

Your Brain and Someone Else's Eyes: The Anatomy of Successful Court Security

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The amazing thing about the human brain is that it is capable of filling in or correcting information automatically. Remarkably, this brain function makes it possible for you to read this paragraph even though nearly all the words are misspelled! Although this amazing ability to automatically overlook or compensate for obvious errors is vital in our daily lives, for court security personnel this effect may not always be a good thing.

Anyone who has proofread someone else's work will probably agree that the above paragraph is absolutely true. Our brains have the amazing ability to process and automatically correct minor errors and inconsistencies that would otherwise slow us down. This allows people to focus on the big picture of daily life rather than the details. For instance, although sirens and car alarms are no less important in cities than they are in suburban or rural areas, they are more often ignored because city residents automatically compensate for them—sirens and car alarms are too familiar to be the focus of attention.

Therein lies the danger for law-enforcement and security personnel, particularly those permanently assigned to court facilities—our inherent ability to compensate for oversights or errors and drown out the real and figurative alarms of daily life. Issues of safety and security may be as prone to this “brain effect” as are the nuisances and distractions that we typically tune out. Furthermore, it seems that sometimes the more familiar security professionals are with their environment, the more likely they are to overlook small but significant security issues. This potentially dangerous situation is one that the Virginia Center for Policing Innovation's (VCPI) court assessors have encountered on many different occasions. What has been interesting is that these oversights were obvious to the assessors, but not to the on-site court-security professionals.

On one such occasion, a court facility was having difficulty with prohibited items being confiscated at its public-screening station. Despite clearly posted signs at the entrance, people seemed to be carrying pocket knives, keychain protection devices (small batons, OC spray, etc.), and other prohibited items into the screening area in inordinately large numbers. The facility's security staff attributed the situation to a variety of factors, including inattentiveness, disrespect for posted rules, and the public's lack of “common sense.” Staffers even quipped that many of the people would grudgingly prefer to surrender their possessions rather than walk back to their parked vehicles to secure the prohibited items. The unfortunate consequences of this situation were slow-moving screening lines,

frustrated and overwhelmed court-security officers, and agitated court visitors.

After conducting on-site observations and surveying the court's parking facility, VCPI assessors quickly concluded that the high volume of confiscated items was the result of misplaced signs—a simple security oversight. The court had posted signs at its main entrance, which meant that people coming to court did not see the signs until they were just about to be screened. The long lines at the screening station (often the result of officers dealing with prohibited items) meant that people had little time to walk back to their vehicles to store their items without the risk of being late to court. The assessors recommended posting signs, identical to the ones at the entrance, in the facility's parking lot. This simple step informed court visitors of the facility's prohibitions before they walked all the way to the courthouse. Although certainly not a cure-all, the signs significantly improved the screening-station dilemma.

Ultimately, it was the fresh perspective of the assessors that gave them the ability to see a situation that the facility's well-trained and highly competent security staff did not. For the facility's staff the big picture was keeping the court safe and free of weapons. That people would rather give up their prohibited items than walk back to their vehicles and their complaints about not knowing what was banned from the premises were simply background noises—complaints that were too common and not significant enough for the staff to notice. It took a second set of trusted eyes—the assessors—to identify the need for the better use of signs.

Courthouses are perhaps some of the most challenging environments to secure effectively. Once you enter a court facility there is an incredible amount of formal and informal activity within dangerously close quarters. Minor security oversights that are automatically compensated for (the brain effect) may have serious consequences. Perhaps the best way to avoid the minor oversights in court security is to do what good report writers do; find a second set of *trusted* eyes to look over your work. Has a security assessment been conducted on your court facility? 