



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Electronic Monitoring

Dear CJM,

I read with interest the 'Home Alone Two' article (Criminal Justice Matters, Summer 1995) decrying the use of electronic monitoring, written by Mr Dick Whitfield of the Kent Probation Service. While the article is strewn with inaccuracies I believe its negative tone is rooted in the omission of the Probation Service in the British tagging trials.

As the world's largest supplier of electronic monitoring systems BI Incorporated has a vested interest in the success of electronic monitoring programs. We have worked with over a thousand correctional agencies over the past ten years while learning the key components that make electronic monitoring programs successful. If one were to poll successful users of electronic monitoring programs in the U.S., Canada, Singapore, Sweden, and Holland to discover the key factors for success one might expect to hear the following responses: clear, well defined objective for using electronic monitoring; strong involvement and support of probation/parole service; carefully screened participants using well-defined selection criteria; provision and supervision (by probation/parole officers) of support programs (e.g. drug/alcohol treatment, theft treatment, etc.); strong government commitment to the program; reliable electronic monitoring equipment.

The belief here is that success is determined by the programs designed to meet objectives and the people involved in, and supervising, those programs. Certainly the equipment must be reliable so that the officers involved have confidence in the information provided by the equipment. But reliable equipment alone will not assure a successful electronic monitoring program. The involvement of professional social workers is key. Perhaps if Mr Whitfield and his colleagues were more involved in the British tagging trials he would have a more realistic and informed perspective of the issues.

Electronic monitoring in the US is far from a 'shambles' as Mr Whitfield noted. All programs are accountable to budget authorities. If programs were not successful they would be stopped. This is not happening. We estimate that the

market is growing over 10% annually and we are certainly seeing steady growth among our customer base. For example, the US federal probation and pre-trial service has doubled its program (from 1200 to 2500 participants) in the last two years.

The economics are compelling as well. In Canada, the Attorney General's Corrections Branch in British Columbia has achieved cost avoidance of \$10 million through the use of their electronic monitoring program. Further, a capital cost reduction of over \$30 million has been realised through the elimination of three 100 bed open institutions which would be required if not for the electronic monitoring program.

However, one doesn't need to travel west across the Atlantic to benefit from the experience of successful electronic monitoring programs. A short trip northeast across the North Sea to Stockholm would provide all the answers needed. The Swedes have just completed the first year of a two year pilot program. The mid-term results: "Better than our expectations and we expected success," according to one Ministry of Justice official. One key to the success in Sweden: The Swedish Prison and Probation Service is intimately involved in the operation of the program.

Most sincerely,

John D Thurston
International Manager
BI Incorporated
Boulder, Colorado

Dear CJM,

Thank you for letting me see the letter from John Thurston of BI Incorporated which I read with interest. I think it is rather refreshing of him to say that he has a 'vested interest in the success of electronic monitoring programmes' because it is certainly the case. The question of how you define success is, however, at the nub of the problem and why I disagree so strongly with some of the points he makes.

The equipment is undeniably impressive and it now has a very good track record in the States of monitoring people's movements successfully. I have

no problem with that and from this point of view John Thurston is right but he is equally right in saying that reliable equipment alone will not assure a successful electronic monitoring programme. The addition of probation or social work support is, as he says, a key to successful schemes in the States. But what is more revealing are the other criteria which he listed, including careful selection and other support programmes, e.g. for drug and alcohol treatment. He quotes Sweden as an example of success, and I agree with that, but what he doesn't say is that a third of those offered the tag in Sweden reject it; the use is very short-term (maximum two months - average 35 days); offenders must be employed or in training/education schemes and the additional conditions include compulsory drug and alcohol treatment and random urine tests. It is very difficult to see what the tag itself actually produces and certainly the success of the scheme is just as much influenced by all the ancillary conditions and the selection process which filters out bad risks. Also, in Sweden, offenders have to pay 5 kroner per day for the privilege of wearing the tag and, as one probation officer in Malmo remarked to me "we've finished up with a lot of middle class offenders who don't really need the tag at all and who probably shouldn't have gone to prison".

At the end of the day you have to ask yourself "is it worth it?" Sheer cost and complexity of the programmes are only justified if you can point to significant savings like closing a prison, and there is no sense that this will happen in Britain.

Finally, the Probation Service has not been 'omitted' from the tagging trials in Britain and probation officers are co-operating with the Courts in all the three pilot areas. But the Home Office has deliberately set it up as a 'stand alone' option as well as a possible addition to community sentences and the Courts, not surprisingly, are very sceptical about what it has to offer.

With all good wishes,

Yours sincerely,
R G Whitfield
Chief Probation Officer
Kent Probation Service

The Editor welcomes comment on articles and topics features in CJM. See page 27.