



Implementing an Alcohol Monitoring Program in Your Agency

Published: February 2011
Revised: August 2021

Part I: Background

Alcohol abuse is a contributing factor in hundreds of thousands of crimes committed in the U.S. each year. A recent survey of 1,421,700 prisoners in state and federal correctional facilities found that 30% said they had been using alcohol at the time of their offense. State prisoners sentenced for a violent offense were more likely to report drinking alcohol at the time of the offense than those sentenced for a property or drug offense.¹

In turn, client sobriety is a key component of community corrections programs that enhance public safety. A probationer or parolee's ability to abstain from alcohol abuse is a key factor in determining whether they can complete treatment and comply with supervision requirements. An individual has a higher chance of completing the requirements of their probation or parole if they stay sober and become more productive members of society.

Alcohol detection technology helps criminal justice officials track alcohol consumption by parolees, probationers, and pretrial defendants. This white paper examines the value of the different types of technology that enable corrections officials to monitor a client's sobriety. It also offers a cursory overview of techniques for launching a sobriety monitoring program and measuring its success.

Part II: What Makes Alcohol Monitoring Useful?

The influence of alcohol abuse and addiction creates problems at every level of the corrections process. Many individuals end up in the justice system because they committed crimes while intoxicated. While on probation or parole, many continue to struggle with their addiction to alcohol. This often contributes to reoffending. In other cases, parolees or probationers may avoid criminal activity, but their addiction makes it difficult for them to maintain responsible behavior or comply with sentence requirements – such as holding a job or showing up regularly to treatment classes.

A variety of proven alcohol detection technology solutions are available to monitor probationers or parolees.

Transdermal alcohol monitoring measures alcohol consumption through a noninvasive, ankle-worn device. It gauges the alcohol content from the wearer's perspiration and tracks fluctuations that coincide with alcohol consumption. These devices can report data to supervising officers in near real-time or store the data for later review. Some transdermal alcohol monitors, like BI TAD®, incorporate radio-frequency monitoring to allow officials to monitor a client's whereabouts along with their alcohol consumption. The continuous nature of such devices makes them an intensive monitoring option.

Breath alcohol technology (BrAC) measures a person's breath to determine their breath alcohol content. A portable breath testing device (PBT) is a commonly-known type of equipment used to gauge breath alcohol content. The person breathes into the device, and the data is transmitted to a database where it can be reviewed by a supervising officer. It's useful for regular sobriety checks or as a step-up or step-down from more intensive transdermal alcohol monitoring.

Urine testing is useful for infrequent testing, whether scheduled or unscheduled. It can take the form of traditional urinalysis or EtS/EtG testing. These methods of testing can be very effective, however they offer less immediate results and can be labor-intensive. Lab processing time must often be factored into this type of testing.

These different types of alcohol detection technology give corrections officials wide latitude in selecting the most effective way to supervise clients' alcohol intake. Having a continuum of options available enables corrections officials to move clients up or down a graduated scale of sanctions. A probation officer monitoring someone with severe alcohol dependency problems may choose transdermal alcohol monitoring to keep constant tabs on the individual. On the other hand, an officer monitoring someone with no known alcohol dependency issues may require the person to take occasional breath or urine tests.

Part III: Benefits of an Alcohol Monitoring Program

An effective alcohol monitoring program can:

- **Enhance public safety.** Individuals who are receiving treatment or undergoing supervision will be monitored for sobriety or face consequences. This makes them less likely to engage in drunk driving or other alcohol-related crimes that threaten the community.
- **Ease jail overcrowding and its cost to the taxpayer.** Community corrections programs allow appropriate populations to be held accountable while living in the community, rather than being expensively housed in a jail or prison.
- **Help individuals pay for their own treatment and monitoring.** Individuals who live and work in the community while supervised for alcohol consumption can be more productive, contributing members of society. If they are employed and self-sufficient, their income may help offset the daily costs of their supervision.
- **Enhance treatment efforts.** In many cases, individuals in community corrections programs will attend classes, counseling, or treatment to overcome substance abuse problems. Effective alcohol monitoring can help them be amenable to such treatment efforts and help to assess their progress.
- **Enhance the range of available monitoring options.** New technology allows supervising officers to select from a broader, more convenient range of alcohol detection methods tailored to suit an individual's needs. Individuals with severe alcohol abuse problems can be monitored in near real-time by transdermal continuous alcohol monitoring technology. Clients with less serious substance abuse issues can utilize a breathalyzer or submit to occasional, random urine tests.

