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Digital Inclusion and Opportunity in Correctional Facilities

The Value of Technology in Community Reintegration

A White Paper for Correctional Facilities

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Correctional facilities implemented reintegration programs to focus on areas that reduce inmates' future reoffending (e.g., education, employment, substance, etc.), but reentry skills alone do not prepare inmates for a successful community reintegration. Fortunately, combining digital technology with reintegration programs can enhance reentry preparation.

Correctional & Societal Technology Differs

Over 650,000 inmates are released from state and federal prison annually (Department of Justice, n.d.). Additionally, many inmates are released from jails. However, within one year of an inmates' release from prison, nearly half (43.4%) are rearrested (Durose et al., 2014) and approximately 1 in 4 jail inmates will be rearrested in the same year (Sawyer & Wagner, 2023). Many individuals return to the community without completing programs that focus on areas that reduce reoffending (Bosma et al., 2018; Kaiser et al., 2021; Manger et al., 2019; La Vigne et al., 2009). Furthermore, they are not prepared to reintegrate into a digital society due to a lack of technological skills (Manger et al., 2009; Ogbonnya-Oburu et al., 2019; Järveläinen & Rantanen, 2021).

Inmates are often excluded from technology use, leading to exclusion from society upon release (Järveläinen & Rantanen, 2021; Reisdorf & DeCook, 2022; Ogbonnya-Oburu et al., 2019). When transitioning to the community, inmates find it difficult to complete necessary tasks such as applying for jobs, obtaining vital records (e.g., government ID, social security card, birth certificate, etc.), or utilizing online banking due to a lack of digital literacy (Järveläinen & Rantanen, 2021).

Correctional facilities (jails and prisons) have technologically advanced at a much slower pace than the general society (McDougall et al., 2017). In modern society, technology is essential in our everyday personal and professional lives (e.g., socializing, finances, job search/applications, etc.). Most incarcerated individuals return to the community; yet many inmates have been incarcerated since the pre-digital age, resulting in the need for digital literacy in addition to reintegration programs.

Digital Exclusion Hinders Successful Reintegration

Education has a positive association with successful community reintegration (Andrews & Bonta, 2010; Andrews, Bonta, & Hoge, 1990; Givs, 2017). Inmates who participate in education programs are 43% less likely to be reincarcerated (Davis & Steele, 2016) and are more likely to find employment after their release and earn higher wages (Davis et al., 2013; Steurer et al., 2001; La Vigne et al., 2009). Yet, more inmates did not complete high school, or its equivalent compared to the general population (Harlow, 2003), and only 43% of interested inmates (~73%) participate in educational programs (Eikland et al., 2016). The lack of participation is attributed to institutional barriers (e.g., lack of access to computers and internet service, staff

shortages, education program not offered, program capacity reached, and scheduling) (Manger et al., 2019; La Vigne et al., 2009; Kaiser et al., 2021). Thus, digital exclusion interferes with inmates receiving educational programming.

Inmates face several barriers to employment, such as criminal histories and a lack of job skills. Consequentially, less than half of formerly incarcerated individuals can find employment (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2021). The digital transition of society is an added barrier for inmates' successful reintegration in the community. Organizations have transitioned from pen and paper to digitized services for efficiency in areas such as job applications, customer service, and day-to-day operations. Considering that inmates are not prepared for the digital society, they depend on family members for job search assistance (Ogbonnya-Oburu et al., 2019). There is a need for vocational or career programs in correctional facilities to prepare inmates to enter the workforce post-release (Kaiser et al., 2021; La Vigne et al., 2009). Individuals who participate in employment programs while incarcerated are less likely to reoffend after release (Andrews & Bonta, 2010; Andrews, Bonta, & Hoge, 1990; Givs, 2017).

Staff Shortages Interfere with Reintegration Programs

Most correctional facilities employ treatment specialists or counselors to assist inmates with addressing needs to reduce reoffending and prepare for community reintegration (i.e., post-release housing, job search). Correctional counselors facilitate implemented reintegration programs focused on inmates' general wellbeing, addictions, substance abuse, education, vocational training, and employment. According to Latessa (2018), secure facilities must hire, retain, and develop quality staff to deliver reintegration programs with fidelity to lower recidivism.

Elevated levels of staff shortages have plagued correctional facilities (Kaiser et al., 2021; Pew Charitable Trusts, 2022). In turn, there are increased program cancellations which delay inmates' rehabilitation and reintegration in the community (Kaiser et al., 2021). Thus, inmates do not receive the services necessary to address their criminogenic needs and prepare for a successful transition to the community.

Digital Tablets Remove Reintegration Barriers

Secure digital tablets permit inmates to participate in reintegration programs in day rooms on a flexible schedule that avoids conflict with institutionally required activities with a set time (e.g., visitation, meals, showers). Additionally, inmates can participate in programs according to their specific needs and competency level. Thus, gaining technology skills while focusing on key areas that reduce reoffending and better prepare them for release.

