



## VIDEOCONFERENCING IN BRITISH COLUMBIA



### VISION

Court Services Branch has created a provincial network for videoconferencing in courts and correctional centres. Our vision is that “videoconferencing is a regular part of daily operations which will be used whenever appropriate, to reduce or avoid movement of prisoners, witnesses and judges and to expedite the timely progress of cases”

### OVERVIEW OF BRITISH COLUMBIA'S NETWORK

- Videoconferencing technology enables simultaneous visual and oral communication between different locations.
- Currently 33 court locations and 13 correctional centres are operational (see attached diagram), and several locations have more than one set of videoconferencing equipment. Most courthouse equipment is capable of being moved between courtrooms and is shared between Provincial Court and Supreme Court.
- This network has expanded rapidly, most sites are experiencing increasing levels of use and recently additional operators have been trained at all sites. Most sites use ISDN lines, enabling a high quality 6 channel connection while smaller communities or remote locations use Datadial 56 or Switched 56 cabling which enables a slightly slower 2 channel link.
- Practically any imaginable use has already occurred, in criminal, civil and family cases, with various configurations of links. Many courthouses have already conducted court events with links throughout North America and to other continents.
- Bail hearings and interim remands. In 2002, 4200 court appearances have occurred by videoconference where accused persons remained in custody at detention centres. Some courts are experimenting with one judge conducting bail hearings for other court locations to rebalance caseload and improve use of trial time.
- Trials. Hundreds of cases have occurred where expert and other witnesses attend from remote locations. Guilty pleas and sentencing hearings have been conducted with the accused remaining appearing by video link.
- Civil and Family Cases. Pre-Trial and case management conferences using videoconferences enable counsel or judges to avoid travel.
- Masters or judges have heard chambers lists remotely without needing to travel.
- Judges have continued and concluded cases remotely avoiding the need to travel.
- The BC Court of Appeal now has a VC system in Vancouver that has reduced travel to other centres. Appellants can be located anywhere in the province while three justices sit in Vancouver.

## **RESPONSES AND FEEDBACK**

- **Judges.** Many judges have indicated that videoconferencing has enabled cases to conclude more quickly, with key witnesses available for reasonable duration and cost, and has allowed judges to conclude matters remotely without undue delay or incurring travel time and cost.
- **The Bar.** Lawyers who have participated in videoconferences have provided positive feedback, with the vast majority reporting benefits to their clients and indicating saying they would definitely use the technology again.
- **Inmates.** Staff at correctional centres and defence counsel report that more inmates are requesting to appear by videoconference. Often this is preferred over discharge and readmission, travelling several hours in vans, staying in temporary holding cells, disrupting programs or activities, for very brief administrative appearances at court.

## **BENEFITS**

- Benefits are expected to increase as use increases. Several specific benefits from videoconferencing include:
  - **Increased safety in courthouses and during escorts.** By reducing or avoiding prisoner movements, crowding and tensions can be reduced in escort vehicles and in cellblocks. Safety inside correctional institutions can be improved with less chance of contraband entering.
  - **Improved cost effectiveness of services.** Videoconferencing can help reduce or avoid keep of prisoner expenditures. Correctional centres can reduce time spent logging prisoners and their personal effects in and out. Virtual appearances can reduce the need to call out auxiliary deputy sheriffs or police support via emergency response teams. Regular links for inmate appearances should enable cost avoidance on expansion of cellblocks or vehicle fleet. Witness appearances can occur at reduced cost and with greater certainty.
  - **Improved access to justice services.** Costs of proceedings can be reduced when witnesses, party, co-counsel or judge avoid travel. The ability to conduct a scheduled link by videoconference can eliminate or reduce obstacles to case completion and provide better access for protected and vulnerable witnesses.

### **Future:**

- We envision a broader application of Video Conferencing systems to address proceedings such as Traffic Court prosecutions allowing police officers the ability to present their case before a JP without actually leaving the police station.
- As courthouses consolidate, Video Conferencing systems can provide a form of judicial presence in previously serviced locations. There is interest on the part of municipal and provincial governments to develop mutually beneficial working arrangements to service such communities.
- Current systems cost \$18,000 to \$20,000. As with all technologies, these prices will drop making justification a simpler task. We also anticipate other technology platforms to mature bringing additional options to the courts. Some jurisdictions, such as Ontario, have found the use of Video Phones to be acceptable in specific court applications.



# MINISTRY OF ATTORNEY GENERAL VIDEOCONFERENCING NETWORK



## Courts

### Vancouver Island

Campbell River  
Courtenay  
Nanaimo  
Powell River  
Victoria (2)  
Port Alberni

### Lower Mainland

Abbotsford In-custody  
Abbotsford  
Chilliwack  
New Westminster  
North Vancouver  
Port Coquitlam  
Richmond  
Robson Square  
Sechelt  
Surrey  
Surrey -South Fraser Bail  
Vancouver JP  
Vancouver Law Courts (2)

### Interior

Cranbrook  
Kamloops  
Kelowna  
Kelowna – Bail  
Nelson  
Penticton  
Vernon  
Salmon Arm

### North

Dawson Creek  
Fort St. John  
Prince George (2)  
Prince Rupert  
Quesnel  
Smithers  
Terrace  
Williams Lake



## Jails

### Vancouver Island

Vancouver Island Regional  
Correctional Centre (2)  
Victoria Youth Secure  
Custody Centre

### Lower Mainland

Burnaby Correctional  
Centre for Women  
Burnaby Youth Secure  
Custody Centre  
North Fraser Pre-Trial Ctr (4)  
Surrey Pre-Trial Centre  
Vancouver Jail  
Vancouver Pre-Trial (1)  
Matsqui Federal Institution

### Interior

Kamloops  
Regional  
Correctional  
Centre (2)

### North

Prince George Regional  
Correctional Centre (2)  
Prince George Youth  
Secure Custody Centre