

Web-Based Inmate Visitation Improves Security and Access in Washoe County, Nevada

By Debi Campbell, Detention Operations Manager, Washoe County Sheriff's Office, Reno, Nevada

When Mike Haley was elected to the Washoe County Sheriff's Office in Reno, Nevada, in January 2007, he brought with him the determination to ensure that his office would be a leader in technology and innovation for direct supervision facilities throughout the country.

One of Sheriff Haley's first requests of the Detention Bureau was to find and implement a web-based inmate visitation system so that family and friends would not have to come into the facility to visit an inmate.

The goal was to alleviate the long waits that our visitors experienced and eliminate the necessity of moving visitors into secure areas within the facility, increasing operational efficiencies while providing added benefit for both inmates and their visitors.

Sheriff Haley's request turned out to be a bit of a challenge. At the time, we were in the process of completing a Request for Proposals (RFP) for a video visitation system and added the web-based visiting concept as an addition to the RFP. Although we spoke with many vendors who stated that they could accomplish a web-based system, our efforts proved fruitless, partly because this was a "new" technology and partly because of the cost associated with funding the development in light of the bleak economic climate.

In 2010 a local company asked our agency if we would act as their pilot test site for a web-based visiting application. Since this company was at the time headquartered in Reno and was willing to cover all start-up, hardware, and software costs to accomplish its objective, we jumped at the chance.

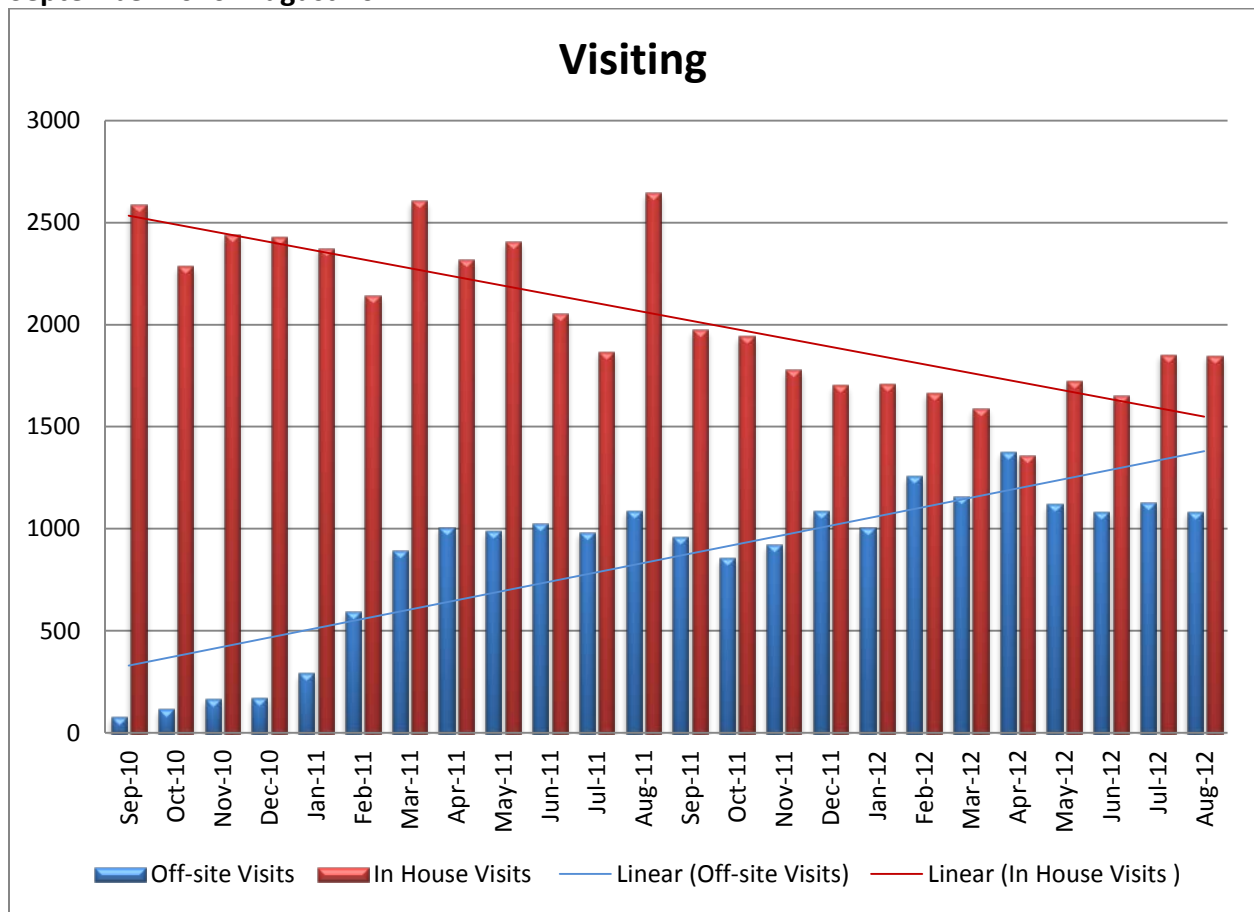
Although there were no costs to the Sheriff's Office, people wishing to visit inmates would be charged \$9.00 for a half-hour visit. We had considerable concerns at first that our visiting customers might not be willing to pay to use this new service.

