

The Statewide Inmate Banking/Commissary System

The Statewide Inmate Banking/Commissary System (SIBCS) for the State of Mississippi Department of Corrections (MDOC) functions much like a bank and grocery for inmates allowing them to indirectly receive funds from an outside source and make purchases with those funds from an in house commissary. In July 1999, the Inmate Banking and Commissary Departments were centralized at the Department of Corrections Central Office in Jackson, Mississippi. As of May 2000 there are eight participating facilities, three state operated and five privately managed, containing approximately 13,500 inmates. Currently, the inmate account funds for inmates throughout the state are maintained in a networked centralized database.

The database contains accounts that have been established for each inmate in his/her name that are activated upon receiving a deposit from an outside source. When funds of an approved type (Postal Money Orders, Financial Institution Official Check or Money Order, and Western Union Quick Collect Checks) are received for an inmate, they are first opened and checked for accuracy. After having been inspected, a data image is made of each financial instrument creating a permanent record. The funds are then ready to be deposited to the inmate's account.

As funds are physically being deposited to the inmate's account, and interface between the data imaging system and SIBCS allows pertinent information to be transferred from the deposit screen to be stored with the data image of the particular item being posted. This reduces the need to enter the same information twice and allows for easy recall of the actual monetary instrument that has been posted to an inmate's account. All images can be readily retrieved using the inmate's MDOC number which can be very helpful when researching a posting error or providing requested documentation to Agency officials. Once the image has been made, the funds are deposited to the inmate's account, which automatically causes a receipt to generate for the deposit.

Prior to centralization, it was necessary to look up an inmate's physical location in order to forward his/her deposit receipt to them. This would require the entire day of a full-time employee at each location to manually prepare receipts to be sent to the inmates. Once centralized, the software was programmed to automatically retrieve the inmate's name, MDOC number, and location from the Agency's Inmate Monitoring System and print it on the receipt. When folded the address is nicely displayed in a window envelope. This enables the department to use a high-speed folding/inserting system to prepare the receipts that are sent to inmates. Using this technology, we are now able to prepare a day's receipts, in excess of eight hundred, in less than one hour and deliver them to inmates across the state the following day.

Once funds are deposited and made available to the inmate, commissary sales then processed using a bagging system. This entails the inmate filling out an order form on his own time and sending it in to the canteen, where it is filled and put in a bag to be delivered to the inmate at a scheduled time. This eliminates the need to have an officer escort the inmates to and from the canteen, as was done in the past. Now that facilities no

longer need a security officer available to escort prisoners to canteen the officer can be assigned to more important duties. In order to automate and streamline the mailroom, a high-speed postage machine, and a folding/inserting machine were added. These two pieces of equipment alone eliminated the need to increase staffing by two full-time employees. Since there is no longer a need to have employees working in a face to face order taking environment, fewer employees are needed.

Using the technology available to the agency, we are able to update the SIBCS database daily as to the movement of our inmate population. We have interfaced the agency's Inmate Monitoring System, which contains all current and prior locations for an inmate, with the SIBCS database. This insures that the inmate's account will always be available to him/her regardless of their physical location. Actually, the minute an inmate's location is updated by the agencies records department, the inmate's account is transferred as well.

As a result of centralization MDOC now has the ability to have all of its accounting and data entry functions for the eight currently participating facilities prepared in one location. The need for an accountant and data entry clerks at each of these facilities has been eliminated. This has made it possible to free up accountants and data entry clerks for other important tasks. This also enabled one accountant to more readily formulate a set of comparative financial statements for each facility. Since the accountant now has a more comparative financial statement he is able to reimburse MDOC for its actual salary expenses from the canteen. Thus the resulting net profit on the canteens Income Statement shows the actual cost of operating the canteen as if it were private business. This alone currently saves MDOC over four hundred and forty thousand dollars annually (See Exhibit "A") in salaries and other administrative expenses that are reimbursed from the canteen.

Microsoft NT and T-Netix software were installed to replace the old Unix system on which the inmate banking/commissary operated. By replacing this stand alone system with Windows based Microsoft NT, routine office work and banking/functions can be processed from one personal computer. Therefore, the exorbitant cost of operating and maintaining two separate computer networks has been avoided. The T-Netix software or TFC (Trust Fund/Commissary Accounting System) allows for extensive reporting and accounting and product inventory while also managing commissary operations. A few added bonuses of the new software are that it maintains an account history of the inmate's account, supports the option of suspending the account if necessary, and allows for descriptive text to be attached to the accounts transactions. In essence the system integrates all accounting functions into one comprehensive system.

The benefits realized by the customer (inmate) include funds being deposited to their account in a more timely manner, the next day delivery of a detailed receipt for each deposit made on their behalf, their account being readily accessible regardless of their physical location throughout the state, and uniform pricing.

As a result of enhanced software capabilities, we were able to offer uniform pricing at each facility. Prior to centralization, it was left to the discretion of each facility to charge

what it viewed as a fair price for the goods in its canteen. This created a variance in the price of goods from one facility to another. Now that prices for all goods are determined at the central office we are able to offer the same goods for the same price across the state. This eliminated complaints about differing prices from one location to another.

The inmate account/commissary system currently in use by the Mississippi Department of Corrections would be of direct benefit to most other state, local, and federal government entities managing inmate populations that are still using stand alone systems and face to face sales to inmates. The ease of use and ability to conduct commissary sales without handling cash make the program ideal in terms of reducing corruption within the prison environment. Also, the statewide network requires less manpower to operate due to the efficient use of existing technologies.

The consolidation and centralization of the inmate banking/commissary system has gone very smoothly. As can be seen, MDOC is saving a considerable amount of taxpayers money as a result of having done so. State operated and privately managed facility personnel are pleased with the results. This is an ongoing process with six existing facilities to be added in the near future. Most of the facilities to be added are eager to become part of the centralization process in order to reap the same benefits that have been experienced by the existing members.

In closing, the innovative aspects of the SIBCS are in its simplicity. Severe delays in processing transactions with the old system, such as forwarding receipts to inmates in a timely manner have been completely eliminated by minor programming adjustments. Instead of viewing the inmate population as separate groups segregated by facilities, we have used the network to create one universal population, which allows for efficient transaction processing. Applying simple solutions to complex problems has created a system that provides much improved service at a greatly reduced cost.