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## VIDEO VISITING IN CORRECTIONS: BENEFITS, LIMITATIONS, AND IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS



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# Video Visiting in Corrections: Benefits, Limitations, and Implementation Considerations



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## FROM THE ACTING DIRECTOR

Visits from family members, children and other sources of support can be a lifeline in the lives of incarcerated men and women. Visits provide an opportunity to maintain connection, re-build relationships and actively begin to form links to the community both for support and to assist in the reentry process. Yet, visiting takes on added dimensions with the challenges imposed by geographical distance between facilities and visitors, cost implications for transportation, lodging, childcare, lost wages and the roadblocks often presented from institutional security procedures. Emerging research speaks to the importance of building and maintaining healthy family and community connections for men and women, during their period of incarceration as well as for planning and implementing the reentry process. Traditional methods of communication such as phone calls, mail and on-site visiting have their limitations, some of which are noted above. The advent of video visiting has enhanced traditional methods of building and sustaining those critical connections for incarcerated individual, it is also an industry which is expanding exponentially. Little replaces the opportunities for families to see one another in person, but in those situations where that is not possible, video visiting is a viable option. This guide will address the importance of visitation, introduce video visiting as a resource, ideally in concert with in-person visitation, discuss implementation of video visiting, address the importance of setting up a process and outcome evaluation of visiting programs and provide a set of resources for agencies interested in introducing or enhancing their current visiting capacity.



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## FOREWORD

The impetus for this document came from stakeholders who are keenly aware of the importance of visiting for incarcerated men and women. The benefits of visiting with family and other supportive individuals are well-documented throughout the literature, research, and in the voices of the incarcerated and their families. Visiting policies vary among the over 1,000 prisons and 3,300 plus jail systems across the country. What should be consistent is the acknowledgement by correctional leadership, via policy, that visiting can build and strengthen family connections and provide hope and encouragement for incarcerated men and women. Visiting creates bridges to community supports that promote productive reentry and contributes to improved outcomes, in particular, community safety and reduced recidivism rates.

Virtual events are now commonplace in today's environment and this modality has extended to criminal justice practice through web-based events, telemedicine, and video court hearings, to provide just a few examples. Video visiting software and equipment for jails and prisons are prominent in the exhibit halls at national correctional conferences. There are a wide variety of models emerging and as the technology continues to become more commonplace, affordable, and accessible, an increasing number of correctional systems will be using video visiting. It must be noted that video visiting should not be deemed as an invitation to discontinue in-person visiting. With video visiting come great opportunities as well as cautions and challenges. Creating the capacity to incorporate both visiting approaches in policy and practice provides a resource that captures the advantages that both in-person and video provide to incarcerated populations, families, and other support systems. Well-designed visiting practice can provide advantages to correctional systems through increased engagement in programmatic activities and reductions in negative behavior. With that in mind, the National Institute of Corrections awarded a cooperative agreement through a competitive process to the Osborne Association in New York, a well-established agency that has on-the-ground experience with both in-person and video visiting and a long history of working to strengthen families affected by incarceration. Through the cooperative agreement, the Osborne Association has written a well-researched document that provides 1) an overview of the importance of visiting to include the use of video visiting; 2) considerations for implementing video visiting; 3) an overview for evaluating a video visiting program; and 4) appendices that provide examples, resources, checklists and evaluation tools.

Each chapter of the guide is valuable to assist correctional administrators and staff, as well as potential external partners and stakeholders, to enhance current visiting policy and practice or design a system that incorporates video visiting into overall practice. Taken together, each chapter builds upon the preceding chapter, and the research, practical examples, and tools that are provided throughout the guide will benefit correctional leadership in enhancing current visiting practices.



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## PREFACE

The purpose of this guide is to inform the development of video visiting programs within a correctional setting. “Video visiting” is real-time interactive video communication which uses video conferencing technology or virtual software programs, such as Skype. It is an increasingly popular form of communication between separated family members in settings outside of corrections. The rapid expansion of video visiting in jails and prisons over the past few years suggests that video visiting may become very common in corrections in the near future.

This guide will help inform administrators about the benefits and challenges of using some common video visiting models across a variety of settings. Video visiting can be a positive enhancement to in-person visiting, and has the potential to promote positive outcomes for incarcerated individuals and their families and communities. In certain circumstances, video visiting may benefit corrections by reducing costs, improving safety and security, and allowing for more flexibility in designating visiting hours. The value of video visiting can be maximized when the goals of the facility are balanced with the needs of incarcerated individuals and their families.

