

Less Noise Leads to Less Stress

By Kathryn Podolsky

High noise levels in correctional facilities due to enclosed rooms with predominately hard, reflective surfaces have been alleviated in some newer facilities with built-in jacks that broadcast television audio over headphones. Older facilities constructed before this technology was available must have TV transmitter systems installed or have no system at all.

The American Correctional Association set standards for noise levels for interiors in the daytime at no more than 70 dBA (or decibels). However, the sounds of televisions, offender appliances, generators, PA systems, radios and speech bouncing off the walls can easily exceed this level, and research from sources such as Cornell University, Yale University, University College London and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health point to a link between noise and stress.

The Rockingham County Department of Corrections in New Hampshire experienced high noise levels until they purchased a new FM transmitter system for the televisions. It allows them to transmit any audio source via the included standard 1/8-inch stereo headphone jack or the stereo RCA jack adapter, resulting in a reduction in ambient noise levels.

"I remember when the TV noise would go from one end of the block to the other," said Dave Proulx, a correctional officer with the Rockingham County Department of Corrections for 16 years. "It was a nightmare – you wanted to put earplugs in."

The Whole House FM Transmitter, which won the highest rating of all the transmitters reviewed by FMTransmitterReview.com, has partnered with correctional facilities to provide a quieter, less stressful environment overall and at a price that strained-budget facilities can afford. Tom Webb, Chief Financial Officer and co-owner of the transmitter company with his father, said the most obvious difference between his company and others is the price – \$89.99 all-inclusive compared to \$300 to \$400 per unit.

"The basics of our systems versus other systems are the same," Webb said. "Take an FM Transmitter, connect it to a TV's audio out port and begin broadcasting to any FM radio. We get asked a lot why our system can be so much less and still do the same thing and it comes down to two major factors."

First, Webb said, they buy directly from the manufacturer, and secondly, correctional facility staff can install the system themselves, alleviating the need for an audio/visual team or company to come onto the grounds.

"Fortunately, the system is very easy to install, so anyone who can connect a DVD player to a TV can work our system," he added. "It's a pretty simple process and that's why correctional officers and inmates enjoy using our system."

If power is lost to the transmitter – and then restored – it will begin broadcasting on the same channel. Webb believes this saves officers time and effort, especially if they delegate audio/visual responsibilities to an outside company.

"This works great for correctional facilities that cut power to the TVs at night and turn them back on in the morning – they don't have to keep resetting the transmitter," Webb said.

The unit is on around-the-clock in the Rockingham facility's largest sentence block, which houses about 80 inmates. Proulx said the asset to the facility is not only that inmates sit quietly and are more focused on watching TV, but also that safety issues have inadvertently been addressed.

"You can hear someone crying for help; you know if someone has a heart attack," Proulx said. "And there's less chance of inmates sitting there idle – sitting there and thinking of stuff to do."

Noise sources such as electrical or mechanical equipment can be modified, but offenders shouting over television noise can be much harder to monitor. High noise levels can also affect stress and anti-social behavior. According to a study by Dr. Alice H. Suter, an audiologist at the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, included in noise-related problems are high blood pressure, peptic ulcers, cardiovascular deaths, strokes, suicides, degradation of the immune system and impairment of learning. Noise is also associated with an increase in aggression and a



decrease in cooperation.

Webb said there are other possibilities for the transmitter's use and capabilities of better controlling inmate populations that often exceed the limits of facilities.

"The Whole House FM Transmitter can also be used for more than just the TV; it can also broadcast audio files, such as MP3, music on a computer or Internet radio," he said. "I know of one correctional facility that uses our FM transmitter to broadcast a few types of music – rap, country, rock – to inmates throughout the day."

"For those facilities that don't cut power to the TVs, the FM Transmitter is designed to be on 24/7 without any adverse effects," Webb added. "This brings up an interesting option for correctional officers. If they wanted to they could broadcast the TV's audio 24/7 and depending on the facility, inmates could listen to TV in their beds."

According to Proulx, whose facility has correctional officers working amongst the inmates, the decrease in noise levels has improved staff morale, as well.



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