

South Carolina

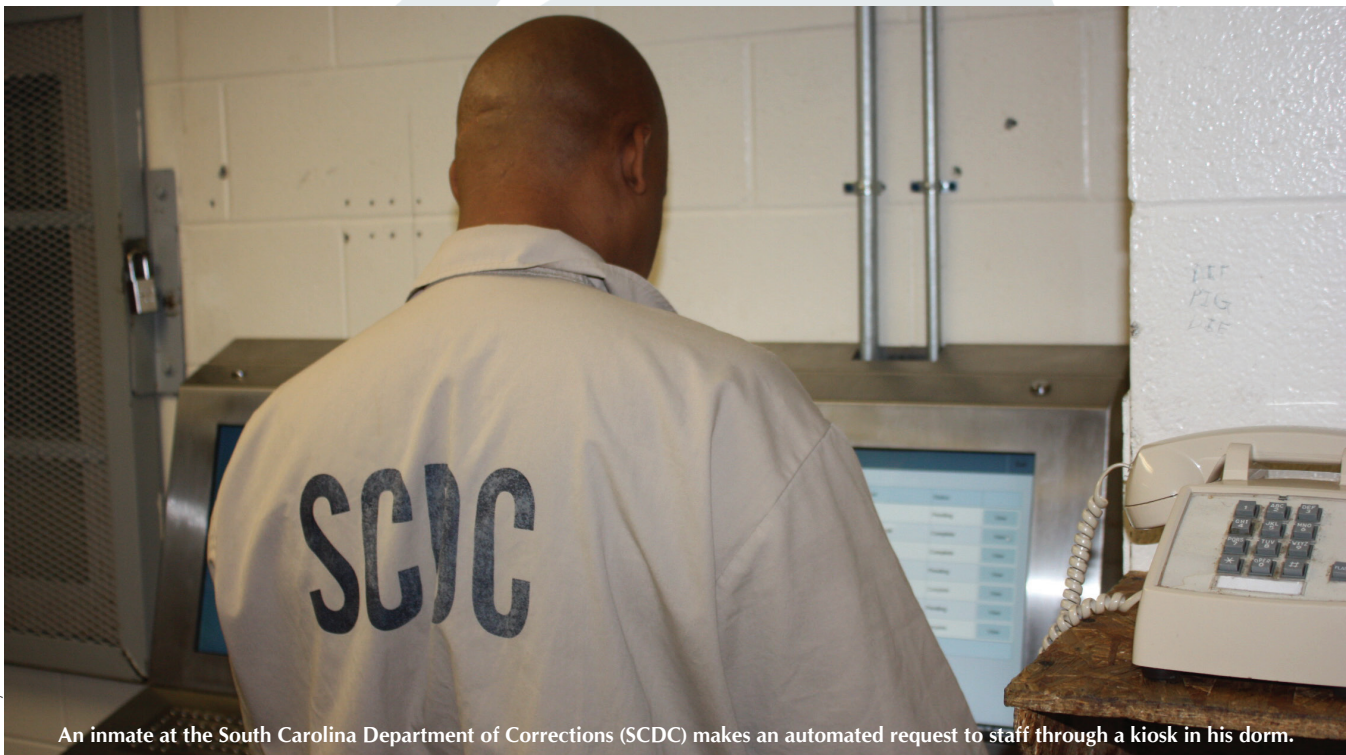
Automates Inmate Requests to Staff

By Clark Newsom

Like so many correctional systems nationwide, the South Carolina Department of Corrections (SCDC) has long sought a better method for efficiently and effectively managing its inmate requests to staff members (RTSMs). With 25 institutions, a total of just under 22,000 inmates and more than 5,500 employees, a reoccurring problem has been inmates making requests to multiple staff members within an institution who may not have been the right people to answer their queries. The result is a ponderous process that all too often leads to unsatisfactory results for both the inmate and prison staff. However, with the recent implementation of new technology and a renewed dedication by employees to improve and streamline the methodology, SCDC is making tangible progress toward solving this long-standing problem.

