

A Changing Role: Perspectives from Two Officers

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Supervision Practices Before EBP

Prior to the adoption and implementation of Evidence Based Practices (EBP) in the Northern District of Iowa, the practice of supervising offenders often felt unrewarding, mundane, and restricted. Officers struggled in their attempts to manage directionless caseloads. It occurred to us on more than one occasion that we were, as an organization, reactive in nature. It was also apparent that our supervision practices were having little, if any, effect on reducing the rate of recidivism in our offender population. Something needed to be done to alleviate the pressures officers were experiencing.

In the Northern District of Iowa, we began our journey of change by challenging our professional barriers and examining our existing supervision practices. We asked ourselves some difficult questions. What was keeping us from doing our job in a way that would bring about personal and professional satisfaction? What could we do to enhance safety in the community and to implement proactive change in our offender population? How could we best support the Court and be more effective in our duties?

Others have examined these introspective issues. For example, Guy Bourgon, James Bonta, Tanya Ruge, Terri Scott, and Annie Yassine presented Strategic Training Initiative Community Supervision, Technology Transfer of What Works to Probation at the November 2007 American Society of Criminology Annual Meeting in Atlanta, Georgia. They presented a study that had been conducted in Manitoba, Canada, on probation case management in which probation officers were videotaped to see how they used risk/need assessments to formulate their case plans and manage their cases. This study netted five major findings regarding the “status quo” of supervision at the time (Bourgon 27-29):

1. Contacts with probationers appeared to be limited;
2. Intervention plans are not driven by risk assessment;
3. Identified needs were not being addressed in supervision;
4. Probation officers could be more active; and
5. Positive changes in the offenders were ambivalent.

The closing statement of this study indicated that the researchers felt as though they had simply created a “starting line for a race” to provide better supervision to offenders, stating: “In that race, it is clear that training and changes in “the way we do business” are required. Probation officers can learn to do more and do it better. Managers can alter policies and procedures and

seek the resources probation officers need to be more effective. The beneficiaries of such an effort will be the staff, the offenders, and the community” (Bourgon 29).

This study reflects that, previously, probation officers were having minimal, if any, effect in changing the lives of the people they were supervising. Clearly, our instincts that changing the way we do business was needed and supported by others’ experiences. The following reference supports what sort of changes were necessary to invoke positive change.

Brad Bouge, Jennifer Diebel, and Tom O’Conner wrote an article in the Journal of the American Probation and Parole Association Perspectives, volume 32, number 2, Spring 2008, entitled “Combining Officer Supervision Skills.” They concluded that, if a model for community corrections is to be helpful, it must be emotionally meaningful, easily understood, logical, and practical for officers to carry out in the midst of large, challenging caseloads within agencies that are constantly struggling to secure enough resources (Bouge 31). It was clear that changes needed to be brought about, yet critical to keep the approach simplified.

In the Northern District of Iowa, the catalyst for the transformative change came with bold new leadership and staff realignment, in conjunction with a renewed emphasis on the values and principles embodied in the Charter for Excellence. With this renewed energy, we strategically planned, prioritized, researched, trained, and budgeted for the knowledge and implementation of the tools and skill sets associated with the principles of evidence-based practices. We collaborated with other criminal justice agencies who had experience in EBP implementation. We changed the term “offender,” previously used to define a person under our supervision, to “criminal justice client” - realizing that something as simple as referring to a person that is being encouraged to change as an “offender” is not necessarily supportive of the impression we were hoping to achieve. We restructured caseloads and determined treatment dosages for those cases. We assessed the risks and needs of criminal justice clients and matched treatment services to their individual characteristics. We processed, intervened, and learned how to measure our work. By adopting and implementing the concepts learned from EBP, officers in the Northern District of Iowa became more proactive, fulfilled, and purposeful. Staff rededicated themselves to the mission of our core purpose - to reduce recidivism through proactive change.

