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More jails considering body scans to find or deter contraband



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By **Holly Zachariah**

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The people who run the Tri-County Regional Jail have heard the stories: weapons and drugs stuffed into parts of prisoners' bodies where weapons and drugs are never supposed to be.

Guards there don't have any of their own harrowing tales of finding contraband hidden that way. But they've confiscated plenty of drugs — and uncovered a few weapons — in the jail in Mechanicsburg, which serves Champaign, Madison and Union counties.

And they know those things were smuggled in somehow.

So after months of study, the commission that runs the jail is expected to approve buying a \$190,000 body-scanning, low-dose X-ray machine to check every inmate being booked in. The vote is scheduled for January, and the scanner would be paid for using operating and capital-improvement money.

Only three such scanners operate in county jails in Ohio: The Hamilton County sheriff's office was the first to install one in Ohio, in 2013, and jails in Cuyahoga and Hancock counties have added them since. That's according to the Ohio Department of Health, which inspects the machines and sets the safety guidelines.

Several other county sheriffs are considering them.

Scott Springhetti, director of the Tri-County Regional Jail, visited Cincinnati recently and was put through that Hamilton County scanner for a look at how it operates.

The inmates stand while clothed and holding their shoes and are run on a conveyor through the X-ray.

It shows foreign objects inside a body, such as balloons of drugs that have been swallowed or inserted, but it also does a better job of catching things that are hidden in less-invasive ways, Springhetti said.



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The Hamilton County jail was the first in Ohio to install a body-scanning, low-dose X-ray machine.

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“We’ve seen people sew tobacco or loose drugs into the tiny hem of a T-shirt,” he said. “No way that’s getting through a machine. It even showed the fillings in my teeth.”

Thoroughly searching incoming prisoners can be problematic for officials. Jailers pat everyone down, but sometimes, that’s all they can do.

A U.S. Supreme Court decision in 2012 made it clear that anyone entering a jail in custody can be strip-searched. (That means get naked, squat and cough. But internal searches of a body cavity always require a search warrant.)

But while Ohio law allows strip searches for those charged with felonies, it prevents them for those charged with misdemeanors.

This is a problem when the majority of those entering a county jail are charged with low-level crimes, said Madison County Sheriff Jim Sabin.

He wants the machine at his Tri-County Jail, which will process about 4,500 inmates this year for an average length of stay of about 16 days.

“Where we see our biggest problem with contraband is for weekend reports — people who are ordered by the court to report in on a specific day for a short stay,” Sabin said. “They think they can just bring their drugs in with them.”

This year, Tri-County has logged nearly 90 incidents of contraband being found either at intake or in a cell. Jailers have found syringes, heroin, pills, marijuana and four weapons.

Sometimes, though, that’s not all that prisoners cart in.

In Hamilton County, where the sheriff’s office used money it made at the inmate commissary rather than tax dollars to pay for the scanner, the machine found a screwdriver hidden in a man’s rectum. That’s contraband, a valuable weapon for a prisoner with ill intent, said Maj. Charmaine McGuffey.

“Finding just one weapon makes this a success,” McGuffey said. “It’s about keeping our facility safe.”

And just a couple of months ago, the men running the scanner there found a gem. Literally.

A woman and her accomplice were accused of breaking into a local jewelry store. The crime went awry when the elevator broke down during their getaway, McGuffey said. Stuck, the thieves threw a bag filled with 26 stolen diamond rings into the ceiling.

Even so, they were found with a mask and criminal tools and were arrested. But while they were being processed at the jail, a 27th stolen ring was found, this one tucked in the woman’s vagina.

Although that story made its rounds through the law-enforcement community and got plenty of play on the evening news, it really doesn’t illustrate the point of the scanners, said Chief Deputy Geoff Stobart, who is in charge of corrections and court services at the Franklin County sheriff’s office.

Franklin County’s planned \$135 million jail, scheduled to open in 2019 on Columbus’ West Side, will use X-ray scanners, Stobart said.

Sheriff Zach Scott would have installed them already at the existing jails, but there isn’t room, Stobart said. The machines have a footprint of at least 7 square feet and are at least 8 feet tall.

said, deputies would never have to discover any contraband for a machine to be worthwhile.

“Right now, there’s little deterrent to stop people willing to put things where they shouldn’t and try to get it into the jail. It’s absolutely insane, what people are willing to do to get drugs in,” Stobart said.

“But word on the street spreads fast, and if they know they’re going to — without question — get caught, that’s a deterrent.”

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