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Scanner helps stop flow of drugs in Fla. jail

The installation of the scanner in Orange County Jail has cut down on inmates sneaking in drugs

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By Stephanie Allen
Orlando Sentinel

ORANGE COUNTY, Fla. — Sheriff's deputies warned Sara Suffield that bringing drugs or paraphernalia into the jail is a felony charge -- one that several dozen people have faced so far this year in Orange County, court records show.

Deputies had already found two needles hidden in Suffield's shorts when she consented to a search during a traffic stop last week, according to an arrest report. Suffield, 31, denied having anything, the report states, but when female jail officers took her to a search area to perform an X-ray cavity search, Suffield's answer changed.

Orange County Jail officers have been trying to cut down on the amount of contraband, including drugs and weapons, that slip through into the facility, and in April, started using a new X-ray system to better detect if an incoming inmate is concealing something.

So far, it appears to be working, jail spokeswoman Tracy Zampaglione said.

After the scan, Suffield pulled out 49 small baggies of heroin and 10 bags of cocaine that she had hidden inside of her, according to the arrest affidavit.

The jail has averaged about eight contraband incidents a month so far this year -- down from about 11 a month during all of 2015, according to data released Tuesday.

An incident could be anything from officers finding an inmate altering jail-issued clothing, or in possession of tobacco, cash or other prohibited items, Zampaglione said. Officials rarely find weapons or illegal drugs that make it inside the jail, she said.

"The great thing is the new SecurPass X-ray scanner is doing a great job at keeping contraband from being introduced into the jail," she said.

SecurPass is a full-body digital scanner, similar to ones used in airports, that can detect items concealed under clothing or inside body cavities, according to the Cannon USA website, which produces the scanner.

Orange County purchased its scanner, paid for by general fund money. Every new inmate booked into the jail is screened before entering, in addition to being given a pat down -- just as they were before. Zampaglione said this is an enhancement, not a replacement to their security measures.

It uses a low-exposure X-ray system that scans in less than eight seconds to help officers easily find and secure the items, according to the website. They're marketed for use at border security sites, at airports, nuclear power plants and in jails and prisons.

The Federal Bureau of Prisons installed SecurPass systems at several prisons across the country and has been testing the technology's effectiveness at cutting down on contraband, according a report released in June by the Office of the Inspector General.

The Inspector General's office was reviewing the Federal Bureau's efforts at stopping contraband and interviewed prison staff who called SecurPass "a good enhancement for security," and a "milestone in the facility," the report states.

Zampaglione said jail officials have been "extremely pleased" with its effectiveness at detecting illegal items during the booking process so they never make it into the jail -- items such as the distribution-ready baggies of heroin and cocaine that deputies said Suffield had hidden inside her.

"Safety is paramount," Zampaglione said. "Our primary focus is to keep our correctional officers, civilian staff and the inmates safe."

SecurPass provides that additional layer of security."

Suffield is being held in the jail on charges including possession of heroin with intent to sell or deliver, possession of cocaine with intent to sell or deliver and introducing contraband into a county facility.

McClatchy-Tribune News Service

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