The development of this guide was informed by current practice across the United States. Interviews were conducted with prison and jail administrators, IT personnel, technology companies, family members of incarcerated individuals, incarcerated individuals; community-based organizations that provide supportive video visiting programs, and advocates for the incarcerated and their families. A survey was administered to correctional administrators nationwide to learn about existing program models and implementation challenges and successes. A literature review was conducted to learn about the various uses of video conferencing in a correctional setting. Research on the use of video visiting in settings outside of corrections was also reviewed. And finally, articles published in the media about video visiting in corrections were reviewed from August 2012 through January 2014.

This guide is meant to assist correctional administrators, commissioners, sheriffs, and other key decision makers in the following activities:

- Determining whether video visiting is appropriate for a particular setting or jurisdiction;
- Preparing for and implementing video visiting; and
- Conducting a process evaluation and preparing for an outcome evaluation.



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We are grateful to our group of advisors who provided valuable insight and suggestions to inform the development of this guide. The advisors represent diverse perspectives including those of prison and jail administrators; information technology; community-based organizations offering programs for families involved with or affected by the criminal justice system; clinicians serving children and families affected by incarceration; parole and probation agencies; legal advocates and public defenders; and family-focused reentry services providers.

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- Carl Wicklund, American Probation and Parole Association.

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# INTRODUCTION

Research confirms that incarcerated individuals, corrections, families, and communities all benefit when incarcerated individuals can communicate with and receive visits from family and supportive community members. Video visiting is an additional form of communication that can build and strengthen social support systems of the incarcerated. This relatively new form of communication builds upon the success of video conferencing used for court appearances, and attorney-client communication. It's also being used to bring professionals together with those incarcerated to address pressing legal and medical issues. Video visiting and conferencing may also offer added benefits in planning for reentry, supplementing healthcare delivery, and facilitating cross-systems collaborations.

Video visiting is rapidly expanding in correctional facilities across the nation. However, there is a scarcity of research about how effectively video visiting achieves, or builds upon, the benefits known to be associated with in-person visiting. Video visiting approaches are varied, using different technologies, partnerships, and models. Generally speaking, visitors usually video visit from a community-based visiting center, their home, or at the correctional facility itself.

In determining whether to use video visiting, and what model to select for a particular setting, it is best to be informed about the benefits and challenges, and to balance the needs of corrections, incarcerated individuals, families, and communities. The technology industry highlights the benefits, but video visiting has its limitations and it may be inaccessible for some families. Video visiting is in its infancy, and there is limited research about how effectively video visiting alone or in combination with in-person visiting leads to the positive outcomes known to be associated with in-person visiting. A hybrid visiting approach that offers both video and in-person visiting offers the most flexibility and ensures that the benefits of in-person visiting are preserved and possibly enhanced.

Chapter One provides a brief overview of the benefits known to be associated with in-person visiting and discusses the benefits and limitations of video visiting. Chapter Two focuses on how to assess whether video visiting is an appropriate fit for a particular setting and discusses issues that should be considered upon implementation. Chapter Three provides tools for conducting a process evaluation and preparing for an outcome evaluation. An implementation toolkit and sample evaluation tools are included in the appendices. The appendices also include information about other uses for video conferencing in a correctional setting, video visiting with children, and a listing of relevant resources.



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# CHAPTER 1: WHY CONSIDER VIDEO VISITING

## Traditional In-Person Visiting Benefits Corrections, Families, and Communities

It is helpful to consider what we know about traditional visiting to assess the value of video visiting. Studies confirm that incarcerated individuals have better outcomes when they receive in-person visits from family members and supportive community members. Specifically, traditional in-person visiting has been found to benefit both corrections and incarcerated individuals by:

- Improving institutional adjustment and psychological well-being among the incarcerated
- Reducing behavioral infractions and violent behavior among the incarcerated
- Increasing incarcerated individuals' motivation to participate in programming
- Increasing motivation to gain release from the facility
- Lowering recidivism and increasing public safety

Traditional visiting has been found to benefit incarcerated individuals, their families and communities by:

