

Rethinking Reform

HOW A HIGH-TECH SENTENCING ALTERNATIVE CAN SAVE MONEY, STRETCH RESOURCES AND POSSIBLY MAKE FOR BRIGHTER OUTCOMES.



Celebrities, as of late, have brought vital status services (VSS) to the attention of the mainstream. VSS are an off-shoot of location-based services, with a focus on the real-time location of people and very valuable assets. GPS-based VSS (not to be confused with electronic monitoring, which is best for a confined areas, such as house arrests) lets the wearer to move about more freely (while constantly monitored) and costs in the vicinity of \$10 a day, versus the \$60-plus a day of incarceration.

Leaders in Community Alternatives (LCA), a San Francisco organization that works with the public sector to create custom programs that promote a more successful criminal justice system, is a proponent of a GPS-enabled ankle cuff made by Omnilink. Linda Connelly, president and founder of LCA, considers the returns on investment to be numerous and diverse.

"It's a great deterrent," says Connelly. "It keeps people from going to certain neighborhoods where they could get into trouble. Knowing that someone is watching

24/7—it's a constant cognitive reminder. When someone has to focus on a schedule, and do what's right every time, it helps them to later follow that constructive behavior because a habit has been created and practiced."

Connelly says LCA tested several GPS products on the market but wasn't happy with the results until it found OmniLink. Its tracking device is lightweight, waterproof and has a rechargeable battery that lasts up to 21 days with light usage and three days in scenarios of intense monitoring. The tamper-resistant band requires no tools to install, and it's said to be able to

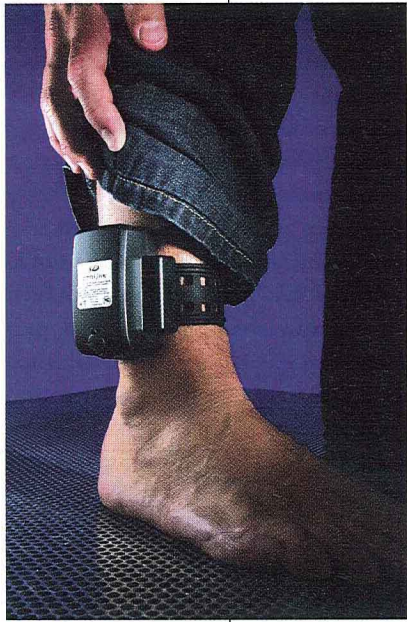
track a wearer to within 50 feet, even in signal-resistant environments such as subways, buildings, armored vehicles and tunnels.

Omnalink's Focalpoint software is based on a "management by exception" architecture, which means that officials can set predetermined conditions and be alerted by an email, fax, pager, text message or voice call if those parameters are violated. It also enables victims to be pro-active about their safety by downloading the application onto any off-the-shelf cell phone. If an offender wearing a court-mandated device comes close to the victim (or rather, to the phone), the victim and appropriate law enforcement are instantly and simultaneously alerted.

"The solution offers huge savings to government and really pays for itself," says Connelly. "We're currently trying to assist Mendocino County, a rural area with remote outlying areas that are hard to cover, to assess how GPS might help them manage their caseloads and provide services to the community." She emphasizes that no device is a replacement for face-to-face counseling—"The human interaction has to be there,"—but the Omnilink solution is a positive tool in their arsenal.

"Consider the benefits of a being able to have a family stay together, and a father—or a mother—who's working, versus splitting the family up and putting the children into foster care. Plus, there are the costs of jail and the price of courts and police arrests," says Connelly. "We're locking up non-violent offenders who could be working in their communities and supporting their families."

Do offenders wearing tracking devices have higher rates of reform than those who are jailed? "It's *really* hard to say," says Connelly. "That's a big weakness in the field right now. We need long-term studies. But if you look at our recidivism rates of 70 percent right now, it's clear something isn't working. It's time for some new ideas." //



>> The GPS-based Omnilink tracking device creates new options for government agencies.