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GPS to Monitor Parolee; Sex Offender – the State Plans to Outfit the Target of Inland Protests with the Device this Week

By Lisa O’Neill Hill and Douglas Quan, The Press-Enterprise

Satellite tracking devices used by the military to monitor troops and by automakers to find lost motorists are gaining popularity across the country as a way to keep tabs on sex offenders and other criminals.

Florida, Massachusetts and Tennessee are among the states using the Global Positioning System to help monitor the movements of rapists, child molesters and other offenders. The California Department of Corrections recently announced plans for a pilot program that will lock GPS ankle bracelets on 180 high-risk sex offenders in Southern California.

David Allyn Dokich, whose parole to a Mead Valley group home spurred daily protests, is set to get one this week. The two-time rapist will be one of the first offenders in the state to receive a bracelet, officials have said, acknowledging that the public outcry made him a priority.

Proponents say the technology provides an extra layer of oversight and is intended to supplement human supervision. But critics say the devices have limitations: No system is foolproof, and knowing where a sex offender is is quite different from knowing what he’s up to, they say.

“I guess it will be helpful. It’s not a panacea, though,” said Riverside County Assistant District Attorney Rod Pacheco, who won a rape conviction against Dokich in 1987. “He could be wearing that device when he attacks somebody. It’s not like it’s going to stop him.”

The pilot program is scheduled to last 2 1/2 years and will cost the Department of Corrections \$ 8.75 a day per offender, said Steve Logan, chief executive officer of Satellite Tracking of People, the Houston-based company that will help the state monitor sex offenders.

Authorities can program into the device “exclusion zones,” such as schools and parks. The system notifies authorities when an offender enters an exclusion zone or when someone tries to take off the device. A parole officer would receive a cell phone call, page, email or fax, Logan said. Police and parole officers could then respond.

As part of the pilot program, crime data from local law-enforcement agencies will be compared with data about offenders' movements. Police can then easily identify which offenders were near the scene of a crime and which ones were out of the area, Logan said.

The use of technology corresponds with a shift in dealing with offenders, Logan said. The 1980s and 1990s were the "lock 'em up" decades, when officials built big prisons, he said. Now, corrections officials are faced with crowding in prisons and need an efficient way to manage people out on probation and parole, he said.

GPS technology also is being used to monitor defendants awaiting trial, juveniles and people convicted of domestic violence, he said.

"It doesn't alleviate the need for human involvement. It's meant to be a tool to make them more effective in their work," he said of probation and parole officers. "We think it's very powerful and very cost-effective."

SURVEILLANCE

Dokich is now basically on a 24-hour curfew and can leave the house only if he's with parole agents. Two parole agents also monitor him from 8 p.m. to 6 a.m., and Dokich is under electronic surveillance. Officials say the GPS device is more sophisticated than the current electronic surveillance, which can let authorities know only whether he has left the house.

Dokich was convicted of raping two teenagers in separate crimes. He spent two years in prison for raping a 15-year-old girl in Orange County in 1982, was released and then committed another rape. In 1987, he was convicted of raping a 16-year-old Lake Elsinore girl.

Alfred Martinez, spokesman for the parole region that includes Riverside and San Bernardino counties, said the GPS units give officers another supervisory tool and allow them to tell in real time where an offender has been and where he or she is going.

But some civil libertarians say round-the-clock monitoring could impede the offender's transition back into society.

"Hyper surveillance of people on parole or probation is not necessarily the best public-safety policy because these individuals will be out from under supervision . . . and we want them to learn to operate on their own," said Ann Lambert, legislative counsel with the American Civil Liberties Union in Boston.

It's not considered healthy for parents constantly to hover over their teenage children, and the same rule should apply to the way the state treats released sex offenders, she said.

"Supervision, sure. Rules, sure," Lambert said. "We can't stay on them all the time because they have to grow . . . a healthy self-awareness."

SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY

San Bernardino County's probation department recently began using satellite tracking devices to supervise sex offenders on probation, becoming the first county in the state to embark on such an effort.

People convicted of sexual offenses or domestic violence will be required to wear GPS devices as a term of probation. Officials expect to install the first system on an offender due to be released this week, said Michelle Scray, deputy chief probation officer.

San Bernardino County is using a different system from the one the Department of Corrections has.

The system used by San Bernardino County uses an ankle bracelet and a cellular phone, through which an offender and a supervising probation officer on duty 24 hours a day can communicate. If an offender strays into a restricted area, the supervising probation officer is notified. The officer then can get in touch with the offender and decide whether the police need to respond.

"We can call them and say, 'Why are you at the park? What are you doing there?'" Scray said.

The GPS devices also will give domestic-violence victims a higher level of protection because authorities will be better able to monitor whether an offender is going near a victim, she said.

Technology is helping officers doing their jobs more efficiently, Scray said.

"I don't think there can be a down side to using whatever technology is available," she said.

Sixty sex offenders on probation or parole in Massachusetts are being monitored under a similar GPS program introduced in May.

The Tennessee Board of Probation and Parole is launching a pilot program using GPS technology in nine counties. The devices will be locked onto about 600 offenders Richard Nimer, vice president for business development of Pro Tech Monitoring, a Florida company that does GPS tracking for 600 sex offenders in that state, said the technology provides a strong deterrent.

"What GPS does is it takes away offenders' anonymity. This thing tracks everywhere they go. When you know you're being tracked, you're going to think twice."

Mead Valley resident Lirra Bishop is not convinced. Bishop, who has been protesting outside of Dokich's home, demanding that he be moved, said an offender could easily commit a crime in two minutes, long before parole or police officers arrive.

"No amount of surveillance, GPS, parole is going to keep someone from doing what they have set their minds to do," she said.

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GPS TRACKING: David Allyn Dokich, the high-risk sex offender released from prison last month to a Mead Valley group home, will be required to wear a satellite tracking device to monitor his whereabouts.

- Dokich will be fitted with a high-tech ankle bracelet.

Ankle bracelet

- The bracelet will continuously transmit his location to a Global Positioning System satellite.

Satellite

- The satellite will relay Dokich's location to a central computer.
- The computer will record his whereabouts and immediately notify authorities if he enters any areas where he is not allowed.

VeriTracks mapping software

- Authorities also will be notified if Dokich attempts to take off the bracelet.

SOURCE: CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS, VERITRACKS, SATELLITE TRACKING OF PEOPLE LLC, THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE.

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