

# From ankle strap to wristband: Warren County pilots 'smartwatch' electronic monitoring devices

By: Valerie Lyons | Posted at 10:13 PM, Aug 23, 2023



LEBANON, Ohio — Warren County's judicial system is among the first in the country to pilot a new device that encompasses all the functionality of an ankle monitor in the compatibility of a smartwatch device.

The technology, called the VeriWatch, is relatively new but that didn't give Mike Steele pause.

Associate director of electronic monitoring for the Warren County Court of Common Pleas adult probation department, Steele said his team has partnered with Business Intelligence Inc. for roughly 15 years. Whenever they launch new technology, like this GPS monitoring device, he always asks if Warren County can demo it, he said.

"I had seen the value in this," Steel said. "Especially with clientele who are low-to-mid risk — failure to appear, child support — things of that nature, this stigma of wearing an ankle monitor out at work or out in public for an offense such as that. It's gotta be rough, it's gotta be hard on that individual."

Warren County has one of the highest rates of assigning electronic monitoring devices to offenders in lieu of incarceration in Ohio, second only to Franklin County.

Steele said oftentimes, those wearing the ankle monitors are non-violent, low-level offenders in recovery programs or in the pre-trial process.

He said the "clunky boxes" can get in the way not only physically but also mentally. When we see the monitors, we often jump to conclusions, he said.

"I myself, when I first demoed an ankle monitor, I went to the YMCA to work out and I got all kinds of looks," Steele said. "I wore (the VeriWatch) for a

week and no one was the wiser to it so the technology has advanced to where that stigma that the client on court supervision being singled out in public — this greatly diminishes that."

Steele said the smartwatch-style device operates like a traditional ankle monitor, tracking wearers' movements, with more tech perks thrown in.

It tracks via GPS or local Wi-Fi networks — whichever connection is strongest at that given time, and has a messaging system between wearers and parole officers, biometric face scanning to confirm wearers' locations and even a calendar reminding them of upcoming court dates.

The wristbands can be charged with a portable charger that attaches to the strap and they're also secured with specialized locks. If wearers attempt to remove them, proximity sensors that can detect that.

"We put it through its paces," Steele said. "We do the same thing that we see our clients do with electronic monitoring. They attempt to tamper with it so we do the same. We remove it, we see how fast the alert notification comes through. We travel with it to see what the tracking points are like, we wrap it in tin foil. We do all the things that we see our clients do in demoing it because we want to make sure that what we're getting is a product that's going to be effective out in the field and for the officers."

The discreet devices are also cost-effective, Judge Robert Peeler said.

Running the wearer \$5 per day as opposed to the \$7-10 per day for the current ankle monitors and roughly \$95 per day to house an inmate, Peeler said the VeriWatch is an all-around win.

"It's much cheaper," he said. "And the fact you're wearing a watch that looks very similar to this is a lot less noticeable than a big black box on your ankle."

But Peeler said ultimately he agrees with Steele. The device helps lower the stigma, allowing wearers to feel more comfortable as they reenter society or simply try to continue normal activities that would otherwise be hindered by the traditional device.

"You think this big monitor on your ankle is going to help or hurt your ability to get a job? People don't feel good about someone looking them as if they're dangerous when in fact they're not," Peeler said. "We work at eliminating obstacles that have been created over the years, self-created, and the more we eliminate then the more likely it is that good people are going to be able to resume a good life."

Warren County is currently supervising 165 people on electronic monitors, Steele said. One person is wearing the new VeriWatch as the tech continues its testing phase but the hope is to assign a few dozen to low-level offenders by the end of the year.

Peeler said he eventually hopes the wristbands can be assigned to anyone.

"To me, it should go for everyone," said Peeler. "Keep in mind many of these people have not been convicted of a crime. They're presumed innocent and if you embrace that presumption — it's the American way and in our constitution — then no one should have a complaint about the fact that someone is being monitored without everybody knowing it."