On August 1, 2010, we went live. Although it took several months for the web-based visiting option to pick up, once it did it really took off.

As web visits steadily increased, we developed a goal to have web visits be the primary source of visits for our inmates by August 2012. We reached that goal 4 months ahead of schedule. In April 2012, web-based visits outpaced in-house visits by exactly one visit.

Although web-based visits have not sustained the majority, Figure 1 (page 2) provides a vivid example of the growth of web-based visiting in just 2 years' time. We went from just 80 web-based visits in August 2010 to 1,500 in August 2012.

Figure 1. Trends in Web-Based and In-House Visitation, Washoe County Detention Center, September 2010–August 2012



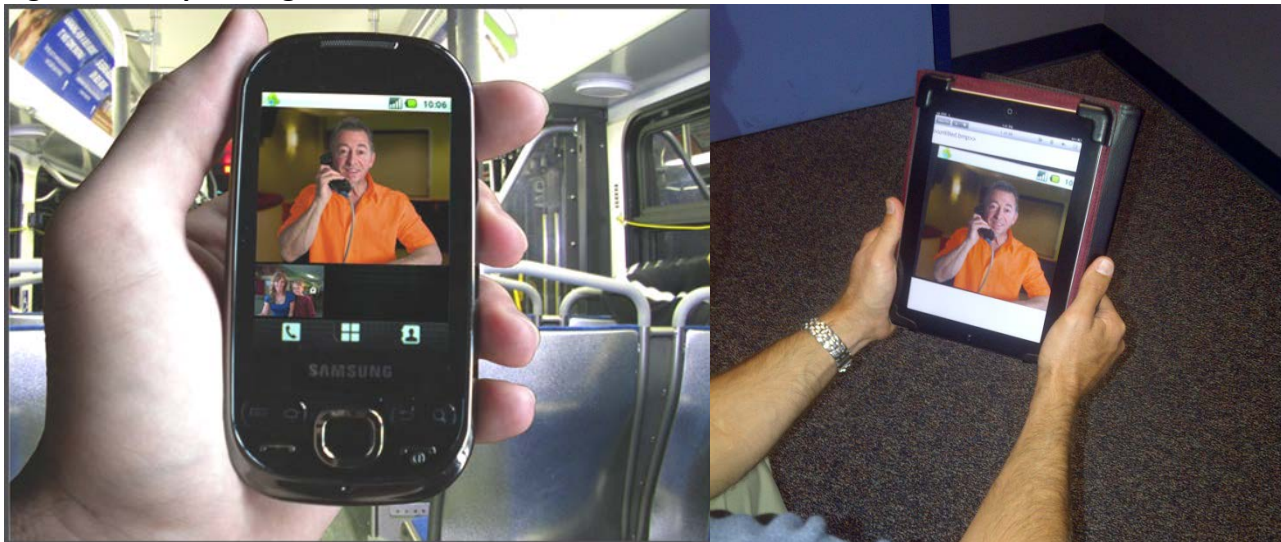
During those 2 years, we also saw numerous advantages with online visiting.

