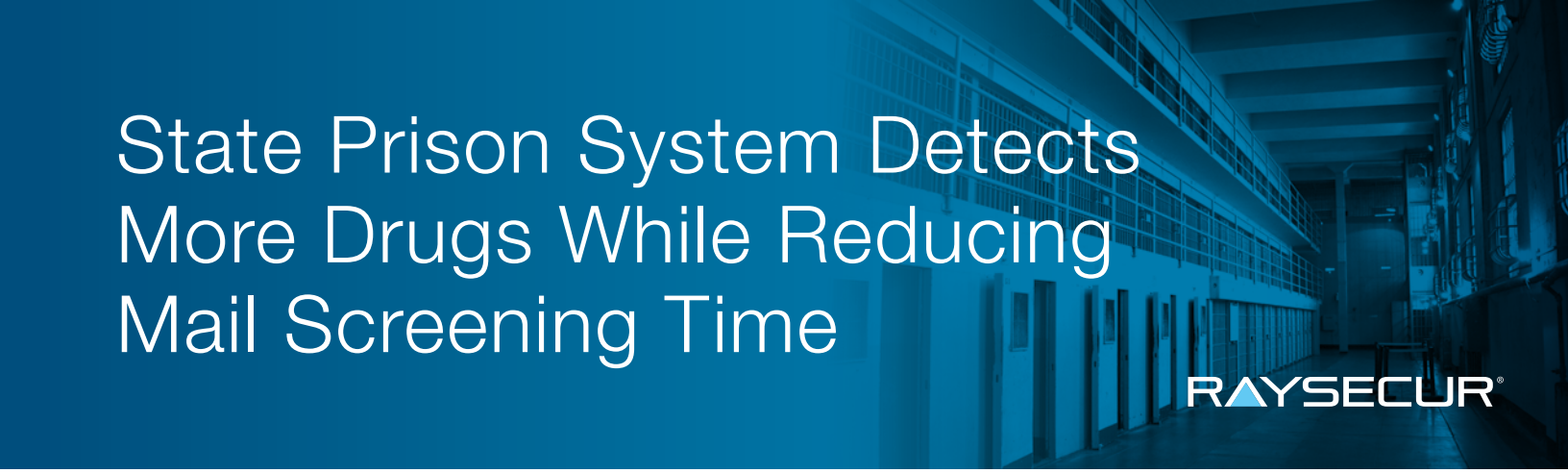
State Prison System Detects More Drugs While Reducing Mail Screening Time



RAYSECUR®

MAILSECUR®

INDUSTRY

Corrections and Law Enforcement

CUSTOMER

Major State Department of Corrections

CHALLENGE

Detecting illicit drugs smuggled in mail and parcels

Increasingly postal mail is used, as it is easy to conceal and hard to detect, particularly drug-laced papers, suboxone strips, and small quantities of powders and liquids. The problem is pervasive, straining thin screening resources, exposing officers to harmful substances, and contributing to inmate violence, overdose, and death.

Correctional facilities, prisons, and jails nationwide are struggling with how to combat the stream of contraband, including illegal drugs.

SITUATION

A state-run correctional system with 32 high- and medium-risk facilities needed a better way to screen inmates' legal mail. Legal mail is constitutionally protected and cannot be opened or digitized. As a result, fraudulent legal mail has become the preferred means to send narcotics into correctional facilities. Its inspection requires more time and resources, and the COVID-19 shutdowns worsened the situation as reduced visitations caused the quantity of mail to increase, as did the COVID exposure risk for inmates and staff.

Despite devoting significant resources in man-hours and technology to the problem, drugs and other harmful substances continued to be missed and flowed into the general population, as evidenced by the increase in drug-related violence and overdoses. The facility was actively seeking a better and more efficient mail screening solution to reduce the screening time for staff that was already stretched thin and increase screening effectiveness.

CHALLENGES

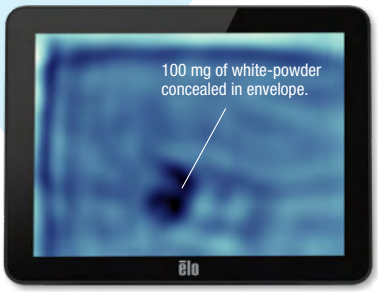
There are two broad categories of mail streams into corrections facilities – personal and legal mail. While the screening process is similar, each has distinct challenges. The screening of personal mail is involved as every piece must be inspected, including examining all pages in a newspaper or magazine for hidden contraband. Putting each piece of mail through an X-ray scanner is not practical, and it also does not detect drugs in small quantities, especially treated papers, powders, and liquids. This leaves staff to perform a manual inspection by opening each mail piece. This is dangerous and exposes staff to harmful substances, including fentanyl. Mail screening staff are increasingly hospitalized for fentanyl exposure, a growing problem nationwide[1,2].

Unlike personal mail, the screening of legal mail, from an attorney or court, is a multi-step process, as the mail cannot be opened without cause and requires the inmate to be present. In this particular facility, three staff members were involved in screening legal mail: one conducted a Google search to verify the legitimacy of the law firm on the return address, a second called the law firm to verify the firm did indeed represent the inmate, and the third to physically screen the mail item (visual and tactile inspection).