The Purpose of EBP in Federal Probation

If one throws a rock in a pond, the ripples created by the rock breaking through the water’s surface stretch out around the point of impact, thus affecting and disrupting everything in its path. This analogy can be applied to the commitment of a crime. The crime itself does not only affect the perpetrator and victim, but also affects their families, their children, their neighborhood, their community, and society as a whole.

Through the implementation of EBP, our primary purpose is to reduce crime. We do this by providing criminal justice clients with an opportunity to address the most significant and profound issues that led them to seek out criminal solutions to their problems. The probation officers’ primary goal in supervising criminal justice clients is to prevent recidivism, or system re-entry, thereby protecting the community while enhancing the criminal justice clients’ lives and the lives of their families.

Thomas F. White, Director of Operations of the Court Support Services Division, State of Connecticut Judicial Branch, authored a report in April 2005, entitled: Re-Engineering Probation Towards Greater Public Safety: A Framework for Recidivism Reduction through Evidence-Based Practice. His report studied crime causation and treatment and concluded that recidivism can be predicted by using validated risk assessments to identify and address criminogenic needs and that recidivism can be reduced through programs that target criminogenic needs (White 3).

In searching for more specific methods to achieve our goal of reducing crime, we again reference Bourgon, Bonta, Ruge, Scott, and Yassine’s presentation of the Manitoba, Canada, study regarding how probation officers used risk/needs assessments to formulate their case plans and manage their cases. There are four major findings in this study regarding recidivism (Bourgon

2):

1. The length of the interview/contact was unrelated to recidivism;
2. The more topics covered in the interview/contact, the higher the recidivism;
3. The more time devoted to one or two criminogenic needs, the lower the recidivism; and
4. The more time devoted to specific conditions of probation, the higher the recidivism rate.

We have learned that using evidence-based scientific research to assess and then pinpoint one or two main objectives, we can effect positive change in the lives of the people we supervise. Our probation profession has become more aligned with science by understanding the research, utilizing such tools as the COMPAS risk/needs assessment, and then targeting the information gathered to each criminal justice client specifically. The information gleaned from our assessment process now guides our supervision strategies by matching focus areas through evidence-based treatment modalities and programs geared to their individual need areas. This logical and sequential case management approach provides criminal justice clients with an opportunity to realize their potential for positive change in a targeted, productive manner and examine the impact their behavior has had on their family, neighborhoods, and communities.

Yes, the small things do matter! By using the scientific data relating to predictable, successful outcomes in our work, we have become proactive in determining the root of the problems in the lives of criminal justice clients. We attempt to act prior to the potential occurrence of violations. We intervene when *indications* of violations occur. Thus, we attempt to create ambivalence in their thinking to eventually change their behavior. We attempt to motivate criminal justice clients to make changes in their lives, linking them to cognitive-behavioral programs and freeing them from the stranglehold of criminal activity. An important tool in this process consists in the techniques found in Motivational Interviewing (MI).

The Role of Motivational Interviewing in Federal Probation

It is not what you said, it's how you said it. This statement is no more powerful than in the profession of federal probation and the work that we do as probation officers. Motivational Interviewing used in conjunction with targeted intervention, is a research based method of directing conversations, which places emphasis on previously determined targeted issues in the lives of criminal justice clients. Its techniques have been practiced in various modalities throughout the world. Motivational Interviewing is an officer led but client driven conversation, in which the practitioner or probation officer constructively listens to and appropriately responds to the content of the conversation through a series of open-ended questions, affirmations, reflections, and summaries. The MI conversation is geared and directed toward a point of decisional balance when the criminal justice client describes ambivalent behavior. The goal is that, in response to the verbal challenge of the officer, the criminal justice client will choose a path of positive change to move forward instead of continuing in their status quo lifestyle. This empowers and challenges criminal justice clients to change in a non-confrontational method and is a critical component of evidence-based strategies.

The implementation of MI in the world of federal probation is arguably one of the most significant shifts in methodology and practice that we have experienced. Change can be implemented simply through the conversations we have. The criminal justice client's relationship with the probation officer should assist them in deciding to make positive life changes for themselves. MI complements and supports a positive and professional relationship with criminal justice clients so that rapport is sustained with value and dignity.