The implementation of secure technology eliminates class cancellations due to staff shortages, thus providing a solution to correctional facilities' longstanding staffing concerns. Technology expands access to programs that reduce future reoffending such as education, employment, and substance use, while simultaneously developing digital literacy. Therefore, the implementation of secure technology in correctional facilities is a comprehensive benefit.

Maintaining Security with Inmate Access to Technology

Correctional facilities are concerned about digital technology implementation because of issues around privacy and security, as well as the potential for misuse or abuse of the technology by inmates. Although correctional facilities focus on inmate rehabilitation, they also have a duty to protect and serve the community. Correctional facilities avoid technology due to the perceived harms such as making threats and unlawful transactions.

With secure digital technology, inmate usage is monitored at all times by skilled technicians and inmates are restricted to pre-screened and approved courses. Therefore, the level of security on digital tablets and the monitoring of usage reduces inmate misuse and abuse. It is important for correctional facilities to implement digital technology in a responsible and ethical manner, with proper oversight and safeguards in place.

Palmer et al. (2020) reported few instances of misuse in prisons that implemented digital technology and a decrease in illicit use of mobile devices, as well as a reduction in friction between inmates.

Breaking Barriers and Building Families

Over 2,000 jails and prisons nationwide have implemented secure digital technology as a new way of learning and communicating. In 2022, the North Carolina Division of Prisons implemented free pay-to-play tablets to all inmates. Thus, providing digital access to inmates that averaged 25 years in prison and near age 50, which experienced a technological learning curve because of the pre-technological evolution incarceration (Mays, 2022). The implementation of technology at the North Carolina Division of Prisons broke barriers for digital literacy, reintegration programs, and conflicting schedules that may prevent visitation or successful phone calls.

Technology supports inmate rehabilitation, as it is a positive way for inmates to virtually contact family members and participate in self-groups (Järveläinen & Rantanen, 2021).

Opportunities of Digital Inclusion in Correctional Facilities

There are several benefits to offering digital education programs, including:

1

Increased Access

Digital technology can provide inmates with access to educational resources that may not be available within their correctional facility, such as college-level courses or specialized vocational training.

2

Flexibility

Education through digital technology can be self-paced, allowing inmates to work around their own schedule. This can be particularly beneficial for inmates who may have work assignments or family visitation, or who may have limited time available due to facility schedules.

3

Cost-Effective

Digital technology education programs are more cost-effective than traditional classroom-based programs, as they can reduce the need for physical classroom space and staffing, as well as permit delivery to multiple inmates simultaneously.

4

Technology Skills

By utilizing digital technology to complete education programs, inmates also develop important transferable technology skills to apply in future job opportunities and in their daily lives post-incarceration.

Digital inclusion of inmates through secure technology provides for the expansion of employment programs, as well as other key reintegration areas that deter future reoffending. The internal employment programs offered at correctional facilities are limited due to capacity, space, and staff. Studies have shown that there is a need for vocational or career programs in correctional facilities to prepare inmates to enter the workforce post-release (Kaiser et al., 2021; La Vigne et al., 2009). Digital technology in correctional facilities provides inmates opportunities that range from a high school diploma or equivalent to obtaining trade skills. These opportunities and resources are limited at facilities. Employment programs are an important aspect of correctional rehabilitation and reintegration efforts, as well as improving correctional settings. Furthermore, participation in prison programs improves the chances of inmates finding work upon release (Davis et al. 2013).

While reintegration programs are vital to closing inmates' revolving door of the criminal justice system, correctional facilities digitally exclude inmates. Thus, inmates are socially excluded and experience a difficult transition. The implementation of secure technology for inmates provides a solution to staff shortages, reintegration program capacity and access, and digital literacy. In turn, reintegration programs are offered seamlessly without delaying rehabilitation and correctional facilities are supported in accomplishing their mission.

About Us

ViaPath Technologies concentrates on breaking the cycle of incarceration and digital exclusion through transformative technology and services for incarcerated individuals, their support network, and correctional agencies. With nearly 500,000 secure digital tablets in jails and prisons nationwide, ViaPath Technologies provides advanced communications, technology and management solutions that facilitate meaningful connections, educational opportunities, and enable successful reintegration for both current and formerly incarcerated individuals. Our secure digital tablets encompass over 20,000 courses related to education, employment, substance use, family needs and other areas of interest. Additionally, our secure digital tablets offer a convenient secure communication method via messaging and video visitations for inmates and families.

ViaPath Technologies is headquartered in Falls Church, Virginia, with an employee presence throughout North America. To learn more, please visit viapath.com.

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