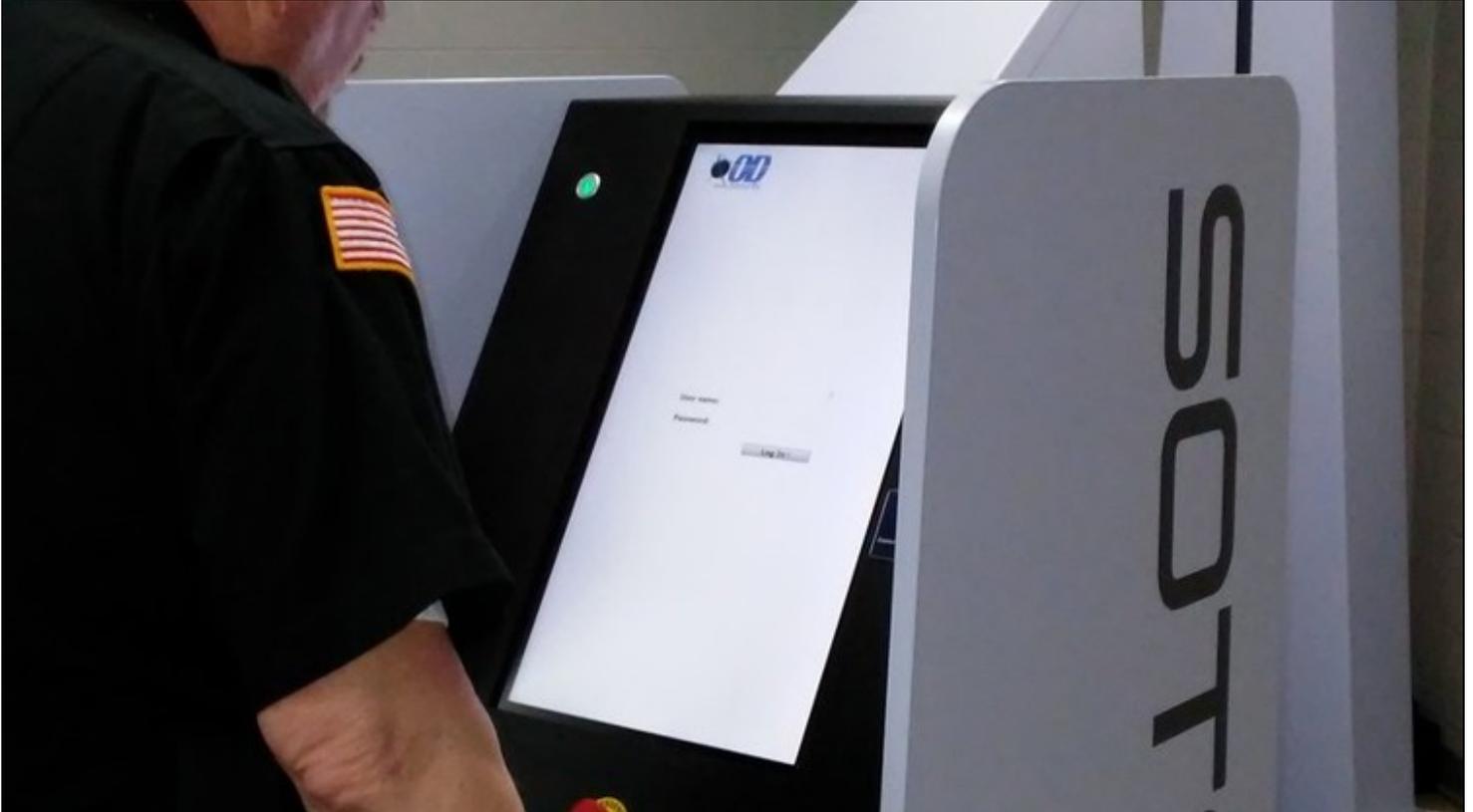


Sheriffs turn to body scanners to curb drug flow into jails

CRIME By Mark Gokavi - Staff Writer



The body scanner at the Tri-County Regional Jail in Mechanicsburg. TRI-COUNTY JAIL

Posted: 3:19 p.m. Thursday, March 02, 2017

Heroin, fentanyl, cocaine, meth and other drugs are smuggled into jails in body cavities. Officials say drugs — the gold standard in jailhouse currency — lead to drug abuse, withdrawals, overdoses and deaths like Tuesday's suspected fatal OD of an inmate in Greene County.

County jails across Ohio are seeking funding for or installing body scanners that can spot illegal drugs and contraband such as tobacco, paper clips, "sporks" or weapons. Butler County installed a scanner on Thursday.

RELATED: [Inmate dies of apparent overdose in Greene County](#)

"It began serving its purpose as word spread that we were getting it," said Scott Springhetti, director of the Tri-County Regional Jail in Mechanicsburg, where a scanner was installed in August. "The amount of contraband started decreasing."

Montgomery County Sheriff Phil Plummer and county officials say they've reached an agreement to fund a body scanner for the jail. Inmate Dustin Rybak died of an overdose last fall while waiting to testify in a trial.