- Providing incentive to maintain visiting privileges
- Increasing the probability of discretionary parole
- Facilitating planning and support for community reentry
- Increasing the chance of obtaining gainful employment post-release
- Reducing the likelihood of using illegal substances post-release
- Maintaining and strengthening the parent-child relationship
- Reducing the trauma that children experience when they are separated from a parent

### Traditional visiting is linked to lower behavior incidents in Ohio Prisons

A recent study on traditional visiting's effect on incarcerated individuals' behavior in two Ohio prisons (male and female facilities) found that those receiving traditional visits, especially from a parental figure, had fewer behavior infractions compared to those who did not receive visits. This study found that even one visit reduced infractions.<sup>1</sup>

## Video Visiting in Corrections

Video visiting was first used in a correctional setting in the 1990's. And with technological advances resulting in more user-friendly and affordable equipment, it is expanding at a rapid pace. A review of video visiting practices in prisons and jails across the country revealed tremendous variation in the purpose, model, funding, prerequisites to participation, and technology.<sup>2</sup>

In August 2012, *The New York Times* estimated that correctional facilities in at least 20 states had video visiting capability or were planning to implement some form of video visiting.<sup>3</sup> Research conducted for this publication one year later reveals that jails in at least 28 states and Washington, D.C., offer video visiting and no fewer than 15 state corrections departments are considering or offering video visiting in select prisons.<sup>4</sup> Jails are rapidly adopting video visiting, whereas prison systems are slower to do so, partly because of the challenges of implementing video visiting in statewide systems. The rapid digitization of society and the proliferation of video visiting over the past few years suggest that video visiting will likely be the norm in the near future.

Video visiting is in its infancy, and there is still little empirical evidence about how effectively video visiting alone or in combination with in-person visiting leads to or builds on the positive outcomes linked to in-person visiting. Video visiting has benefits and limitations. Video visiting provides another way for families to communicate when distance, cost and other factors limit or prevent in-person visiting. Where it increases the frequency and consistency of communication, it has the potential to build on the benefits of traditional in-person visiting. To the degree that it reduces in-person visiting, it also has the potential to reduce staffing costs and increase safety and security at facilities. On the other hand, some find that video visiting cannot replicate seeing someone in person or is difficult to use.

Traditional, in-person visiting is a best practice that should continue in all correctional settings when possible.<sup>5</sup> Until more is known, implementing a hybrid model of in-person and video visiting is encouraged. In doing so, the benefits of traditional visiting are preserved and potentially strengthened with video visiting.

### Benefit: Connecting Families and Building Social Support Systems

#### Connecting family members and supportive friends

Video visiting has the potential to bridge the gap for families with loved ones incarcerated out of state or in remote facilities and to foster an incarcerated individual's social connectedness. The Michigan Department of Corrections temporarily offered one of the earliest video visiting programs to incarcerated individuals housed outside of Michigan. Since then, other states such as Wisconsin and Alaska offer video visits to individuals incarcerated out of state, and at least 13 states use video visiting to connect families with individuals incarcerated in prisons within the state. Video visiting in jails may also bridge the gap for families residing in large counties or in counties that lack public transportation.

Video visiting can also keep families connected when travel conditions are poor. For example, the State of Oregon’s Department of Corrections experienced a voluntary decline of in-person visits at one prison during the winter months, suggesting that home-based video visiting is attractive when travel conditions are poor (see chart 1A).<sup>6</sup>

	Winter 2011	Winter 2012	Winter 2013
<b>SRCI</b>			
Video Visits (VIP calls)	0	1997	3188
Physical Visitations	6978	5597	4637
Combined (Overall Visits)	6978	7594	7825
<b>Statewide</b>			
Video Visits (VIP calls)	0	1977	15408
Physical Visitations	77202	74744	70498
Combined (Overall Visits)	77202	76721	85906

“Oregon DOC visiting during winter months in 2011, 2012, and 2013”<sup>7</sup>

Families may video visit more often than they visited before video was available. This is especially true when video visiting is convenient, affordable, and/or offered at a family friendly community-based site. For example, the year after the District of Columbia Department of Corrections (D.C. Jail) started video visiting they recorded approximately 20,000 more video visits as compared to the number of in-person visits that occurred the year prior to video visiting implementation.<sup>8</sup> D.C. jail administrators theorize that friends and family video visited more often than they visited in-person because the community-based video visiting center is family friendly and does not entail long waits and security checks.

