

Electronic monitoring helps authorities keep closer watch over defendants

By Brian Freskos

When Ray Murphy decided to field test the alcohol monitor his company recently purchased to use on defendants awaiting trial in New Hanover County, he strapped it to his ankle and drank a beer.

Sure enough, it worked. The ankle bracelet sensed the presence of alcohol in Murphy's sweat and transmitted the findings to an analyst sitting in a cubicle 1,500 miles away in Denver, where the product's manufacturer is based. The analyst examined the reading and confirmed that, yes indeed, Murphy imbibed.

The gadget is the latest in a growing line of electronic monitoring devices that has reshaped the criminal justice system and reduced jail overcrowding.

Many of the devices entered the market in force at an opportune time, as cash-starved counties tried to curtail spending during the economic downturn.

Now, instead of housing defendants in expensive jail beds while they wait to go before a judge, counties can place them under supervision using increasingly sophisticated monitoring equipment.

In New Hanover County, for example, electronic monitoring efforts yielded \$2.5 million in savings between July 2010 and June 2011, according to calculations by Tarheel Monitoring, which provides monitoring services to the county.

"You're looking at the future of corrections right here," said Murphy, a program manager for Tarheel Monitoring. "We cannot lock everybody up that does something wrong in our society... We've got to try to manage as many of these individuals as we can without using



Larry Powell and Ray Murphy with Tarheel Monitoring display some of the different pieces of electronic monitoring equipment used to keep tabs on people under house arrest Thursday, Sept. 1, 2011. • Photo by Paul Stephen

valuable jail resources."

The alcohol-monitoring bracelet gained nationwide attention after a judge ordered actress Lindsay Lohan to wear one last year. It works much like a breathalyzer, only instead of a person's breath it tests perspiration for trace amounts of alcohol.

Alcohol is eventually metabolized by the body and expelled through the skin in the form of sweat. The device, which is about the size of a pack of cigarettes, samples that perspiration, runs it through a fuel cell sensitive to ethanol and stores its readings on a memory chip.



Electronic monitoring helps authorities keep closer watch over defendants, continued

Once a day, usually a night while the user sleeps, the information is sent to the monitoring company and manufacturer in Denver, SCRAMx. The company analyzes the readings and reports its findings to the appropriate agency.

But the alcohol-monitoring ankle bracelet is just one device authorities are utilizing. GPS monitoring, especially, has enabled New Hanover County to increase the number of defendants on pretrial release and decrease the number of inmates in jail.

“It’s not uncommon to find that some criminal activity will increase in a down economy, but because of pretrial release and other programs, our jail numbers are on a downward decline,” said Chris Coudriet, an assistant county manager for New Hanover County. “So yes, we are saving money on a daily basis.”

It costs about \$80 per day to hold someone in the county jail; electronic monitoring costs the county \$12 per day.

In Pender County, where overcrowding has also led to excessive incarceration costs, the county commissioners recently approved a contract with Tarheel Monitoring that would allow certain inmates to be tracked with GPS equipment.

Sheriff Carson Smith, echoing a common concern with pretrial release programs, said the county was prepared to move forward with the deal but needed to resolve concerns about public safety.

“The main thing is it saves money. But we don’t want to do anything just to save a couple of bucks if we think it’s going to put the community in danger,” he said. “I foresee it (the deal) happening, but I’m not trying to rush into it.”

Larry Powell, Tarheel Monitoring’s co-founder, said 95 percent of people under electronic monitoring do not commit new crimes, presumably because they know that the ankle bracelet could tie them to the scene.

On the other hand, Powell said, investigators have used GPS information to exclude potential suspects by determining their whereabouts at the time a crime occurred.

The GPS devices triangulate a user’s position each minute and transmits that information via cellphone towers to the monitoring company. It is accurate to within 10 feet.

It can also be used to restrict someone to a certain location, say, their house, by sounding an alarm every time the user steps over a predetermined boundary, what is called an inclusion zone. Or it can prohibit a defendant from entering a certain area, an exclusion zone.

Powell said Tarheel Monitoring was in talks with New Hanover County to link the GPS unit with the 911 dispatch center so that every time a user violates the conditions, a police officer can be sent to check on the perpetrator.