One of the most significant points in Bourgon, Bonta, Rugge, Scott, and Yassine's presentation was that probation officers can be more influential in the lives of the people we supervise. In explaining this, they found that establishing a good relationship with the criminal justice client and then providing them with structured, meaningful conversations which target one or two criminogenic needs were the most effective approaches in reducing recidivism (Bourgon 2-4). The variable is not dependent on procuring or securing additional financial resources, it simply means working "smarter" and being more effective in what we do as officers in the lives of the

criminal justice client. This concept of evidence-based practices provides us with the roadmap we need and a direction for our work.

The EBP Effect

Bringing back the passion. Officers in the Northern District of Iowa were introduced and have become familiar with the eight guiding principles of EBP as outline in Using in Integrated Model to Implement Evidence-Based Practices in Corrections, a compilation by Joplin, Bogue, Campbell, Carey, Clawson, Faust, Florio, Wasson, and Woodward. These principles are critical in guiding our approaches in Federal Probation (Joplin 4):

1. Assess actuarial risk/needs.
2. Enhance intrinsic motivation.
3. Target interventions.
4. Skill train with directed practice.
5. Increase positive reinforcement.
6. Engage ongoing support in natural communities.
7. Measure relevant processes/practices.
8. Provide Measurement Feedback.

By implementing techniques driven by the eight guiding principles of EBP and connecting the strategies together, the probation staff in the Northern District of Iowa have been rewarded with a greater sense of accomplishment and passion for their profession. A different culture exists in which we regularly share and celebrate our success cases.

So, how do we measure success? Even our concept of success has changed subsequent to the implementing of EBP in federal probation. Success is now measured through quality conversations that we, as probation practitioners, have with criminal justice clients, challenging their thinking, their behavior, and ultimately, their way of life. Success is through identifying need areas and targeting interventions specific to those need areas so that we can provide criminal justice clients with an opportunity to realize and achieve their own success.

Success is not only measured by a reduction in recidivism but, more than this, in the small steps criminal justice clients take in their lives by making clear choices not to return to the criminal justice system. Measuring these types of successes in the hearts and minds of the criminal justice clients we supervise can be elusive, even microscopic. It is recognizing, once again, that the small things do matter and even the smallest decision or choice towards behavior change can be considered a giant feat in their lives. If probation practitioners simply provide a mental alternative to a criminal justice client's thinking and then target that alternative to a specific need area, we can assist him/her in changing their behaviors and effect change in their lives thus providing them with an opportunity to change. Opportunity is how success is measured by probation practitioners.

EBP: An ongoing process...

The implementation of EBP has created a win-win environment in the field of probation at a time when change was desperately needed for the individuals that we serve, the communities we protect, and the profession we strive to become both more effective in and satisfied with. The probation officer must be goal oriented, empathetic, understanding, and encouraging to the criminal justice client in an attempt to bring about positive change. In implementing EBP, the weight of the case requirements are taken off of the probation officer and rest more squarely on the criminal justice client - it is a true shift of responsibility. We as probation officers become allies of the people that we supervise in their journey to change, no longer telling them what they need to do or should do, but asking them what they think they should do and guiding them in that process of inner discovery. Probation officers can become creative, while remaining vigilant in holding criminal justice clients accountable.

During our journey of implementing evidence-based principles of supervision and through the use of tools such as risk/needs assessments, targeted cognitive-behavioral programming, re-entry

involvement, and Motivation Interviewing, the role of the probation officer in the Northern District of Iowa has evolved over the past two years. The effects of EBP have altered the landscape of the probation field in which we work. We have found ourselves changing in the workplace as much as, if not more than, the criminal justice clients we supervise in the community. As our profession evolves toward the future and as we continue to apply the evidence presented to us in research, we strive to invoke positive changes in the lives of the people we supervise and the community in which we all live.

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