Given the critical importance of in-person visits, a decrease of in-person visits, especially between incarcerated parents and their children, may not be a desirable trend. Infusing family- and child-friendly visiting practices at facilities is a response that may ensure that in-person visiting continues.



FIGURE 1-COMMUNITY BASED VIDEO VISITING CENTER AT DEANWOOD COMMUNITY CENTER

### Video visiting supports relationships

Preliminary evidence suggests that video visiting helps adult family members maintain a relationship with an incarcerated individual family member. Of the 40 families surveyed who participated in video visiting at the community-based Family Services of Western Pennsylvania's Families Outside Program, all reported that video visiting helped them maintain or nurture their relationships with incarcerated family members.<sup>9</sup>

### Supporting the parent-child relationship

Approximately 2.7 million children in America have a parent(s) in jail or prison on any given day.<sup>10</sup> For most children, visiting and communication mitigates the risks associated with having an incarcerated parent and reduces the trauma of separation, thereby improving their chances for a bright and healthy future.<sup>11</sup> Video visiting is an additional communication tool that facilitates the critical connection between children and their incarcerated parents. However, some children, especially very young or developmentally delayed children, may not understand the technology and may find the inability to touch their parents to be traumatic or frightening.

"My son gets to see me and see that I'm o.k. It gives him peace of mind." —Mother at Albion Correctional Facility, New York State<sup>12</sup>

Facilitating parent-child communication also benefits incarcerated parents. Being separated from a child is a source of distress that impedes institutional adjustment for some incarcerated mothers, possibly leading to increased behavior infractions.<sup>13</sup> Research indicates that incarcerated parents need support and consistent contact with their children to alleviate this distress.<sup>14</sup> Incarcerated parents who have some form of contact with their children were found to have lower rates of depression, anxiety, and stress.<sup>15</sup>

As early as 2000, the Florida Department of Corrections offered video visiting in two women’s prisons in response to the limited number of visits women were receiving from their children due to distance.<sup>17</sup> Participating incarcerated mothers indicated that their self-esteem and relationships with their children improved, and that video visiting enabled contact that was previously not possible because of distance.

Video visiting programs designed for incarcerated parents and their children may be offered in conjunction with a parenting class. These video visiting programs may involve a community-based partner that hosts a video visiting center for children and provides supportive services to children, caregivers, and the incarcerated parent. (See appendix 1B for more information about video visiting programs for children of incarcerated parents.)

**“(It’s) the best thing that has ever happened to me and my family while being incarcerated. It gives me a great view on what they are going through in the house at home.”—Father participating in the video visiting program at the New Hampshire Department of Corrections<sup>18</sup>**

### **Video visiting helps children maintain relationships with their parents**

According to a Sentencing Project report on video visiting, research suggests that children of divorce and military families using video conferencing to communicate with their absent parent experienced reduced stress from being separated from a parent. This report also found that video visiting has the greatest benefits for children of incarcerated parents when:

- “It is used as an adjunct to rather than a replacement for other modes of communication, particularly contact visits;
- children can visit from their homes or nearby sites;
- facility policies allow for frequent visits; and
- fees are not cost prohibitive.<sup>16</sup>

## Child welfare involved families

In 2009, an estimated 14,000 children entered foster care, in part related to parental incarceration.<sup>21</sup> Even more children in foster care experienced the incarceration of a parent after entering foster care.<sup>22</sup> Child welfare policy and social services law generally establish that children and parents have the right to visit. However, in most correctional systems, visiting is considered a privilege not a right.<sup>23</sup> This inconsistency between the rights of children and those accorded to incarcerated individuals may be detrimental for children who need parental contact and for incarcerated parents who risk losing their parental rights.

Video visiting expands communication options for child welfare-involved families and promotes parent-child connections that potentially lead to the following outcomes:

- Increased visiting opportunities, which may prevent termination of an incarcerated parent's parental rights.
- Opportunity for a child welfare agency to observe parenting skills, and to engage the parent in planning for the child and assess the progress towards the permanency plan.
- Facilitation of reconciliation and reunification upon release, reducing costs associated with parental rights termination proceedings and lengthy stays in foster care.
- Reduction of costs to public agencies that provide health, mental health, special education and juvenile justice services to children and families.
- Promotion of cross-systems collaboration between agencies (corrections and child welfare).

