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Smart Ideas for Government presented by Steve Goldsmith



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Taking Reservations at the Jail

An online system is dramatically improving the process for inmate visitations



Posted by *John O'Leary*
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The Santa Clara County Department of Correction had a problem. The system couldn't handle the daily onslaught of those coming to visit the more than 4,500 inmates held in its facilities. Although potential visitors could call a general number at the Department of Correction to schedule visits over the phone, this was a time-consuming and costly process that didn't work very well.

Most people who wanted to visit an inmate simply showed up and stood in line. The result was a disaster. Visitors were accepted on a first-come, first-served basis, which led to lines forming at the jails as early as 5 on weekend mornings, even in bad weather. Many times, people were turned away when the visit time slots were filled, some after having driven a great distance. The county's Board of Supervisors received many complaints from the public regarding their frustration with the inmate visiting process.

This approach put stress on staff as well. The waiting visitors needed to be pre-screened for visit eligibility, such as for outstanding arrest warrants. Due to staff shortages, inmates on weekend work programs were used as clerical staff to screen visitors so that department staff could escort visitors through the jail. This situation resulted in potential breaches in prison security and opportunities for identity theft.

Perhaps worst of all, this system meant that inmates got fewer visits, either because their potential visitors were turned away for lack of space or because the process was such a hassle that would-be visitors simply visited less often.

Visits are important. The average length of stay in the county system is about 110 days, and 80 percent of the population has a history of drug- or alcohol-related problems. Studies have shown a clear correlation between high rates of visitation and low recidivism. For those on the outside, being able to visit a struggling family member can be very important.

To solve this problem, Santa Clara County introduced a Web-based self-service system that allows potential



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visitors to register for an inmate visit via the county's [SCCgov portal](#). When a user registers, the Department of Correction runs a warrant and criminal background check on the potential visitor and approves or denies the visitation request. The registrant receives an e-mail notification of the request's approval or denial. Once approved, the user is able to pre-schedule inmate visits up to three weeks in advance via the county's Web site. Kiosks are also provided at the department offices for the public to register for and schedule visits.

The change has been dramatic.

In effect for three years, the system has made it possible to nearly double the number of visitors. On average, of the roughly 10,000 inmate visits each month, over 55 percent are now self-scheduled by members of the public. These visitors are pre-screened, so when they do arrive, processing them into the facility is much easier. Rather than allowing visits on only two chaos-filled days per week, the system now accepts visits six days a week. Furthermore, the reservations system has brought the department into compliance with both federal law and the California Corrections Standards Authority's mandate regarding inmate visitation rights.

There are other benefits to the system. In addition to scheduling visits, the system also provides a secure way for family and friends to obtain hearing, booking and bail information. The system reduces the number of phone calls to the department regarding court developments, and interested parties can more easily visit an inmate, post bail for an inmate, or attend an inmate's court hearings.








It's not surprising to see this sort of technical innovation in Santa Clara County, home of the Silicon Valley. This system has been [cited by the Ash Institute's Innovations in American Government Program](#) and holds promise for other jurisdictions. Since December 2006, the Online Visitor Registration has consistently been one of the top three applications accessed on Santa Clara County's public portal.

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