Updating RTSMs to a New System

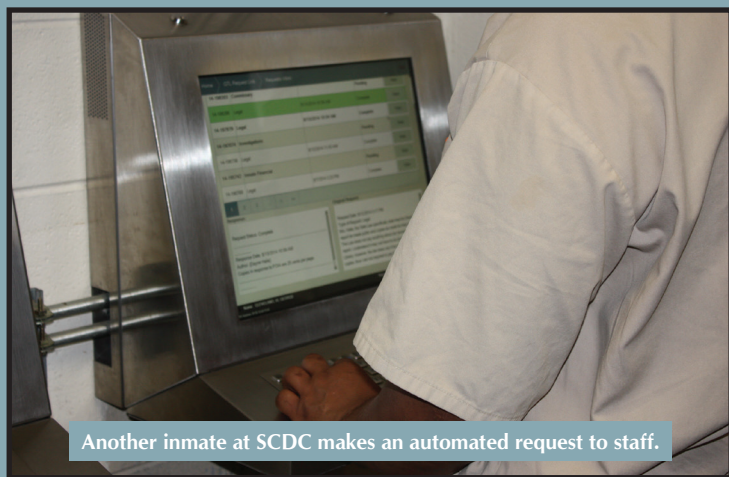
In November 2012, David Tatarsky, whose Office of General Counsel for SCDC is charged with managing requests to staff from individual inmates, decided that it was time to find a better solution for handling those requests. "When we are served with litigation, one of the first things opposing attorneys ask for is an accounting of RTSMs for their inmate clients. Under our old paper system, it was very difficult to determine if we were getting all of the requests that each inmate had actually written and submitted," said Tatarsky. At that time, both inmate requests and the responses from staff were handwritten. "There were also no set deadlines for responses by employees or any retention requirements. These inconsistencies led to a lack of prioritization, resulting in delays in properly addressing inmate requests



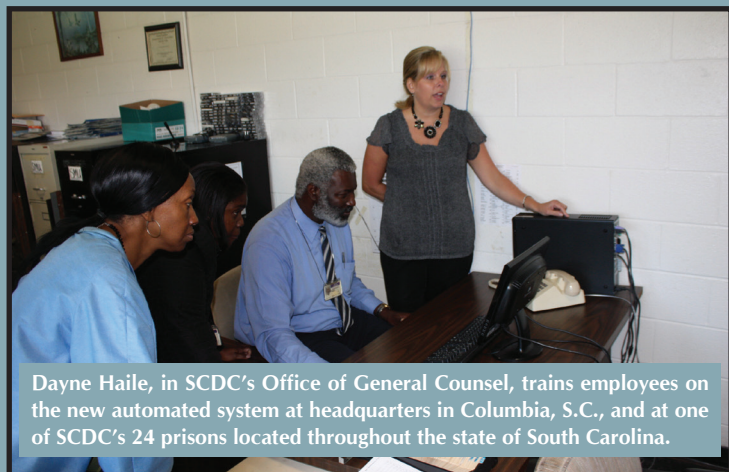
An inmate at the South Carolina Department of Corrections (SCDC) makes an automated request to staff through a kiosk in his dorm.

Photos by Clark Newsom

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Another inmate at SCDC makes an automated request to staff.



Dayne Haile, in SCDC's Office of General Counsel, trains employees on the new automated system at headquarters in Columbia, S.C., and at one of SCDC's 24 prisons located throughout the state of South Carolina.



Haile training employees at another facility



Haile coordinated the RTSM Automation Project.

and poor accountability," Tatarsky added. The old paper system required inmates to fill out handwritten forms that were many times submitted to more than one staff member and then finally answered in writing 10 months later.

