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Visitor brought cell phones, memory cards, cash into prison

From Staff Reports

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CRESAPTOWN — Fast action by observant correctional staff at North Branch Correctional Institution led to the discovery of a wide variety of contraband there, plus two cell phones at Western Correctional Institution next door.

The search is on for the prison visitor who was caught on tape Sunday allegedly bringing much of it in.

Tower officers spotted a suspicious visitor entering North Branch with a bag in the mid-afternoon. Gatehouse officers were notified and searched the trash can upon seeing the visitor leave the prison shortly after entering.

Officers found a bag containing cell phones, phone headsets, memory cards, chargers, audio CDs, tobacco, rolling papers, \$180 and prepaid phone cards,

The items are considered dangerous because inmate fights over control of the contraband often lead to assaults and serious security issues, according to a spokesman for the Division of Correction.

The investigation, which now includes the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services Internal Investigative Unit, implicated an inmate at WCI, who was found with two phones and a charger.

The work fits in with the state Division of Correction's heightened intelligence gathering and contraband reduction effort.

Its Intelligence Coordinating Unit also has hired an analyst to design and maintain a gang database through a \$216,000 grant from the Governor's Office of Crime Control and Prevention.

Mark Vernarelli, department spokesman, said these efforts have dramatically reduced the number of overall serious assaults by inmates on staff — defined as cases requiring more than basic first aid. From 2006 to 2008, they have dropped 32 percent. Serious weapons assaults are down 75 percent and serious assaults by inmates on other inmates are down 28 percent over the same time period.