunity to break up long days with the sights and sounds of a different world. Music is an especially effective option for combating boredom and idleness. Prisoners have noted that [access to entertainment](#) alleviates the stress of incarceration, creating a more peaceful atmosphere.

Educational resources and vocational training also give prisoners a constructive way to structure their time and provide hope for the future and a purpose to work toward. [Equipping the incarcerated](#) for life after release is a vital, but all-too-often overlooked, part of the justice system. Even skeptical prison officials, however, have come to [recognize the impact](#) of educational resources in cutting down idleness and instilling hope. Prisoners themselves report that these self-guided education and employment tools increase their optimism about the future and help to counteract depression. No one should have to feel hopeless. Giving prisoners access to these resources helps to improve their mental health by giving them hope and an enhanced sense of self-esteem, which are essential to life both during and after incarceration.

Newer prison technology is both directly and indirectly helping to improve the mental health of justice-involved individuals. Providing resources that facilitate connection to their support systems and applications help them remain engaged during their time in the incarceration system are ways to help prevent their mental health from deteriorating, but technology can also provide them with health resources, counseling services and stress relief to incarcerated individuals facing a torrent of stressors every day. We all need a little help sometimes, and incarcerated individuals are no exception. Prioritizing their mental and emotional well-being is essential to a strong justice system that strives for rehabilitation and reintegration.

The total loss of autonomy and purpose can lead to the all-too-common combination of powerlessness and despair, driving incarcerated individuals to reckless or violent behavior toward those around them. These feelings are detrimental to the rehabilitation and reintegration process and can increase the risk of recidivism, as inmates are not afforded the opportunity to maintain stability and connection. Tablets' ability to fight boredom and instill purpose is an essential component to prioritizing the safety and well-being of every individual within a correctional facility.

Utilizing technology in prisons is about transforming lives and communities as the justice involved are reminded that their lives are full of significance and potential. Strong relationships, job training and hope – they're all wrapped up in a simple tablet. Prisoners should never be left to struggle with mental health issues on their own. Instead, we must understand how technology can provide opportunities and instill the hope central to successful rehabilitation and reintegration. Technology is the future for everyone, regardless of their past. Giving justice-involved individuals a true second chance starts while they are still serving time. If we want justice for all, we can't leave prisoners behind.

About the author

Christopher Ditto is the vice president of research and development at ViaPath Technologies, a global corrections technology leader that facilitates successful reintegration for incarcerated individuals.

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