

Prison officials examine ways to curb illicit use of cell phones | [View Clip](#)
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Companies demonstrate their technologies at Jessup facility

A few years ago, two prisoners used contraband cell phones to orchestrate their escape from the Evansville Correctional Institution in South Carolina. They called relatives, told them where to put wire cutters and when to meet.

The calls continued until the inmates were sprung, said Maj. Robert Murray of the South Carolina Department of Corrections, and it still sticks in his craw.

Murray was among dozens of officials from across the country who came to the closed Maryland House of Corrections in Jessup Thursday for a daylong fact-finding mission on how to clamp down on rampant use of mobile phones by inmates. The goal was to survey technologies available to stop the problem, which has reached a critical mass this year.

Congress is considering making it legal to block mobile signals around prisons through a bill introduced by Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison of Texas and co-sponsored by Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski of Maryland and lawmakers from a dozen other states. And tech companies are increasingly creating divisions devoted to killing the calls by detecting the phones so they can be confiscated or by intercepting their signals. There are at least three such businesses based in Columbia alone.

The phones - smuggled in by corrupt staff, through the mail and at least once in Brazil by carrier pigeon - have been used to order the death of a Maryland witness, to orchestrate riots in an Oklahoma jail and to threaten a Texas senator.

Cell phones are the most frequently confiscated item in Maryland's jails, according to the Baltimore state's attorney's office. In South Carolina, Murray says, inmates use them to tell confederates outside when the coast is clear to throw contraband over prison walls.

"It creates a dangerous situation for the public, our employees and the offenders," said Gary D. Maynard, head of the Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services.

Despite the problem and Thursday's demonstration, Maryland officials say they have no immediate plans to purchase phone detection systems.

In July, Maynard testified in support of the federal Safe Prisons Act, which would allow conditional cell signal jamming in jails, which is now prohibited by a 1934 communications law enforced by the Federal Communications Commission.

Support for the act has grown along with instances of cell phone abuses. Mikulski and Gov. Martin O'Malley issued a joint statement Thursday saying that it is "critical" that the bill passes.

But critics, who include the wireless phone industry, say jamming technology jeopardizes legitimate calls within prisons and nearby because it cannot be narrowly confined.

Maryland officials sought federal permission to test jamming technologies but received no response. So, those who turned out Thursday from states that included Delaware, New Jersey, South Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia and the District of Columbia, and from groups such as the National Governors Association and the American Correctional Association saw demonstrations of systems that mostly specialize in finding phones.

Columbia's ITT Corp. demonstrated Cell Hound, which uses sensors placed throughout a prison

to signal where phones are. The information can be used to track use, compile habit reports and uncover likely hubs of contraband, or to simply confiscate the phones, said Terry Bittner, director of security products.

His company makes much of its money from jamming technology used in national defense, Bittner said, but opposes its use in prisons because it is hard to limit its effect to a confined space.

"It's not the right solution," he said.

That sentiment was echoed by most of the businesses represented Thursday.

AirPatrol's chief executive, Ozzie Diaz, said jamming is like "the bull in the china shop." His 18-person company, based in Columbia, focuses on wireless threats and has 150 sensors in a Defense Department building to keep cell phone signals out.

Nortel Government Solutions is working with the Defense Department by managing calls. Cell phone detection is relatively new for the business, which hasn't branded its product with a name for U.S. sales yet, said Nortel's Larry J. Rowe.

Nortel's system can trace a cell phone's location to a relatively small area, but it also has the ability to jam it should it become legal, and wiretap if ordered by a court.

"This system will grow and expand," Rowe said.