

Four Steps for Using Videoconferencing Technology for Parole Decision-Making

Before the COVID-19 pandemic made videoconferencing the new normal for numerous workplace interactions, many parole agencies had implemented or were considering implementing some form of videoconferencing technology (VCT). VCT does not replace in-person hearings but can facilitate quick decisions about release to meet immediate agency needs for public health reasons. Parole agencies must have every tool available to protect fairness, maximize efficiency, maintain integrity, ensure public safety, and incentivize positive behavior change, all at manageable costs to the state. Implementing VCT according to the following four steps is an effective way to meet these goals.

Step 1: Review and Revise Policy

Before parole agencies implement VCT, they should examine policies, statutes, and case law that govern hearing practices for release and revocation to identify barriers to using VCT, such as a requirement for in-person appearance. They should then make revisions to add VCT as an option to facilitate quick decisions about release to meet agency needs in emergency situations. Changes to policy should aim to improve efficiency without compromising (1) the due process rights of individuals, especially in the revocation hearing process; (2) effective communication and interpersonal connection; (3) quality assurance and feedback about the use of VCT from all hearing participants; and (4) victim access to hearings, when appropriate.

Step 2: Prepare to Implement VCT

Implementing VCT requires assessing and possibly upgrading technology in the central office of the parole agency, prisons, and, for revocation purposes, jails. If hearings are recorded, parole agencies should conduct a cost-benefit analysis on electronic storage capacity, processes, and security. Agency members and staff will need training on revised policies and changes to roles and responsibilities related to VCT. This may include training from IT staff. An online survey of members and staff can determine training needs. Training and technology support should continue throughout implementation.

Step 3: Develop a Communication Plan

The shift to VCT, or the continued use of VCT following initial emergency utilization practices instituted in response to COVID-19 office closures, gives parole agencies an opportunity to increase transparency and develop a communications plan to inform a broader audience about the move to VCT for release or revocation decisions. Parole agencies should work with legal and public information staff to determine how to solicit public comment, incorporate proposed changes into policies, or communicate the rationale for rejecting certain changes. External stakeholder and internal agency communication should continue throughout every step of implementation. The communication strategy should also involve informing people who are in prison and eligible for parole release or who are on parole supervision of all changes to practice and policy once revisions have been made and should include opportunities for people on parole to provide feedback about their experience during parole hearings.

Step 4: Implement VCT and Measure Results

Make sure there are quality assurance and accountability structures in place to continuously track whether VCT is being used as intended, and that important metrics (i.e., changes to numbers of hearings, percentage of hearings where victims appeared, differences in decision outcomes via VCT versus in person, etc.) are made publicly available in a timely manner.

State Case Studies

Two states exemplify how VCT can enhance evidence-based paroling practices while adhering to social distancing guidance during the COVID-19 pandemic. These examples demonstrate two avenues to VCT implementation: one where VCT was legislated as part of an effort to enhance evidence-based paroling practices (Montana), and another where new evidence-based policies and practices were implemented and designed to work seamlessly with existing technology (Missouri).



Since 1999, the **Montana** Board of Pardons and Parole (MBPP) has had statutory authority to conduct hearings remotely ([MCA § 46-23-109](#)) and since 2015 has been required to record those hearings ([MCA § 46-23-110](#)) and make them available to the public when requested. VCT was sparsely used until 2017, when MBPP transitioned to a full-time parole board as a result of the passage of Justice Reinvestment legislation and began conducting hearings almost exclusively through the use of VCT. VCT has created efficiencies by reducing long-distance travel to conduct in-person parole hearings. Other benefits of VCT hearings include increased victim participation, reduced security concerns at institutions, increased capacity to hold hearings, and increased ability to conduct revocation hearings closer to the time of violation without transporting people from supervising jurisdictions.



Missouri's initial goal of implementing VCT for parole hearings was to give victims the opportunity to "attend" a parole hearing without having to interact with the person in prison. In 2018, as part of Missouri's Justice Reinvestment Initiative, the Missouri Parole Board revised many of its administrative policies and practices ([Missouri Parole Board Procedures Governing Release](#)) to align them with best practices and research. One focus was to improve the quality and content of parole hearings, both video and in-person, by focusing on motivational interviewing techniques. Part of the training on these new techniques specifically focused on how to effectively connect with clients over video platforms in a way that encourages and reinforces positive behavior change and that demonstrates to clients that supervision officers and parole board members are working together to hold clients accountable and to help them accomplish their supervision goals.

Additional Resources

Parole agencies are encouraged to use these publications to improve practices in conjunction with implementing VCT.

Nancy M. Campbell, *Comprehensive Framework for Paroling Authorities in an Era of Evidence-Based Practices* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Corrections, 2008).

National Institute of Corrections, *Evidence-Based Policy, Practice, and Decisionmaking: Implications for Paroling Authorities* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Corrections, March 2011).

National Institute of Corrections, *Core Competencies: A Resource for Parole Board Chairs, Members, and Executive Staff* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Corrections, March 2010).

National Parole Resource Center, *Project Resources* (Kensington, MD: National Parole Resource Center, 2018).

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