

Treatment interventions and assessment protocols in the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections.

The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has the ninth largest state correctional system in the country, housing nearly 44,000 inmates. Approximately 90 percent of the State's inmates will be released into the community, and since 47 percent of those released in 2001 returned to prison at least once within a three year period, interventions to decrease the recidivism rate are always being sought. The overarching goal of the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (PADOC) is to improve the probability of success for released offenders since every success means fewer victims, one less family disrupted, and more resources to dedicate to other pressing public policy issues.

In order to reduce recidivism rates, the PADOC is applying a Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) approach to all of its treatment interventions as a result of the evidence-based success of CBT-based programming. The Washington Public Policy Institute concluded that one of the multiple prison-based programs which reduce recidivism and where the benefits outweigh costs is CBT.¹ And, according to the Reentry Policy Council, providing CBT is not only cost-effective, but also, it can significantly reduce the likelihood of offenders recidivating because it targets an individual's reasoning skills. Offering CBT is also one of the widely regarded Principles of Effective Correctional Intervention which serve as the basis for providing effective programming in institutional settings. Based on these and other research findings, the proven effectiveness of CBT for correctional populations is evident.

Upon entry into the PADOC, inmates are individually assessed for criminogenic risk and need, and then appropriate CBT-based interventions are prescribed based upon these assessments. However, during the course of evaluating the PADOC's assessment and treatment practices, some concerns were raised. In regard to the staff who were facilitating the treatment groups, it was found that some staff members had never received training in effectively implementing CBT methods and techniques. It was also noted that there is no delineation between treatment and casework duties for those who are classified as counselors. In response to these two issues, two initiatives were implemented in the PADOC.

In order to address the training component, the Department contracted with the Center for Criminal Justice Research (CCJR) of the University of Cincinnati. In July 2007, CCJR conducted the first of seven CBT trainings for the PADOC. The contract also provided for Pennsylvania Board of Probation and Parole (PBPP) staff to participate in two trainings that were specifically directed toward parole staff interactions with offenders.

During the PADOC trainings, CCJR taught the Principles of Effective Correctional Intervention as they pertain to risk, need and responsivity when delivering treatment

¹Aos, Steve, Marna Miller, and Elizabeth Drake. "Evidence-Based Public Policy Options to Reduce Future Prison Construction, Criminal Justice Costs, and Crime Rates." Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2006.

programs, and provided an overview of CBT and related. Participants also learned how to effectively use rewards and punishers, what the role of the facilitator is and how to encourage inmates to appropriately practice and role play skills and techniques that they have learned.

In addition, both PADO and PBPP staff will participate in upcoming “train the trainer” sessions in which participants will be trained to instruct others in CBT methods. The goal is for all staff members to eventually be trained to use the techniques in their daily interactions with offenders, whether the exchanges occur within a group setting or on an individual basis.

Studies show that delivering “effective” treatment programs to the appropriate people will significantly reduce recidivism. Based upon the literature, we know that the type of treatment program offered (e.g., CBT-based), as well as the manner in which it is delivered, are important in lowering an offender’s risk to re-offend. As such, the PADO’s second initiative involves the creation of a new position description under the State Civil Service’s counselor classification. Efforts are currently underway to create two position tracks under this classification—one specializing in case management and the other specializing in the treatment of offenders (e.g. treatment specialists). A case manager would primarily assist inmates with reentry efforts such as those related to the completion of identification paperwork (e.g. drivers’ licenses, Social Security applications, etc.). Conversely, the treatment specialist’s function would be to facilitate ten cognitive-behaviorally based treatment groups on a weekly basis with the remainder of the work week dedicated to group preparation. These treatment specialist duties are similar to what is currently expected of the PADO’s Drug and Alcohol Treatment Specialists and educational staff.

Through administering assessments that inform the prescription of CBT-based programs, the PADO has made a commitment to preparing inmates for a successful reentry into the community. In order to further this goal, the CBT staff training initiative and counselor position reorganization were initiated within the Department. Ultimately, the key to both effective and efficient initiatives is to have intensive quality programs run by highly skilled and experienced professionals.