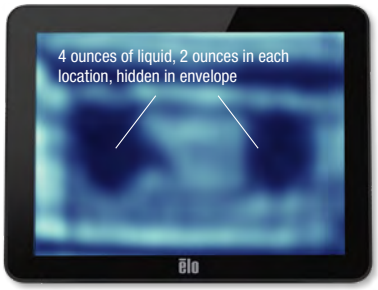
Detection of potentially suspect or fraudulent items required the inmate to be moved from their cell to a separate screening room to witness the opening, further inspection, and testing. The entire process was labor-intensive, time-consuming, and generally ineffective.

This facility also used technology screening tools, including an X-ray scanner and additional chemical detection devices. X-ray requires radiation safety protocols, permits, and specialized training to operate and interpret the images. While effective at detecting potential weapons, the X-ray could not detect the small amounts of drugs and related contraband, especially suboxone strips, K2 and similarly treated papers, and powder or liquid drugs hidden in envelopes or taped to pages in a book or file.

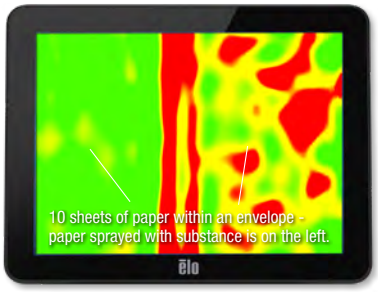
Powders



Liquids



Laced Papers



Suboxone Strip

SOLUTION

Following extensive onsite benchmarking, with actual samples and mail items from the facility's evidence locker, the facility deployed MailSecur® scanners and the EODSecur™ support service in their central mail processing facility. The roll-out was supported by web-based and onsite training and certification of the screeners over a half-day – significantly less than X-ray training and certification.

The corrections staff quickly became proficient in detecting previously missed drugs and contraband without opening the mail. In cases where screeners needed an expert second opinion, the EODSecur support service provided real-time access to former military threat experts who could remotely connect to the scanner onsite and support local screeners. The screening staff also utilized the EODSecur service when training new staff members.

Compared to their existing screening process, the screening staff was very pleased with the system's ease of use, flexibility, and detection capabilities. In quick order, they improved the efficiency and effectiveness of their legal mail screening operation, reducing screening time by 80% while significantly decreasing the need for inmate interaction in the process.

A primary reason for the success in corrections applications is the MailSecur scanner's ease of use and imaging capabilities, due to its T-ray imaging technology. Unlike X-rays which use ionizing radiation, T-rays, or terahertz frequencies, are simply high-frequency radio waves which do not generate ionizing radiation and are safe. As a result, mail handlers can place the item directly on the scanning bed and manipulate it to gain alternate views in real-time. Given the safe nature of the T-ray waves, anyone in the facility can operate the device, extending the number of mail handlers that can perform screening and significantly reducing the training time needed to become proficient with the system. Since the images appear in real-time, the mail handler can move quickly through the mail and letters that require screening.

DHS Designated CBRNE Substances	MAILSECUR
Explosives	✓
Illicit Items	✓
Contraband	✓
Powders	✓
Liquids	✓
Chemicals	✓
Biological	✓
Radiological	✓
Nuclear	✓

MailSecur T-ray imaging technology provides 4D image scans that are 300x more sensitive than X-ray to detect liquids, powders, and other forms of drugs. The addition of live-action video allows the operator to see grains of powder or liquid moving within an envelope or identify sections of paper previously soaked in drugs or other chemicals. It is also sensitive enough to detect the presence of suboxone strips hidden within the pages of a magazine or the folds of fraudulent legal mail inside an envelope. It is the only mail screening device that can detect all nine of the CBRNE designated substances recognized by the Department of Homeland Security and used in a number of other government and corporate security applications, including screening mail for G8 leaders and four of the five largest US corporations.

Mail handlers also have the freedom to move mail screening to wherever they need it within the facility. The MailSecur scanner is a desktop unit weighing 70 lbs and powers with a standard power outlet. It is no longer necessary to move the inmate from their cell to witness a secondary screening process as the system can be moved on a cart to the inmate and reduces the risk of exposure and unnecessary interactions.

The EODSecur support service backs the MailSecur solution. This team of military-trained EOD specialists is available 24x365 to assist mail operators in diagnosing any suspicious scans. The unit's image scans and videos are remotely accessible by the EODSecure team, which allows them to quickly identify and provide guidance on mitigation steps and support additional training remotely.

OUTCOME

After deploying MailSecur scanners, time devoted to mail screening decreased by over 80%, primarily due to the reduced need to move inmates daily from their cells to the screening room and the ability to very quickly weed out legitimate threats from potential false positives – a fundamental problem with the previous approaches the facility was using. Staff who previously devoted a significant amount of time to mail screening could now be re-assigned to other activities, helping to ease the facility's strain on staffing.

Staff are now safe from exposure to harmful and dangerous substances since the mail can effectively be screened without opening and interacting with the contents of the mail item.

The MailSecur solution eased several critical challenges this prison was facing. In a short period of time, they have improved their drug detection capabilities, reduced the amount of contraband introduced to the general population, and limited the need for inmate movement.

An added benefit is that they can quickly scale their operation by simply deploying more MailSecur devices across all of their facilities.

1 https://www.wqad.com/article/news/local/thomson-prison-drug-exposure-hospitalizes-officer-afge-local-4070/526-a9c2af63-87c5-4b6b-9526-0439558556a3

2 https://www.silive.com/crime-safety/2022/03/report-7-hospitalized-after-fentanyl-allegedly-went-airborne-at-juvenile-center-in-ohio.html

For information on how to use MailSecur to keep your people and organization safe, contact:

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