Part IV: Implementing an Alcohol Monitoring Program

Establishing an alcohol monitoring program in your organization requires vision, clear goals, and a willingness to fine-tune the program for maximum effectiveness. In the exploration phase, key stakeholders in the local criminal justice system should be given a voice in the program planning process. Judges, court officials, prosecutors, defense attorneys, law enforcement, treatment providers, and technology providers all deserve a seat at the table.

The planners and stakeholders must agree on the goals of an alcohol supervision program that make sense for the local criminal justice system and the public at large. Defining clear goals will help organizers identify metrics to measure outcomes and results of the monitoring program.

Next, the program's planners decide who will actually manage the monitoring. Who runs the program and makes sure it is effective? If a third party (such as an outside contractor) runs the program, who monitors the third party? Who do they report to?

This is also the stage at which planners decide the eligibility criteria. For example, many programs allow only non-violent offenders to participate, but planners in each agency make this decision on a case-by-case basis. Additionally, establishing sound, consistent metrics for selecting individuals will help ensure the program meets their needs. It will also help supervising authorities manage the progress of the individuals (as well as the program as a whole) because they'll have defined criteria for success. Quite simply, you cannot measure what is not defined.

The program's planners must establish rules and procedures for alcohol monitoring. What will be the rules for clients under alcohol monitoring? They need to be thorough and clear. What will be the sanctions for a client who relapses? Will there be a "one-strike" penalty system or a graduated set of sanctions? How quickly will clients who break the rules be sanctioned? How much discretion will the supervising officer have in these decisions? This is a key piece of planning and implementation.

Next, supervising authorities should consider using a continuum of technology. Is the program filled with individuals for whom alcohol addiction is a serious concern? If yes, transdermal alcohol monitoring may be useful. Individuals

with less severe alcohol consumption problems can be monitored using breath or urine testing. Many programs use a combination of monitoring technologies – in some cases, with radio frequency or GPS tracking adding an extra level of accountability.

After the program is launched, program managers should examine the benchmarks for success to see what’s working well and what needs improvement. Supervisors can track the number of days clients were monitored instead of being housed in jail or prison – and the amount of money saved as a result. Other possible metrics include: number of tests performed in a year; number of positive and negative tests; number of clients that found gainful employment; how many clients successfully attended treatment programs; number of clients who paid restitution (if applicable); and the number of clients who remained sober while being monitored.

Part V: Conclusion

The variety of alcohol monitoring technology available today is ideal for helping parole, probation, and pretrial services officers hold individuals accountable, increase public safety, and ultimately save taxpayer dollars. By tailoring the method of alcohol monitoring to the needs of each individual, an officer can make sure each client receives an appropriate amount of supervision, which raises the individual’s likelihood of succeeding and avoiding recidivism. With alcohol abuse as a key factor in many crimes – and the costs associated with the U.S. corrections system – alcohol monitoring programs that enhance public safety and save taxpayer funds are important corrections tools.

About BI Incorporated

For more than 40 years, BI Incorporated has delivered innovative products and services that offer an alternative to incarceration for community corrections agencies supervising parolees, probationers, or pretrial defendants. Our products include a complete continuum of electronic monitoring technologies, case management software, and services for reliable community supervision. Electronic monitoring is a reliable, safe, and cost-effective way to monitor individuals as they live and work in the community.

Source

¹ U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, Alcohol and Drug Use and Treatment Reported by Prisoners, July 2021

<https://www.ojp.gov/library/publications/alcohol-and-drug-use-and-treatment-reported-prisoners-survey-prison-inmates>