

Controlling Contraband

By Gregory Gearhart

A correctional officer encounters an inmate who just stabbed another inmate with a homemade shank; correctional officers find an inmate who has committed suicide or has died of an overdose of illicit drugs; handmade weapons such as knives or guns are smuggled in, and drugs are smuggled or mailed into the jail facility by family or friends. These are examples of what jails across America encounter on a daily basis.

Jail staff must be as cunning as the inmates they watch over when it pertains to controlling contraband in a correctional facility. The old adage, "When inmates have time on their hands, contraband will be present," could not be more true. Controlling contraband is often a matter of life and death, not only for inmates but for the staff who watch over them. When a death occurs, it takes a toll on officers. There is always second-guessing. They wonder what they could have done to prevent the death. The correctional officer is also the victim in these circumstances.

How can jail officials and staff prevent contraband from entering their facility? Contraband control begins at an inmate's intake. Recent circuit court rulings have made detection of contraband more difficult, curtailing the strip-searching of inmates without cause. A recent ruling by the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals further curtailed strip searches when it ruled that a body-cavity search violated the rights of a woman because there was no reasonable suspicion that she had concealed drugs or other contraband, even though she had been arrested for a misdemeanor drug charge. The decision was handed down on April 20, 2006, in *Way v. County of Ventura*. Decisions such as these further impede the ability to control contraband in jails. Correctional officers must be diligent in searching newly arrested inmates. When impeded by strip-search rulings, a thorough pat search should be followed by having the arrestee remove clothing down to the underwear and walk through a metal detector.

Identifying and Addressing Problem Areas

Officials at the Pima County Adult Detention Center in Tucson, Ariz., noticed that there was an abundance of drugs and marijuana being found by officers in the intake housing unit. Newly arrested inmates were processed in the identification/intake unit dressed in jail clothes and

moved to the intake housing unit located in the main part of the detention facility. Staff were informed that misdemeanor arrestees were purposely getting arrested and smuggling drugs to friends who were already in jail.

During this same time, the jail was in the process of asking for a bond issue to build an addition to the jail. The bond passed, and corrections officials planned a new ID/intake unit that was separate from the main jail, with a video court attached that allowed releases without the arrestee ever entering any other part of the jail.

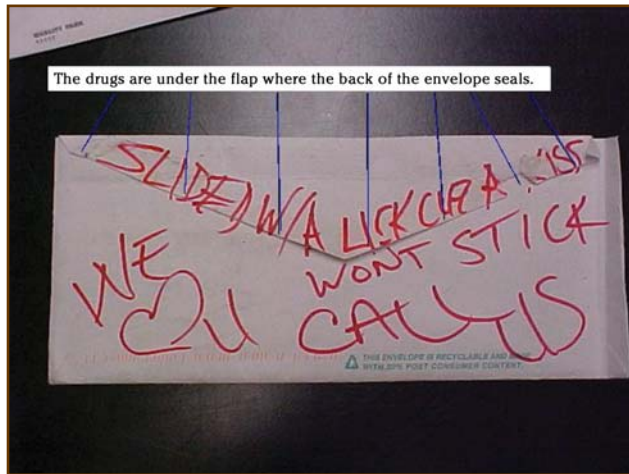
The new unit, as anticipated, meant a significant decrease in drugs being detected in the housing units; the facility had closed another avenue of drug smuggling.

ID/booking/intake units that are detached from the housing units allow isolation of inmates from the rest of the correctional population. Any organization considering a new facility should use this architectural concept. This alleviates the problems of contraband smuggling encountered when newly arrested inmates are housed in an area where they have access to other inmates.

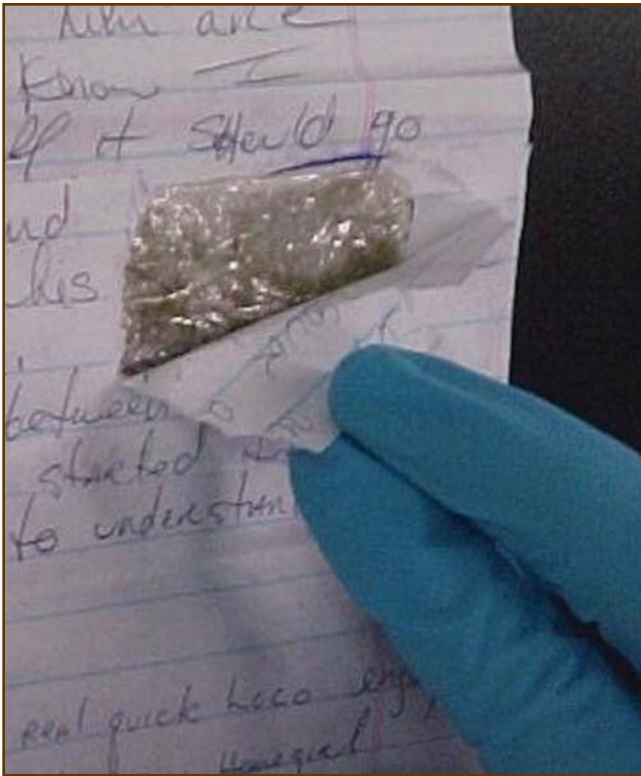
Programs held in a common area of the facility also