### **Courts are less likely to terminate parental rights when parents maintain consistent contact with their children**

The federal 1997 Adoptions and Safe Family Act (ASFA), designed to reduce the length of time children spend in foster care, requires that termination of parental rights proceedings begin when children are in foster care for 15 out of the past 22 months, with some exceptions.<sup>19</sup>

This timeframe is particularly challenging for incarcerated parents whose average sentence length is 80 to 100 months.<sup>20</sup> A positive and consistent bond must be demonstrated by the parent to retain their parental rights, but distance makes it challenging for families and caseworkers to regularly take children to the facility. Video visiting is another way for incarcerated parents to maintain a bond with their children. Virtual conferencing can also increase opportunities for parents to participate in meetings about their children and virtually "parent from the inside."

## Visiting alternative for no contact populations

Video visiting may be a viable alternative for incarcerated individuals who are not allowed in-person visits due to policy or medical status. Nebraska, Indiana, and Wisconsin use video visiting for individuals who are not permitted contact for reasons such as segregated housing.<sup>25</sup> The Federal Bureau of Prisons uses closed-circuit video visiting for incarcerated individuals in segregated housing and is planning to expand video visiting to connect individuals in general population with their families.<sup>26</sup>

### **Benefit: Video Visiting Can Help Corrections Meet Objectives**

Visiting policies in state prisons became more restrictive between 1991 and 2005, in part due to fiscal, staffing and security constraints.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, many jails have also experienced budget cuts that may make it challenging to enhance or even maintain in-person visiting hours. Video visiting can help alleviate these challenges by potentially reducing labor costs and increasing security while maintaining or even expanding visiting opportunities.

Early video visiting programs were often pilots implemented with the goal of connecting incarcerated individuals with family members. Now video visiting is being used to achieve additional correctional objectives, including the following:

- Reducing costs
- Improving safety and security
- Flexibility in scheduling visiting hours and expanding visiting opportunities
- Supporting the mental health and institutional adjustment of the incarcerated
- Facilitating reentry planning
- Reducing recidivism and increasing public safety

“Video visitation is the wave of the future for correctional facility communication. . . . The new system presents tremendous advantages in time and cost savings, as well as contributing to increased safety and security for Clare County, Michigan our facility.”—Sheriff John Wilson, Clare County, Michigan<sup>28</sup>

#### **Video visits facilitate court ordered visits**

“All visits have been successful . . . one visit working with the caseworker bringing the children who were court ordered for monthly visits, and one family getting visits ordered through divorce court. Such court ordered visits may have taken much longer to happen or may not have happened at all without the [video visiting] program.”—Video visiting coordinator, Florida Department of Corrections<sup>24</sup>

## Reducing costs

In many cases, video visiting is less labor intensive than traditional visiting, allowing for correctional staff to be reassigned to other duties. If system efficiencies lead to staff reductions or attrition, then legacy costs may also be reduced (benefits and pensions). However, employees and labor unions may oppose actions that may lead to staff reductions. There are costs associated with video visiting, and it is important to recognize that the amount of savings that may be realized can vary considerably.

Depending on the video visiting model used, the labor hours dedicated to visiting may be reduced in the following ways:

- Reduces movement
- Fewer staff needed to monitor in-person visits<sup>30</sup>
- Reduces or eliminates contraband searches
- Reduces on-site visitor processing and visitor searches
- Some systems automate visitor background checks and scheduling

It is unclear how video visiting will affect the frequency of in-person visiting at facilities that use video visiting as a supplement to in-person visiting. Early reports suggest that these facilities are experiencing a voluntary decline of in-person visits (see chart 1B).<sup>31</sup> As a result, labor previously dedicated to in-person visiting can be dedicated to other critical functions. On the other hand, some correctional administrators predict that in-person visiting will increase because video visiting will improve communication with family and friends and facilitate reconnections.

"Through use of this system, the Department of Correction has operated a safer and more efficient facility. In 2011, DOC had 3,500 fewer visitors to the facility. With each averted visit, our staff members are able to devote their time and attention to other work-related tasks." —Commissioner of Correction Kevin Cheverko, Westchester County Jail, New York<sup>29</sup>



Chart 1B: Trends in Web-Based and In-House Visiting, Washoe County Detention Center, September 2010–August 2012<sup>32</sup>

## Improving safety and security

Video visiting is often used to enhance safety and security, especially at jails. A reduction in contact visits (the result of a voluntary decrease of in-person visits mentioned above) may reduce the flow of contraband in traditional visiting rooms. Reduced traffic and congestion in waiting and visiting areas potentially improves the safety of visitors, staff, and incarcerated individuals. Safety and security may also improve when movement is reduced. Staff are potentially freed to dedicate more time to duties that manage safety and security at a facility when in-person visiting declines.

