



Technology to track criminals will expand

Wesley G. Hughes, Staff Writer

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As the economy tightens the reins on the rest of us, San Bernardino County is shortening its leash even more on a special few.

This is a group almost everyone is glad that someone is watching. It includes child molesters, wife beaters, drunken drivers and gang members.

The Board of Supervisors last week voted to expand the county's use of surveillance technology to track criminal offenders who are on probation or serving time on house arrest or weekends in jail.

Some of the technology includes global positioning satellite surveillance, home-based electronic monitoring and alcohol monitoring.

Primary users of the technology will be the county Probation Department and the Sheriff's Department.

And in these days when the taxpayers are taking a beating, this program is expected to pay its own way by requiring the offenders to pay for the equipment that tracks them. It's either agree to that or jail.



(Rick Sforza/Staff Photographer)

Taxpayers get another break out of the deal. When the offender is out and about and being monitored, the county isn't forced to provide him with room and board, which is a big savings. It also helps alleviate overcrowding in the jails - a chronic problem in San Bernardino County.

The county signed contracts with Total Court Services to provide alcohol monitoring and Sentinel Offender Services to provide GPS tracking and home-based monitoring.

GPS satellite tracking has been in use in the county for four years. But the alcohol monitoring is new and the Sheriff's Department is new to the home-based electronic monitoring.

Sgt. David Phelps said several hundred county prisoners work during the week and serve their time on weekends. This should enable them to complete their sentences sooner.

The offenders will be charged \$15 a day on a sliding scale according to ability to pay. It will cost the county nothing, and the contractors will collect the money.

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Tracking from space

Slap a GPS ankle bracelet on a probationer and you can track where he is and where he has been today, last week or last month. No alibis.

Probation officer Nathan Scarano tells about a gang fight in front of an apartment complex in Adelanto. Word was that a felony probationer might be connected. Scarano booted up his computer and sure enough, the guy had been at the scene when the call came in. He went to the man's home and found him scuffed up like he'd been in a brawl. He finally admitted it and provided other evidence to investigators.

"GPS put him at the scene," Scarano said.

GPS also provided the break in a High Desert homicide, Scarano said. It was a shooting at a house. A man in the program had been there but was not involved. He ran, but the GPS locked in on him, and he became a witness.

Sex offenders

The Probation Department's six-member sex offender unit was formed four years ago. It supervises 450 offenders countywide, including 130 in the High Desert, where acting supervisor Peter Bockman works. The High Desert team ranges far from Victorville to Needles to Trona to Twentynine Palms. There are no sex offenders in tiny Trona at this time, Bockman said.

Sex offenders are very different from other

criminals, Bockman said. "They tend to be intelligent, stable and employed."

GPS is one of the tools used to supervise sex offenders. Others include home searches, surveillance, office visits, treatment and computer forensics. With all its capabilities, Bockman said, "GPS doesn't know what they are doing, who they are with or what actions they have taken."

Satellite tracking is effective at getting compliance to the rules, Bockman said, "They mind their P's and Q's."

The Probation Department is strict in handling felony probationers. They can't get away with just saying they are homeless.

"We make sure we know where you are," Bockman said. "If you say you sleep in your car, show me where you park."

Alcohol monitoring

They call it SCRAM, secure continuous remote alcohol monitoring. It's a different sort of anklewear, and it doesn't make a fashion statement. It is sensitive to and records the amount of alcohol in your sweat.

It's mostly used to monitor people on probation for driving under the influence, but it can be used in any cases where alcohol has been a factor, such as domestic violence, preventing underage drinking, or even custody cases. And Child Protective Services can request it.

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SCRAM representative Maria Gamboa said there are a surprising number of bartenders wearing the device. It is sensitive enough to detect the difference between ambient alcohol and alcohol that has been consumed. The wearer must pair it with a device at home that downloads its information and transmits it to SCRAM.

Probation Officer John Holmes said, "It's a great tool. Nobody gets arrested on suspicion. You get arrested on evidence."

Holmes is hoping SCRAM will reduce the number of second and third offenses and the overall amount of DUIs, making the community safer.

In the past year, the county courts have issued almost 1,500 warrants for drivers who didn't follow the judges' orders and became fugitives. Holmes said he would put both the alcohol monitor and the GPS monitor on an offender, if it was called for.

"San Bernardino County has no tolerance," he said.

Tracking the gangs

There are approximately 780 gangs in the county ranging from 200 to 300 members down to the teens, said Probation Officer Joe Bakunas. There are Latino gangs, black gangs, white gangs, hybrid (mixed race) gangs, tagger gangs, Asian gangs and outlaw motorcycle gangs.

The Probation Department has had as many as 75 gang members tracked by GPS. That number

currently is 25.

Bakunas said the Probation Department is very concerned about community safety. He's seen bona fide gang members as young as 9 or 10 and families with four generations in the gang life.

Scarano said, "I would like to see all convicted felons on GPS."

Gangs "live by their own ideology," Scarano said. "They just prey on the community."

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