

GTL explains etablets for jail inmates

By Brett R. Whitling

CLARION NEWS Writer

CLARION COUNTY

Clarion County Prison Board recently received information about an opportunity for county inmates to use digital tablets. The board was also given a demonstration.

Clarion County Jail's phone vendor GTL had its associate account executive Allan Wirfel address concerns about inmates having access to tablets that would allow them to make phone calls, read books, pursue education, play games and purchase music.

Wirfel noted the benefits of inmates having their own tablets, one being modification of inmate behavior. According to Wirfel, studies show facilities supplying tablets to inmates greatly reduce the number of assaults incidents.

"If they have something to occupy their time with, it's going to help minimize illegal or bad behaviors," Clarion County Jail Warden Jeff Hornberger said.

Other benefits include providing inmates with opportunities to receive an education, have email accounts and increase phone communication with family and friends.

Brian Peters, GTL's executive director of inmate hardware and applications, noted the company has seen an increase in revenue in jails utilizing tablets.

Wirfel addressed the prison board's leading concerns, such as the sense of luxury implementing tablets might create.

"I was pretty skeptical of (the tablets) at first but (my opinion changed) when I started researching it and seeing what other jails are doing as most other jails are heading that direction," Hornberger said.

Tablets can also be used as a disciplinary tool: Taking away a device if an inmate gets in trouble can be a form of punishment.

Funding and Usage

Another issue discussed was how tablets won't cost Clarion County money.

By generating revenue from phone calls and media purchased on the tablets, GTL is able to provide them to the jail at no cost.

Once inmates begin using tablets, Peters said there is an uptake in phone calls.

"We have 40 inmates in particular blocks and we only have three phones," Hornberger said. "After dinner, those three phones are all tied up and it's hard to get in."

Hornberger added of all jail amenities, inmates use phones and television most.

Peters noted Clarion jail will probably generate about \$7 per tablet per month. (On average, the jail houses over 100 men and women.) This number depends on inmates using tablets regularly.

"The inmates are not forced to use them," Peters stressed, "But they chose to use them."

As time goes on, Peters stated GTL will be introducing more apps. This will create more options and services for inmates.

With revenue coming is from phone calls, emails, games, music and e-books, services vary in price. The cost of streaming music is approximately \$1 a day. Sending an email is 25 cents – roughly half the cost of a stamp.

Not all services offered on tablets are geared toward creating revenue, however.

Tablets will be supplied with fully updated law libraries and educational programs. These programs offer inmates the ability to earn anything from a GED to a master's degree, according to Peters.

Life skills classes like barbering or cooking, anger management courses and Alcoholics Anonymous groups will also be available.

"Education is a big thing for us," Hornberger said. "We have a lot of volunteers come in but we don't have any education programs (that) will actually give (inmates) a certificate."

Security

Tablets are stored in a clear case. This both protects the technology and ensures contraband can't be hidden inside. Ear buds and wall chargers are clear, as well.

Tablets are used during the day and turned in at night for charging. Peters added all information, media and data is stored in a cloud, meaning information cannot be saved on individual devices.

Wirfel said tablets were designed strictly for those in a correctional facility: They have no internet, no social media and no access to anything outside what GTL puts on the tablet.

Tablets will be connected to GTL's secure WiFi network, which can only be accessed by registered devices. The difference between GTL's network and a consumer-type wireless network is GTL's ability to actively monitor tablets.

GTL Information Security Director Jason Marass said if the company sees a tablet trying to connect to another network, that tablet's wireless connectivity will be shut down. This renders it almost useless.

Tablets have their own proprietary operating system built off Android OS. When designing OS, GTL removes functions in the tablet that can reset it to its original state, therefore bypassing security measures installed by GTL.

The decision to add tablets to the jail is pending as the prison board weighs benefits against inmate comfort.

The idea is controversial. But some may have thought the same in the years when televisions were first introduced in jails.