These security benefits should be weighed against the possibility that reducing or eliminating in-person visiting may remove the incentive for incarcerated individuals to exhibit good behavior, thereby increasing security concerns rather than reducing them.<sup>35</sup> At this early stage of video visiting, it is unclear how

“Web visits increase the safety of our inmates and our staff. Safety is our highest priority, and every time we move inmates through the jail for visits, a potential safety concern exists. Web-based visits reduce those concerns and greatly reduce opportunities for introducing contraband into the jail.”—Debi Campbell, Detention Operations Manager, Washoe County Sheriff’s Office, Reno, Nevada<sup>34</sup>

morale, well-being, and rehabilitation among those incarcerated will be affected when in-person visiting is reduced or eliminated, particularly in prisons where individuals are likely to be housed for long periods of time.

### Lubbock County Jail Reduces Costs with Video Visiting

“In July 2010 Lubbock County completed a new 400,000 square foot detention center. . . . A key functional concept for this new detention facility was the use of video visitation . . . to minimize or eliminate inmate movements. Standard face-to-face visitation cost in the jail design was projected to be over \$5.5 [million] and have heavy ongoing operational costs. Video visitation costs were estimated at less than half of that with less operational costs and greater flexibility.

When Lubbock County issued an RFP, the responses were for older analog systems with a tremendous initial cost. Lubbock County chose to perform the video visitation engineering and implementation in-house.

There are currently 100 public visitation booths, 140 booths in the cell pods, 6 secure attorney booths at the jail, 10 secure attorney booths at the Courthouse, and a portable booth. There have been over 100,000 video visits made from August 2010 through April 2011.”<sup>33</sup>

Early reports from the field indicate that inappropriate behavior is not a common problem that arises during video visits. For example, Oregon DOC has only had 40 major misconduct reports out of 26,596 video visits, a .15% incidence rate.<sup>36</sup> Software is available to monitor video visits for inappropriate behavior and language and will terminate visits as needed.

## Flexibility in scheduling visiting hours and expanding visiting opportunities

Correctional agencies across the nation state that a major benefit of video visiting is that it allows for more flexibility in designating visiting hours and allows facilities to offer additional visiting hours via video. Video visiting may also expand the number of visits an incarcerated individual has in one day. For example, Boulder County jail offers home-based video visiting during evenings and weekends as a supplement to their in-person visiting hours.<sup>38</sup> At some jails, if an incarcerated individual has met his or her weekly in-person visiting limit, then visitors can access an additional video visit instead of waiting until the following week.

### Supporting the mental health and institutional adjustment of the incarcerated

Video visiting has the potential to build on the benefits of traditional visiting, which has been shown to have a positive impact on an incarcerated individual's psychological well-being, behavior, and overall institutional adjustment. Specifically, incarcerated individuals receiving traditional visits have been found to exhibit less violent behavior, fewer rule infractions, and an increased motivation to participate in treatment during incarceration.<sup>39 40 41</sup>

#### Video visits may prevent a reduction in visiting opportunities

"When the idea first came, we were in a place that a lot of jails are familiar with," said Sheriff Raney [Ada County Jail, Portland Oregon] during a presentation on the new system at the 2010 American Jail Association conference in Portland, Oregon. "Our inmate visitations were very labor intensive and we were forced down to offering visits only three times per week." Ada County now offers video visits seven days a week.<sup>37</sup>

#### Reports indicate video visiting can improve institutional adjustment

"[Inmates] are very happy with it, and we've seen a boost in their morale because of [video visitation]." — Marty Brazell, Warden of Jefferson County Jail, Arkansas<sup>42</sup>

"My boys mean everything to me and to maintain a positive influence in their lives through video visits has helped me deal with the emotional roller coaster of prison life." — incarcerated father<sup>43</sup>