were identified as a hub for drug smuggling among inmates. These programs allowed inmates from different housing units to congregate together for the purpose of rehabilitation. Inmates would hide contraband on their person and pass it on to inmates from the other units. They also used these programs to pass on gang information as well as orders to assault certain inmates. To curtail this, staff no longer allow inmates from different housing units to attend programs together.

Nuisance contraband has always been a problem for correctional facilities. Inmates store excess issue sheets, pillowcases, issued clothing, sugar, and food such as fruit and bread. To the layman this may not seem to be a serious issue. To the corrections professional, however, this is escape material and the makings of a homemade alcohol product. Intoxicated inmates present a serious threat to the security of the facility and the safety of staff and other inmates. Understaffing has been an ongoing problem for law enforcement agencies and a particular one for correctional agencies; they all compete for the same pool of people. The luxury of a shakedown crew solely dedicated to the job of shaking down the housing units and common areas of the facility is out of the question.



Photos by Sgt. Sean Stewart



Fake legal mail containing marijuana is pasted between two sheets of paper.

To save overtime costs, many correctional facilities have disbanded these shakedown crews and, as a consequence, have experienced a rise in contraband in their jails. Pima County is no exception. As an alternative to conducting shakedowns only on a reactive basis or upon suspicion, a Pima County sergeant proposed a way of conducting regular shakedowns while keeping overtime to a minimum. Certain officers would be allowed to volunteer for a shakedown team. These officers would be exempt from attending briefings. They would use the overlapping times normally spent in briefing (45 minutes) to conduct shakedowns of a certain area within the jail. The result has been the detection of a large amount of nuisance and dangerous contraband during the past year. Recent audits of contraband results show that very little in the way of contraband is now being detected. Inmates know they will have their areas searched and, as a result, have stopped hoarding excess issue.

Defeating Inmates' Creativity

As avenues close for inmates to have drugs or weapons smuggled into the facility, they develop new ways to get contraband into the jail. Legal mail (i.e., mail from an inmate's lawyer) is not opened and searched in the mailroom. Instead, it is taken into the detention pods, opened in front of and given immediately to the inmate. However, an informant told facility personnel that marijuana, cocaine and heroin were getting into the detention center via this allegedly legal mail. A tip led detention center staff to the perpetrators of a scam involving legal mail and marijuana. Legal mail was coming in under a fictitious attorney's name. Having only one full-time mail clerk presented prob-

lems, because this person is responsible for all of the mail in the facility, which houses about 2,000 inmates at any given time. The facility requested a drug-sniffing dog to be deployed in the jail to detect the suspected parcels. Once the dog detected drugs, there was probable cause to open the supposed legal mail. Marijuana was found concealed under the attorney's address label. Another suspected package revealed marijuana hidden between two pieces of paper glued together. Suspicious mail was scanned under an ultraviolet light and anything suspicious was passed on to the chief of security who determined whether to test the mail for drugs or simply return it to the sender.

This was a tedious process. Alerts from other facilities indicated that senders were soaking their letters to inmates in methamphetamine as a way to pass the facility's ultraviolet testing process. The facility contacted the Border Research and Technology Center (BRTC), a division of the National Institute of Justice, to see if it could offer any assistance. The facility was guided to BRTC's technology partner, Sandia National Laboratories. A team from SNL's Entry and Contraband Detection Department helped jail officials conduct a mailroom residual background contamination evaluation and an incoming mail contamination evaluation to determine the feasibility of using available trace drug detection equipment.

The SNL team considered the use of bulk detectors and trace detectors. Using the trace detector, jail officials were able to find drugs that were saturated on a piece of paper sent in regular mail. They were also able to detect drugs concealed under a postage stamp. The SNL team was instrumental in helping the jail find the right equipment suitable for a facility of its size with minimal training necessary to operate the equipment. However, this equipment would cost in excess of \$70,000. A jail refurbishment bond was being considered at the same time, so sheriff's department officials made a presentation to the bond committee, and subsequently the taxpayers of Pima County passed the bonds.