- Web visits have significantly reduced the number of people waiting in our visiting lobby.** They have reduced the amount of foot traffic that comes into the jail as visitors are now opting for web-based visitation instead of personal visits. Statistically less than 50% of the public who visit in the jail lobby conduct repeat visits, while over two-thirds

of our remote visitors are repeating visits, many of whom conduct dozens of visits without ever setting foot in our facility.

- **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.
- **Visitors have a higher quality visit with the inmate.** With cloud-based technology, there are no servers to purchase, install, or maintain. The system is convenient and easy to use. Visitors simply go to the website, set up an account, and schedule a visit. All of this is accomplished without downloading any software. Additionally, visitors are able to schedule the visits in the comfort of their home or office and have increased visitation length and frequency. A web visit can be done from any device that has internet access and a web cam. (See Figure 2.)

Figure 2. Sample Images from Inmate Visit on a Handheld Device and Tablet



- **Web visiting gives the visitor the option NOT to bring children into the detention facility.** Numerous studies have been published regarding the welfare of children who are regularly brought into correctional facilities. We know that the jail is not a good environment for children. Web visiting allows spouses/partners and children to visit remotely in the morning before work and school and then again in the evening once they are back at home.

- **Web visiting is a viable law enforcement tool.** The system keeps track of all visits while recording standard visits automatically and allowing visits to be monitored. All visit information is recorded and easily retrievable, so we do not need to keep paper trails for our web-based visits. The system has become a helpful investigative tool used by different agencies within our county. We have provided our detectives with access to the scheduling system and recording repository, which has proven to be a highly effective resource for them. We routinely provide copies of visits or visit information to other criminal justice agencies, including our District Attorney's Office.
- **The system creates another income source for inmates.** Web-based visiting programs are being marketed much like inmate commissary and inmate telephone systems wherein a percentage of the income is given back to the facility for the inmates' use.
- **Less staff time is required to implement and track visiting, for both civilians and deputies.** We installed the web visiting stations in the housing units, and we post a list of visits every day. All the inmate needs to do is be at the correct terminal at the correct time. The regular visits start and stop automatically.
- **Visiting hours have been expanded.** Because we put the web stations in the housing units (see Figure 3), we have been able to expand our visiting times and the number of visits an inmate can receive daily.

Figure 3. Web Visitation Console Installed in Housing Unit



As with all new technology, there have been some issues to overcome. At first the vendor had trouble understanding the complexity and logistics of moving inmates within the facility to accommodate visits while maintaining the safety and security of the facility. The vendor also needed to understand why we could not accommodate visits 24 hours a day, 7 days per week.

As an agency, the Sheriff's Office had some issues to work through as well. Because we were the pilot test for a new product, it became necessary for us to change our procedures often at the beginning of the project, in order to keep up with the changes we had requested from the vendor. This created frustration for staff which translated into some customer service issues for our visitors.

As is often the case with a radically new procedure, we experienced an unusual resistance to change in implementing the system. Some of this can be attributed to the constant procedural changes and some to a normal resistance to change.

All in all, this has been a positive experience with an excellent vendor who has provided exceptional customer service and a willingness to listen to our concerns and ideas to continually improve the product.

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The Washoe County Sheriff's Office website (<http://www.washoesherriff.com>) provides instructions and policy information for web-based inmate visitation. See the "Visit an Inmate" link on the homepage.

Document available at:

http://community.nicic.gov/blogs/national_jail_exchange/archive/2012/11/01/web-based-inmate-visitation-improves-security-and-access-in-washoe-county-nevada.aspx

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