Pennsylvania DOC's original video visiting goal was to "improve and enhance any mechanism that helps to foster family relationships." One year after implementation, the program was also viewed as an effective behavior management tool for participating parents (Crabbe 2002).<sup>44</sup>

## Reentry planning

Individuals returning home from jail and prison face challenges in reconnecting to their families and loved ones, finding and maintaining employment, maintaining sobriety, locating steady and safe housing, accessing healthcare, and adhering to conditions of probation or parole. People going home from prison rely primarily on their families for money, employment, and housing.<sup>46</sup> Family involvement increases the probability of being paroled and successfully reintegrating into the community.<sup>47</sup> For this reason, it is valuable to explore the use of video visiting to connect incarcerated individuals with supportive family and friends, and with community-based organizations, community supervision agencies (probation and parole), child welfare and other city and state agencies, and faith-based and other supportive services.

Some agencies are using video conferencing technology to support reentry. For example, The Osborne Association partnered with the New York City Department of Correction in 2013 to offer video visiting to incarcerated individuals identified as being at high risk for recidivating, with the goal of strengthening family connections to improve reentry outcomes. Incarcerated

Video conferencing can bring the reentry team together “virtually” when travel to the facility is not possible or places an undue burden on team member.

individuals can also video conference with community-based support specialists and providers to plan for reentry. While this increases operational

efficiency for reentry specialists and providers, at this stage it is unclear how incarcerated individuals respond to this form of communication. It is also unclear how video conferencing in a correctional setting affects an individual’s ability to build rapport or develop a relationship.

Video visiting and conferencing facilitates reentry in the following ways:

- Maintains and builds social support network
- Allows for visits with clergy and other supportive community members
- Facilitates connections in community for those who have no support system
- Enables reentry team meetings
- Allows for job, housing, and program interviews
- Provides opportunities to participate in Medicaid and Social Security Administration hearings
- Allows for family involvement in reentry planning
- Facilitates linkages with community-based providers prior to release

### Video visiting can help long-termers remain connected

Facilitating social connections for incarcerated **individuals** with long-term or life sentences potentially improves their emotional and behavioral stability. Pennsylvania Prison Society, a community-based partner that once offered video visiting at prisons in Pennsylvania, recognizes video visiting’s potential with this population:

“Pennsylvania has the largest population of life-sentenced prisoners in the country. Though [video visiting] was not targeted for this population . . . [it] can provide stabilizing assistance in terms of helping people serving time.”—William DiMascio, [Former] Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Prison Society<sup>45</sup>

Video conferencing also facilitates a continuum of care by connecting individuals to supportive community services before they return to the community. For example, individuals struggling with substance abuse can video visit with sponsors and interview for substance abuse treatment programs, allowing for rapid referrals to treatment and thereby reducing their risk of relapse upon returning to the community. Video visiting can also link incarcerated individuals with community-based medical providers to establish relationships and develop treatment plans, ensuring a continuum of care. Project START, which connects HIV+ individuals with medical services in the community, is based on research showing that incarcerated individuals working with the same medical case manager on the inside and in the community are more likely to engage in treatment upon release.<sup>49</sup>

#### **Video conferencing facilitates reentry planning**

“Westchester Drug Courts had a zero budget to perform housing interviews. With video visitation, the Drug Courts can interview inmates for placement into community-supervised housing. It is important that the community housing can address the issues brought with the offender to the home.”—Captain J. Mark Reimer, Westchester County Jail, New York<sup>50</sup>

### **Reducing recidivism and increasing public safety**

Given the public safety benefits of reducing recidivism and promoting successful reentry, correctional agencies can play a role in improving public safety by expanding visiting opportunities. Social support has been shown to reduce the stress associated with reintegration, thereby reducing recidivism rates. For example, a survey of previously incarcerated men in Maryland concluded that individuals with strong family support during incarceration were more likely to gain employment and less likely to use drugs after release.<sup>51</sup>

#### **Key finding from Minnesota Prisons: Visiting reduces recidivism rates**

A recent study tracking over 16,000 individuals released from Minnesota prisons found that those receiving even one visit were 13 percent less likely to receive another felony conviction and 25 percent less likely to be incarcerated for violating parole. Receiving visits throughout one’s incarceration, not just in the months prior to release, is associated with positive outcomes.