Under the recommendation of the SNL team, the department purchased a scanner (IONSCAN 400 B) and an X-ray Inspection Unit. The Ionscan allows jail staff to detect small traces of drugs being mailed into the facility from outside sources. Once detected, the contraband is sent to the crime lab for testing and eventual criminal prosecution. Items that have been detected include:

- Paper drawings made to look like a child had made it for a parent. In reality, it was a piece of paper that was soaked in methamphetamine;
- Christmas cards showing positive for drugs. Heroin was smeared between the face of the card and reglued to look unaltered; and
- Marijuana detected in letters sent to inmates.

In order to get a successful prosecution, there must be evidence an inmate knew drugs were being sent to him or her. The use of inmate phone recordings is an effective tool. Inmates will telephone people involved in smuggling the drugs to either let them know they have not received them or that the drugs were ineffective. Jail staff often send a high-resolution copy of the paper that was soaked in

drugs to the inmate. Inmates who ingest the paper without feeling the desired effects will soon make telephone calls. Pima County has had several successful prosecutions as well as pending cases, either in the lab-results phase or initial investigation. While staff have found no significant contraband such as weapons or bulk material by using the X-ray machine, they have detected drugs concealed in packaged legal mail. Every time contraband is detected, the purchase of such equipment is justified.

Another item that has been considered, but not yet purchased, is the BOSS Chair. This is a chair that has been developed to detect metal objects that may be secreted in a body cavity. There is also an attachable chin rest that allows for the detection of any metal object hidden in the mouth. This is an effective tool when using it as part of the search procedures on inmates returning to custody.

Nothing Is What It Seems

Confidential informants are necessary to prevent contraband in a correctional facility. Do not automatically rule out an informant simply because he or she is an inmate. Take all information seriously and follow up on it. Good officers will show inmates that they are concerned for inmates' welfare, talk to inmates, and treat them with dignity and respect. The resultant rewards are inmates sharing information with officers. Pima County has had inmates give good information that led to finding weapons and drugs in the facility.

Recently, a confidential informant told jail staff that an inmate who was released to attend his mother's funeral would be smuggling heroin and cocaine into the jail when he returned. The informant told jail staff that this inmate had taken orders from other inmates in his housing unit and intended to swallow balloons with the drugs in them. Corrections staff isolated the inmate upon his return and had the inmate X-rayed. Staff eventually retrieved four balloons that the inmate passed. Three contained heroin and cocaine and the fourth contained a syringe. Prosecution of this inmate is pending.

Items allowed in the commissary or issued to inmates must also be scrutinized. All items sold in the commissary unit are inspected by the security services and building commanders for approval. While items such as hot pickles or a cup of soup may seem harmless, both present a danger to facility staff. For example, the main ingredient in the juice of the hot pickles is oleo resin capsicum, which is also the main ingredient of pepper spray. The cup of soup has a dried hot pepper that could be crushed into a powder and blown into an officer's face.

Nothing is what it seems when it comes to preventing contraband. For example, a regular-sized toothbrush could be sharpened into a lethal weapon or fashioned to hold a razor blade stolen from an issued shaving razor. To avoid such situations, Pima County issues thumb toothbrushes. These are small and made specifically for correctional institutions. Razor control is imperative. Inmates must shave within an hour of issue and return the razor to the officer for inspection. Razors are then removed from the housing unit to prevent inmates from getting razors from the sharps container or officer's desk. In addition, the pens inmates



Top: Shanks made from a mophead holder were discovered through the shakedown of a housing unit. Bottom: Balloons containing cocaine, heroin, marijuana and a syringe kit were swallowed and smuggled in.

may purchase from the commissary are flexible pens, specifically made for correctional use, that allow ink to flow to the pen point while preventing inmates from draining the ink to use for tattooing.

Inmates will not stop in their attempts to smuggle in or manufacture contraband. A strong security services unit helps ferret out information on inmates as well as officers being compromised. The ability to prevent politics from playing a role in day-to-day issues allows correctional staff to develop a working relationship with law enforcement agencies throughout the state, as well as with out-of-state agencies.

Correctional staff must never let their guard down or become complacent. Contraband will always be present, but as long as staff persevere and continue to develop new ways to detect contraband, staff and inmates will be safer and liability will remain low.

Capt. Gregory Gearhart is the security operations division commander of the Pima County Sheriff's Department Adult Detention Center in Tucson, Ariz.