

THE SEARCH STILL MATTERS

Technology Supports Correctional Officers. It Does Not Replace Them

In correctional facilities, effective security depends on more than policy, equipment, or technology alone. While modern tools have strengthened our ability to detect, monitor, and respond to threats, the foundation of institutional safety remains the correctional professional who understands the purpose behind each search and performs that responsibility consistently, attentively, and with discipline. This bulletin reinforces the need to keep search procedures a priority, explains how complacency can create risk, and underscores why leaders must continually connect staff to the mission behind the work.

Correctional facilities have changed significantly over the past several decades. Technology has given us better cameras, electronic access controls, detection equipment, and security systems that earlier generations of correctional professionals could only have imagined.

These advances make our facilities safer, but they have not changed one of the most basic principles of correctional security:

There is no substitute for a properly trained, observant, and engaged correctional officer.

Understanding the "Why"

Correctional professionals are asked to perform searches every day. After performing the same task hundreds or even thousands of times, it is human nature for a procedure to feel routine.

That is precisely when leadership and training matter. We should not simply tell employees what the policy requires, as we should make certain they understand why it requires it.

A systematic search is not conducted merely to satisfy a policy, complete a checklist, or demonstrate compliance during an inspection. We search because what we prevent may never appear in an incident report.

A properly conducted search may prevent contraband from entering a housing unit, stop an assault before it occurs, protect another incarcerated person or the officer working the next shift, and, on the day that matters most, save a life.

Technology Is One Layer of Security

Modern detection equipment, cameras, electronic access systems, and other technologies are important parts of a comprehensive correctional security program; however, every security system has capabilities and limitations.

Technology should therefore be viewed as one component of a layered security system rather than a replacement for fundamental correctional practices.

Those layers include:

- Trained and attentive correctional officers.
- Consistent search procedures.
- Appropriate detection technology.
- Effective supervision.
- Intelligence and information sharing.
- Physical security.
- Accurate reporting.
- Review of significant contraband incidents.
- Leadership that reinforces expectations.

When these layers support one another, the facility becomes more difficult to compromise.

When we rely too heavily on a single layer, vulnerabilities can develop.

Different Generations — One Mission

Today's correctional leaders may supervise employees representing several generations, each bringing different experiences, expectations, and approaches to the workplace; our responsibility as leaders is not to decide which generation has the better approach, but to connect them all to the same mission.

A veteran officer may understand the importance of a search because of something witnessed over the course of a long career, while a newer officer may respond differently to training, technology, and communication; however, both need to understand the same fundamental principle:

- The search is not the mission. Safety is the mission. The search is one of the tools we use to accomplish it.
- When employees understand the purpose behind a procedure, compliance becomes more than simply following an order. It becomes part of their professional responsibility to one another.

Complacency Is the Vulnerability

One of the greatest challenges in any correctional environment is maintaining attention to procedures that are performed repeatedly. Complacency can develop when:

- Nothing unusual happened yesterday.
- Nothing was discovered during the last search.
- The equipment did not sound an alarm.

Experienced correctional professionals understand that the absence of an incident does not mean a security procedure is unnecessary; in many cases, it means the procedure is working. Supervisors should reinforce this principle during roll calls, training, inspections, and daily conversations with staff by consistently explaining the “why,” not by delivering lectures.

When Contraband Is Found, Ask the Second Question

Finding contraband is important, but determining how it got there may be even more important.

Significant discoveries should cause us to look beyond the item itself and examine the system surrounding it.

- Was there a breakdown in procedure?
- Was policy unclear?
- Was additional training needed?

- Was equipment being relied upon beyond its intended capability?
- Was there a physical-security vulnerability?
- Was information available that was not communicated?
- Was the required procedure being performed differently in practice than it was written in policy?

The objective should not simply be to confiscate the item and complete a report, but to close the vulnerability.

A Leadership Check

Correctional executives and supervisors may want to periodically ask:

- Are our search policies current?
- Do our written procedures reflect what actually occurs in the facility?
- Do employees understand why the procedure exists, or only what they are required to do?
- Are staff trained in both the capabilities and limitations of our security technology?
- Are supervisors observing search practices and reinforcing expectations?
- Do we analyze significant contraband discoveries for trends and vulnerabilities?
- Can we demonstrate through documentation that staff were trained and supervisors were monitoring compliance?

These questions are not about finding fault; they are about identifying vulnerabilities before someone gets hurt.

The Bottom Line:

- Policies matter.
- Training matters.
- Technology matters.
- Supervision matters.

But ultimately, correctional security continues to depend upon people:

- The officer who notices something that does not look right.
- The supervisor who takes an extra minute to explain why a procedure matters.
- The trainer who connects policy to something an employee may encounter tomorrow.
- The correctional leader who refuses to allow a fundamental security practice to become "just another routine."
- Technology can assist the search.
- Policy can require the search.
- Supervisors can ensure the search is conducted.

But a trained correctional professional must understand why the search matters: behind every search is a simple objective—everyone goes home safely.

Take time to review your agency's search practices, reinforce the "why" with staff, and ensure that technology supports—not replaces—the professional judgment of trained correctional officers. The search still matters, and leadership must make sure that message is understood, practiced, and sustained.

If you have any questions, please contact your Corrections Risk Control Consultant, Ron Edwards, at redwards@jamontgomery.com or the J.A. Montgomery Law Enforcement Team at lawenforcementteam@jamontgomery.com