

L.A. County Jail to Track Inmates

The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department plans to launch an RFID system that could track 1,800 inmates this year, and 18,000 in the future.

By Claire Swedberg

May 16, 2005—The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department is preparing to launch an RFID inmate-tracking pilot program that includes 1,800 inmates. If the pilot is successful, LASD will seek funding to expand the program to use the radio frequency identification in the county's entire jail system, which includes about 18,000 inmates.

LASD will be deploying [Alanco Technologies'](#) TSI Prism system, and the initial pilot is expected to be fully operational by fall 2005, according to Greg M. Oester, the president of Alanco Technologies' Alanco TSI division, based in Scottsdale, Ariz.

The \$1.5 million pilot deployment will be installed at the East Facility of the Pitchess Detention Center, Castaic, Calif., where the county will evaluate the system's effectiveness before seeking funding to expand it to the rest of the county jails.

The TSI Prism system is already in operation at prisons in four states, but the Los Angeles County deployment would be the largest RFID prisoner-tracking system in the world, Oester says. California's Calipatria State Prison was the first jail in the United States to install an RFID tracking system, in 2000 (see [RFID Reforms Prison Management](#)). Since then, jails in Michigan, Illinois and Ohio have followed suit, with bracelets deployed for approximately 3,000 inmates nationwide.

During the past year, LASD Lieutenant Mark Walker investigated the potential for using an RFID tracking system to reduce violence in the jail system. In recent years, the county jail system has had several inmate-on-inmate homicides, Walker says, and in one case, an inmate was able to pass through different sections of a jail for several hours, seeking his victim before killing him. Walker was familiar with the RFID tracking system at Calipatria, he says, and turned to Alanco for a similar solution. With RFID tags worn by inmates and RFID readers deployed throughout the jail, the TSI Prism system would make unauthorized and unmonitored prisoner movement impossible, Walker says. Since the time of Calipatria's RFID deployment, Alanco has added features such as finger printing technology and has improved the hardware, but the basic TSI Prism system is unchanged, according to Oester.

Where the TSI Prism system is in use, every inmate is issued a bracelet when he is processed. Approximately the size of a divers' watch, the bracelet includes an active RFID tag as well as a bar code if the jail system chooses to use it. The bar code, which is encoded with a unique number assigned to the inmate, can be used to add information to a database such as the bar code number of any medication the inmate has taken or any books he has checked out of the library. The LASD has not yet decided whether it will use the bar code system. Eventually the functions of the TSI Prism's bar code system may be integrated into the RFID system, Oester says.

The RFID bracelet is encoded with the same ID number used on the bracelet's bar code. The inmate's ID number and personal information is entered into the database along with a particular profile that would then restrict him to certain parts of the jail. Additional information, such as "keep away" status from a particular inmate or inmates could also be added to the database. In that case, if the inmates came within 100 feet of each other, an alarm would be sent to the jail control room.

The RFID prison management system is intended to have a three-fold function. It ensures inmates do not escape by issuing an alarm if the bracelet approaches the jail perimeter; it reduces violence by allowing officers to monitor who is congregating with whom; and it allows for administrative functions such as tracking where an inmate is when they are needed. The bar code on the bracelet helps the jail track information such as whether the inmate has eaten, how long he was in the library or how many hours he put in on his job. To register an inmate's location and the time he is at that location, a prison guard will scan the bar code on the inmate's bracelet.

The RFID bracelet sends out a signal every two seconds to RFID readers deployed throughout the facility. The readers send that data to the system's control center. Officers wear RFID devices similar to the inmates' bracelets, but have their device attached to their belts. A red button is included with the device for officers to press in an emergency. If that button is pressed, or if an inmate enters a restricted area, an alarm in the control room will alert officers there. By looking at a screen depicting the jail floor plan, guards will be able to determine, where the distressed officer or recalcitrant inmates are, and who they are.

Thus far, no inmates have attempted to escape or tamper with their bracelets in the jails where the system has been deployed, says Oester. Knowing that an alarm would be activated if the bracelet is removed or destroyed has been a deterrent for inmates, Oester says. The bracelet includes several built-in tamper-proof safeguards. The braided stainless steel wire that runs the length of the bracelet will cause the RFID tag to stop transmitting it is cut. The device also has a sensor that is designed to set off an alarm in 15 seconds if it loses contact to skin.

The pilot is being planned for Pitchess Detention Center because it is a midsize jail, Walker says, that has a high risk of violence due to its dormitory-style housing. Up to 60 inmates can be residing in the same room there. With the RFID system, officers will be able to monitor the prisoners' movements within the room and determine which inmates are congregating at any given point.

If the pilot does well, Walker says the county hopes to deploy the technology in additional jail facilities. "If this is successful, and I think it will be," he says, "it is the way of the future for tracking inmates." He adds, "This is probably the most significant technological advancement I've seen in law enforcement for a long time."

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