

## Houston County Georgia Beats Jail Overcrowding with Sentinel Offender Services Electronic Monitoring Service Partnership

**Long-term partnership with privatized probation provider pays off**

### The Issues

One benefit of electronic monitoring is the ability to reduce the number of inmates in overcrowded jails. The downside of living in an overcrowded jail is obvious to inmates. But those on the outside may think inmates deserve the discomfort. Here is how overcrowded jails hurt the rest of us:

- Exposure to federal lawsuits for overcrowded conditions
- Significant cost to taxpayers to build and staff more jail facilities
- Significant cost to taxpayers who pay for incarceration at outsourced facilities
- Exposure to civil lawsuits as a result of mixing various lifelong criminals with defendants awaiting court dates on non-violent offenses
- Increased inmate-on-inmate clashes resulting in explosive internal conditions
- Eventual release of an increasingly dehumanized and violent offender population
- Increased risk to deputies, resulting in fewer candidates and a more expensive workforce

### The Challenges

After a jail reaches 80 to 85 percent capacity, deputies are already experiencing issues related to inmate classification. In other words, it gets more and more difficult for deputies to separate violent criminals from persons accused of minor offenses. Houston (pronounced “How-stun”) County, Georgia was way past the tipping point. Jail facilities in Houston were so overcrowded that officials had to outsource approximately 100 inmates per day, at a cost of about \$40 to \$60 per day, per inmate. County commissioners began to search for alternatives to traditional incarceration.

### Background

The state laws in Georgia allow private companies to conduct official court business and provide “certified” probation officers authorized to issue arrest warrants. In the State of Georgia, Sentinel Offender Services have 22 field offices. Sentinel has been providing electronic monitoring and probation services to Georgia courts since 1993. Our senior-level management team comprises probation professionals with more than 150 years combined probation experience, which has led to a 98 percent customer retention rate. We currently supervise more than 35,000 active probationers in Georgia and employ more than 240 Georgia Sentinel staff. We have collected and remitted more than \$25 million to 90 Georgia courts. Sentinel Offender Services had an existing relationship with the courts in Houston, having served for about three years prior to conducting privatized probation work. By 2002 jail overcrowding ballooned to the point where electronic monitoring had a ready audience.



## **Approach**

Sentinel Offender Services first met with county officials for preliminary discussions. The next step was for a delegation from Houston County to visit nearby Hall County, where Sentinel Offender Services already had an electronic monitoring program in place. About six months later, after painstaking due diligence on the part of stakeholders ranging from state probation officers to judges, prosecutors, local sheriff's and county officials, the Board of Commissioners approved an offender-funded, county-subsidized electronic monitoring program.

## **Solution**

Our initial solution involved electronic monitoring equipment based on Radio Frequencies (RF) for house arrest, including: the DualTrak Home Monitoring Unit (HMU) and Transmitter (ankle bracelet). The DualTrak HMU and Ankle Transmitter work together to monitor the offender's presence or absence while inside their home. In August 2007, Houston modified our existing relationship to add Global Positioning Systems (GPS) tracking using Sentinel TrakMate Series of equipment. The TrakMate GPS Tracking Unit is a unique equipment solution for GPS offender tracking. TrakMate monitors and reports an offender's position when traveling outside the home, including any incursions within zones in which the offender is prohibited. It looks and works like a cell phone equipped with GPS tracking technology. Officers can contact an offender directly at any time by simply calling the TrakMate. This communication feature is not offered in any other GPS product used for tracking offenders. TrakMate provides three levels of GPS monitoring to easily adjust with the needs of any program.

## **The Outlook**

Houston County Georgia has changed the way it uses electronic monitoring since it started the program back in 2002. Now they are using the service more often in connection with the court's pre-trial phase, as a condition of bond. This speaks to the pre-trial liability issues, when a person who may be innocent need not be placed in an overcrowded facility in a bed—or on the floor—next to a violent career felon. Some call this decreasing the inmate population from the “front-end.” We call it a benefit of electronic monitoring. Whatever it's called, it keeps the jail facilities in Houston County from becoming overcrowded, and neighboring counties in Georgia are starting to notice.

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