The study found that “prison visiting can improve recidivism outcomes by helping offenders not only maintain social ties with both nuclear and extended family members (especially fathers, siblings, and in-laws) while incarcerated, but also by developing new bonds such as those with clergy or mentors.”<sup>48</sup> Visits from siblings, in-laws, fathers and clergy were the most beneficial in lowering recidivism. Video visiting provides for additional opportunities to connect these supportive community members with incarcerated individuals.

## Benefit: Video Visiting Can Help Families Overcome Visiting Barriers

The costs associated with travel, lost earnings, and overpriced on-site food from vending machines are financially burdensome for low-income families, making it challenging to visit frequently, if at all.<sup>52</sup> Distance is a major barrier for families. Given the benefits of in-person visiting, correctional systems would benefit from considering proximity to families in their custody and program placement decisions. Video visiting located in or near families' residences can supplement or make contact possible when proximal placement is not feasible due to security levels, programming requirements, location of facilities, and other correctional policies.

Video visiting has the potential to overcome common visiting barriers for families such as:

- Distance and travel costs
- Lost earnings and missed school
- Facility is not accessible by public transportation
- Narrowly defined visiting policy (e.g. immediate family only, no children)
- Limited availability of visiting hours
- Long wait to enter visiting room
- Friends and families with conviction records are not eligible to visit at the facility
- Visiting process is not child-friendly
- Visiting hours are cancelled due to security issues at the facility
- Families are turned away (e.g., too many in party, improperly dressed, overcrowding, etc.)

### Video visiting overcomes some visiting barriers

"In the previous building, people coming in for a visitation had to be approved through a background check. Now we don't deny as many applications to visit inmates because they just come into the public lobby area [so background checks are no longer required]."—Sgt. Jana Abens, Polk County Sheriff.<sup>53</sup>

Video visiting can accommodate families who cannot visit at the facility during traditional visiting hours. It eliminates the difficult decision caregivers of school-age children are often forced to make—choosing between their children visiting their incarcerated parent at the facility or attending school when only weekday/daytime visiting hours are offered. Allowing for visits (video and in-person visits) to be scheduled in advance decreases the likelihood that visitors will be turned away from visiting centers due to overcrowding.

Additional benefits for families may include the following:

- Connects incarcerated youth and their incarcerated parents confined at separate facilities
- Allows for visits from elderly or disabled family members who cannot travel
- Increases frequency of contact between traditional visits
- May be less traumatizing for children as compared to non-contact visits through glass
- Empowering for children to schedule and initiate visits with their parents

## Limitations and Other Considerations

It is important to be informed about the limitations and challenges that corrections agencies and the incarcerated and their families may encounter when using this form of communication. Some video visiting models present more challenges than others depending on the correctional setting, the geography of the jurisdiction, and the unique circumstances of each visitor. Due to the limitations and challenges that video visiting may present, families may choose not to video visit.

### Video visiting is not for all families

For some families, video visiting may be present the following challenges:

- Families may not be able to travel to a video visiting site in their communities or at a facility.
- Families may lack the resources to own a computer and/or to have an Internet connection.
- Families are dissatisfied with systems that have technical problems, poor video and audio quality, and poor camera angles.
- The technology may be confusing for the incarcerated and visitors, especially those with developmental delays and individuals that lack computer skills.
- Video visiting may be confusing for very young children.
- Video visiting is difficult for individuals with visual and/or hearing impairments.
- Illiteracy may be a barrier to setting up a video visiting account.
- Families dislike facility-based video visiting because once they have expended the time and expense to travel to the facility, they would rather see their loved one in-person
- Fees charged for video visiting may be unaffordable.
- The video visiting company's website may not provide scheduling instructions and/or customer service in multiple languages.

#### Visitor speaks out against video visiting fees

"I want to be there to give him that support but with this new [video visiting] system it makes it really hard to support your loved one. Whether it's money-wise, communication-wise. Because they nickel and dime you on everything, every little aspect. And it's supposed to make things simpler, but it doesn't."—Jennifer, mentor for an incarcerated friend<sup>54</sup>

Visitors and advocates for families and the incarcerated argue that charging for visits is an unjust practice that may reduce the frequency of visits received by incarcerated individuals. Video visiting fees and convenience and services charges may be unaffordable for some families. Moreover, families may not have a credit card to set up an

account and pay for visits. Conversely, some visitors prefer to pay for convenient home-based video visits rather than travel to the facility for a free video visit or an in-person visit.