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Commissioners and county administrator Joe Tuss said Plummer has \$1.7 million of discretionary money in his commissary fund to use for a jail that sometimes houses more than 900 inmates.

"Basically, (Plummer) indicated that if he could buy it out of his commissary fund, he would, but if it wasn't something he could do ... just let me know and I will talk to the commissioners and they'll authorize funding out of the contingency (money)," Tuss said. "That offer still stands."

Greene County Sheriff Gene Fischer said Wednesday that he has an agreement in principle to purchase a scanner, which usually cost from \$120,000 to \$240,000.

Deaths in area county jails

Inmates also have died from drug-related incidents the past few years in Montgomery, Warren, Clark, Miami and Fayette counties — all in jails without body scanners.

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"We have been in conversation with (county) commissioners about purchasing a body scanner for everybody coming into the jail," Fischer said during a press conference to announce that inmate Jeremy Withers died while in custody. "That looks like it will happen."

Butler County Sheriff's Office Major Mike Craft said their new scanner will keep drugs, weapons and other contraband out of the jail. "It is much needed for security," Craft said.

Craft said the scanner has a conveyor belt and will "show everything," even if someone has swallowed a balloon of drugs. Several years ago, a woman brought a loaded gun into the jail stuck into her vagina, Craft said.

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Miami County Sheriff Dave Duchak said he'd like to get a scanner but said there is "no funding at this time" though he's looking into using the commissary fund to help pay.

Duchak said it would "be nice to see the State of Ohio step up and supply each county jail one throughout the state," adding that "the state continues to move incarceration burdens onto the counties and are currently looking at all felony 4 and 5's becoming the counties' responsibility."

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Fayette County 'can't wait' for scanner

Fayette County Sheriff Vernon Stanforth said their jail was built in 1884 before indoor plumbing and electricity were common, so county officials are building an addition just to house their body scanner, which should be operational in 30-45 days. The state's recommended number for prisoners is 28, but they've had 70 lately.

"We've had two deaths in our jail from suspected overdoses in the past year," Stanforth said. "People are sneaking drugs in like crazy, in every jail ... and it's part of the epidemic."

Stanforth said, in both cases, the inmates had been in the jail for a while and someone else brings in drugs in body cavities that likely led to overdoses.

"If you're sneaking it in, you're the top man in the jail," Stanforth said. "Because everyone's going to want your (drugs). You can use it to barter with all day long."

The sheriff said a new jail is in the talking stage but that county officials spent nearly \$240,000 for the scanner, cobbling together a cooperative effort from several funding sources.

"I was reluctant to make this kind of investment on an old facility, but I can't wait any longer," Stanforth said. "It's a public health issue that has fallen on the criminal justice system to solve. We don't have the resources. There's not a jail in this country that has those resources. But it's falling on us."

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Tri-County Jail tries to be proactive

At the Tri-County Jail housing prisoners from Champaign, Madison and Union counties, administrators didn't wait for an overdose death to take action.

Springhetti said he learned in 2012 that Hamilton County was the first Ohio county to use body scanners. Ever since, he said he's watched the prices drop as more vendors entered the market.

"We found drugs and contraband that got past security at intake," Springhetti said. "Sporks, paper clips, marijuana, you name it, we've found just about everything."

Springhetti said the jail hasn't had overdose deaths, but that the counties wanted to be proactive.

"The body scanner is a great tool to deter and also detect, but even that itself isn't going to be 100 percent guarantee," he said. "The more changes that law enforcement makes, that corrections make, the more artistic or more creative those offenders that are going to try to smuggle in things become."

RELATED: [Commissioners approve body scanners](#)

Champaign County Commissioner Bob Corbett said funding for the Tri-County Jail scanner came from money from a work release program collected since the new jail opened in 2000.

Inmates who work during the day — and approved by judges to do so — pay a little cash for the right to work outside the jail. Corbett said that total added up and that he's glad Springhetti pushed for the scanner.

"You're either going to go through the messes with the problems that you have — and you're still going to have a mess; you're never going to get rid of all of them — but this is a problem we've got to do something about," Corbett said, adding that prevention pays off. "Where do the lawsuits come from when something happens? And it costs you so much in legal fees."

RELATED: 15 lawsuits alleging mistreatment at area jails

The 'grip' doesn't go away

Fischer said the human cost of illegal drug use is hard for him to comprehend.

"I don't know what goes on in people's minds, why one, they would want to ingest that anyway," he said. "We do know that heroin has, all drugs have a certain draw to people that they just have to have it.

"So, if you know you're going to jail, it seems to be an increasing thing to do now to just ingest some drugs so you can bring them up later and use them when you're in jail."

Stanford added that an inmate's drug problem becomes a jail's problem.

"If you've never seen anyone on heroin, like a parent seeing their child destroy themselves with heroin, they don't know the grip that has on that person," he said. "Just because they're in jail, that doesn't go away."

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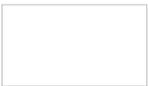
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