

## **The Massachusetts Virtual Connections Summit: The Future is Now**

Sheriff Michael G. Bellotti hosted ***The Massachusetts Virtual Connections Summit: The Future is Now*** on January 14, 2016 at Curry College. The morning conference was held to bring the stakeholders and subject matter experts together to initiate a discussion not only about where we are today in the utilization of video conferencing but where we want to be in the future.

The Summit was well attended and included a number of elected officials, law enforcement and criminal justice experts as well as practitioners from the corrections and the court systems.

Secretary of Public Safety and Security Daniel Bennett addressed the attendees and he informed the gathering of his priority to ensure that all of the courts in the Commonwealth are equipped with state of the art equipment to expand the usage of video conferences. As a former First Assistant District Attorney, Secretary Bennett spoke about the safety and security for staff, inmates and the public.

Due to a scheduling conflict, Chief Justice Paula Carey and Court Administrator Harry Spence were unable to attend the Summit. However, they appeared before the group via video where they addressed the importance of the Summit and stressed their commitment to this issue.

Chief Justice Paul Dawley also spoke to the attendees noting the importance of moving the justice system forward by making it more efficient with the use of video conferences. He noted his commitment to increasing the numbers of non-evidentiary hearings being conducted by video throughout the trial court.

Video conferencing represents the success story of the court and correctional systems working together in collaboration with the common goals of reducing the risk and increasing the security for Court and Sheriff's Office staff, reducing the opportunity to introduce contraband such as drugs into the jail, and generating significant savings in transportation costs.

During a three-month period in 2015, the Norfolk Sheriff's Office transported 1,005 offenders to courts throughout Massachusetts. Although seventy-five percent (75%) of the transported offenders were taken to Norfolk County Courts, another twenty-five percent (25%) went to out of county courts. The

costs of these transports are taxing not only on the vehicles but on the staff and the offenders as well. For example, a transportation trip to Barnstable District Court cost \$201.96 round trip while a trip to Quincy District Court costs \$80.58. Quincy District Court is the busiest court in the county and represents the greatest number of court trips for the Norfolk Sheriff's Office. These figures clearly demonstrate the financial benefits of utilizing video conferencing as often as is possible without compromising offender's constitutional rights.

At the Norfolk Sheriff's Office, there are two (2) designated areas for video conference hearings to ensure confidentiality with proper security coverage. Many of these non-evidentiary hearings only last a few minutes so the NSO is able to accommodate several offenders and their Attorneys on any given day. With the addition of the second room in the fall of 2015 we are hopeful that the use of video conferencing will increase. The NSO is witnessing firsthand the swift turnaround of offenders who no longer have to spend an entire day in a court lockup with for what may be a 5 minute hearing with little to no movement in the status of their case.

The MA Trial Court Strategic Plan issued in 2013, and approved by the MA Supreme Judicial Court, states as one of its goals, a video conferencing system, coordinated with the Department of Correction and Sheriffs, to eliminate avoidable significant security and transportation expenses by "sharply reducing the number of trips made to court" by prisoners and detainees. The Court Management Security Department Strategic Plan of 2014 - 2015 noted that in a 2013 study there have been hundreds of acts of violence in, outside or targeting courts or judicial officers in the US. It was also noted that in Massachusetts Courts handle 21,000 custodies each month. Again, the benefit of video conferencing is illustrated by the volume of these incidents and the vast numbers of the custodies.

During the Summit, the attendees watched videos from Michigan New Hampshire and Pennsylvania where staff and Judges spoke about the extensive use of video conferencing in their jurisdictions. They indicated that this has resulted in a much more efficient justice system in their respective states. These states noted similar benefits, specifically the reduction of the transportation to the courts, the advancement of the cases, increased security for staff and offenders, and the reduction of contraband into both the courts and the correctional facilities. For example, in 2011, The Pennsylvania

Supreme Court reported a savings of twenty one million dollars annually from video conferencing.

As we move forward with video conferencing in Norfolk County and throughout the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, lessons will be learned systems develop and the use of video conferencing increases. The attendance and level of interest at this Summit clearly demonstrated the collective desire from the stakeholders and subject matter experts to move forward for the benefit of all.

Sheriff Bellotti has made the utilization of video conferencing a top priority of his administration noting that all of the information provided during the Summit was contributing factors for its future success. It is highly recommended that this dialog with the stakeholders and subject matter experts continue and develop with the goal of increasing the use of video conferencing. The dialog could continue with ease in both formal and informal settings, such as meetings in small groups between the correctional agencies and the court system or in larger venues as occurred with this particular Summit. No matter the manner, the doors are open and the conversations have begun; the importance is in building the momentum with the goal of accomplishing the common good of reduced costs and increased security for all.