Tatarsky tasked Dayne Haile, administrative coordinator for the Office of General Counsel, with organizing an effort to find a better alternative to the many problems of the inmate RTSM system. Haile, in turn, challenged a group of employees, including Resource Information Management Director Trevis Shealy; Dennis Patterson, a regional director from the SCDC Division of Operations; and representatives from six of SCDC's institutions that were chosen as eventual test sites to come up with ideas. In May 2013, after much discussion, the planning committee authorized implementing a program that would take the written RTSMs at each of the pilot institutions and scan them into a shared folder in SCDC's computer network. Requests were catalogued by inmate name, SCDC number, the date and the inmate's number of requests. Within 30 days, institutions were receiving as many as 200 requests per day. However, with only one person acting as the institutional clearinghouse, making sure each request was properly prioritized and addressed by the correct staff member, the new system still proved cumbersome and offered little overall improvement.

At the same time, SCDC had entered into an agreement with its inmate telephone system provider, Global Tel-Link (GTL) of Reston, Va., to begin using a two-way electronic message service in its institutions. The ConnectNetwork website, combined with GTL Genesis kiosks in SCDC's housing units, enables inmates to communicate with friends and family by email for a low cost. Each inmate has a unique personal identification number that he or she may use to send and receive messages on the kiosks while recipients receive messages via the ConnectNetwork Portal. All messages are subject to review by SCDC staff.

GTL Executive Director for Project Services Ed Adams and his staff were in South Carolina for nine days, training inmates and staff at all 25 SCDC institutions on the new two-way electronic message service. During that time, Adams had a conversation with Shealy, a member of the planning committee, who explained the agency's challenge with the current inmate request system. Adams told Shealy that his company had a program component in their Offender Management System that could be used in combination with the kiosks designed to handle inmate requests, and he thought the company would be willing to partner with SCDC to put it in place at no extra charge. The SCDC planning committee agreed to give it a try, and the inmate requests component was installed, initially featuring 30

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different categories of requests from which the inmate could choose. It was designed as a workflow system enabling 100 percent accountability.

Implementing the New System

GTL and SCDC then began training employees and instructing inmates on how to use the kiosks to input their requests. The agency’s three female correctional institutions — Goodman Correctional Institution and Camille Griffin Graham Correctional Institution in Columbia, S.C., and Leath Correctional Institution in Greenwood, S.C. — served as the initial test sites beginning in November 2013. By March 31, 2014, SCDC had gone statewide with its automated inmate RTSM system. Initially, there were a few bumps in the road, mostly dealing with the speed of the computer system statewide. South Carolina is presently in the process of updating all of its computer equipment and software and adding bandwidth, which is expected to continue to expedite the flow of information back and forth. Under the new system, inmates are not allowed to duplicate requests or pick who they want to answer them. In turn, the prison staff who are designated by their internal clearinghouse to answer individual inmate requests are asked to do so within a 45-day timeframe.

“This new RTSM system ensures that requests get to the right people with the right knowledge and responsibility to appropriately respond to inmate questions in a much more timely fashion,” said Tatarsky. “The volume and depth of information we can now catalogue through the kiosks is limitless and will make documentation simpler and more accurate.”

Results thus far are encouraging. As of May 12, 2015, SCDC reported receiving a total of 616,520 inmate RTSMs, of which 601,596 (97.58 percent) had been completed, with 14,924 pending.

Conclusion

By all accounts, SCDC is the first state correctional department to adopt this kind of automated inmate RTSM system. SCDC Director Bryan P. Stirling is enthused about what this can mean for South Carolina. “This automated system offers a valuable workflow component that keeps the appropriate staff in touch with inmate concerns while allowing our supervisors to better evaluate the performance of their personnel,” said Stirling. “It has the added advantage of saving on the cost of paper and other supplies.”

Adams thinks the new system could be a standard for other states to follow, saying, “At GTL, we pride ourselves on not only providing technology in the corrections market, but furthermore, providing integrated technology solutions, leading to increased operational efficiency.” Jeff Haidinger, president and chief operating officer of GTL, added, “This is another example of an ideal collaboration that brings together public requirements and private industry know-how. We are pleased that SCDC had the confidence to select GTL to help the department transform its operations with our technology.” Stirling summed up the project by saying, “I applaud our staff, the planning committee and the folks at GTL who worked to help us implement this system. We are proud of this partnership and the opportunity to be at the forefront of promoting new and innovative ideas in corrections.”



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