
Rising to the Challenge of Applying Evidence-Based Practices Across the Spectrum of a State Parole System

Like many states, Pennsylvania faces both unprecedented growth in its prison and parole populations and stubbornly high recidivism rates. Our state prison population has grown 21% already this decade, from 36,810 in 2000 to 44,365 in 2006. A large majority of these offenders will be released into communities across the state, and among them 75% will be released to the authority of the Pennsylvania Board of Probation and Parole (the Board).

As the prison population increases, so do our parole numbers—our caseload has grown 23% since 2002 and is projected to be over 30,000 offenders by the end of fiscal year 2007–2008. Many of these released offenders will fail in the community and return to prison. Almost half—approximately 47%—of released inmates return to prison at least once within 3 years of their release.

According to a 2006 analysis by the Council of State Governments, these trends are largely the result of criminal justice system policies and practices in Pennsylvania; they are not caused by state population growth or increases in crime rates. Recognizing the impact of these numbers on community safety and the state’s limited fiscal resources, the challenge for the Board is to address the state parole policies and practices that contribute to these trends.

The agency has risen to this challenge by embarking on an aggressive agenda to apply evidence-based practices at each critical point along the continuum of our system—from the time an offender enters prison, to release decision-making, to field supervision. By doing so we intend to improve the effectiveness of our parole system and reduce the likelihood that released offenders will commit further crimes.

In 2004, the Governor’s Reentry Task Force convened all state agencies that have a role in reentry to examine systemically each agency’s specific role and to identify gaps and needs. Building upon the work of the task force, the hundreds of recommendations of the Report of the Reentry Policy Council, and the volume of empirical research findings that are now available about “what works,” the Board has accomplished much within our own agency.

So far, we have:

- ◆ Refined our release decisional instrument;
- ◆ Created an effective Bureau of Offender Reentry;

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- ◆ Significantly reduced the number of technical parole violators returned to prison;
- ◆ Implemented statewide and local performance measures; and
- ◆ Convincingly demonstrated the need for additional budget resources.

We still have much work to do—important work that will affect both the prison population as well as the safety of our communities in positive ways.

Releasing the Right Offender at the Right Time

Pennsylvania is fortunate to be one of the states that has maintained a system of discretionary parole. The Board thus has the ability, in cooperation with the Department of Corrections (DOC), to provide offenders some incentive for good in-prison behavior, program participation, and post-release planning while they are still in prison. Incentives are important, of course, but the cornerstone of any good system is a valid and reliable risk and need assessment instrument to determine which offenders to release and when. Our agency has a long history of using a decisional instrument that incorporates the Level of Service Inventory–Revised (LSI-R) to facilitate release decisions and ensure consistency in those decisions.

However, our current challenge is to move from this traditional instrument to one that both incorporates evidence-based practices and relevant case history information about the offender and also ties in directly with field supervision practices. To accomplish this, the Board is completing a 1-year study to ensure that the instrument comprehensively reflects and weighs factors correlated with the risk of future offending. As part of that effort, the instrument will be modified to better align it with the risk principle, which calls for minimal interventions for low-risk offenders and the targeting of resources to the most critical needs that contribute to a life of crime for mid- to high-risk offenders.

The Board and the DOC have adopted a strategy of providing lower-risk offenders with lower levels of treatment and supervision. The instrument now will adequately reflect this. At the other end of the scale, the highest risk and needs domains from the LSI-R will be pulled into the decisional instrument to establish parole conditions that target interventions toward dynamic characteristics that contribute to criminal behavior. These conditions will interface with the overall reentry plan to eliminate any potential disconnect between the established conditions of parole and the post-release reentry plan for case management purposes.

As we have worked on this project, we've uncovered a major concern of certain stakeholders—such as judges, defense attorneys, and prosecutors—that they lack a clear understanding of the decisional instrument and the decision-making process as a whole. In response, we are creating an advisory committee to the Board that will provide input into future refinements of the instrument. We recognize that it is inherently vital for key stakeholders to have a voice in the parole decisional process, because the Board's decisions significantly affect the prison

population and ultimately affect public safety by determining which offenders to release.

Shifting to a Case Management Model for Reentry

Making our communities safer and helping to contain growth in the prison population require that each offender who is released to parole supervision be provided with the support and services he or she needs to successfully complete parole. To end the fragmented, stovepipe approach to reentry that has hampered our best efforts to improve our recidivism outcomes, we have created a Bureau of Offender Reentry. One of the Bureau's main responsibilities is to facilitate the agency's shift to a new approach to offender supervision that balances supervision and case management.

The foundation for effective case management is our new Transitional Accountability Plan (TAP). The TAP is a comprehensive analysis of an offender's education, employment, medical, financial, family, emotional, criminal history, substance abuse, housing, and other needs and issues. This information enables us to build upon and complement the treatment that the offender received during incarceration.

Once parole is granted, the institutional parole agent and the offender jointly develop the TAP to ensure offenders are linked to appropriate programs and are motivated to participate. Offenders undergo myriad assessments while still in prison that will shape future supervision strategies on parole.

Essentially, the TAP procedure backs up the process of parole supervision planning into the institution, before the offender is released, rather than this planning being initiated in the field as it had been done previously. As an active participant in this process, the offender begins to understand and accept what he or she needs to do to increase the chances of success on parole and thereafter. Importantly for offenders with medical and mental health needs, the TAP documents the date and time of any scheduled appointments and the amount of medication provided to the offender upon release.

Offenders' difficulty obtaining proper identification to apply for jobs and to access social services has been one of the most significant barriers to successful transition. The DOC has substantially assisted our reentry efforts in this area. After verifying the inmate's identity, the DOC can process an application for an inmate to receive a duplicate Social Security card.

Also, the DOC now can assist offenders with an application for a new or renewed non-driver's license photo identification prior to their release. During the TAP process, the institutional parole agent checks for these documents, and if they have not been obtained already, the agent will work with the offender to get them.

Cultural change through training—and retraining. The shift to case management and a focus on problem solving does not happen without training that helps agents develop the necessary skills and competencies. To meet this challenge, we have initiated a massive training effort that integrates the lessons of research into offender management. Sixteen training sessions have been scheduled in an 18-month period, based on several mutually supportive components.

- ◆ The Board developed a curriculum that reflects the eight principles of effective intervention (National Institute of Corrections, 2004) to educate agents on best practices in the provision of treatment and case management that have been shown to reduce recidivism.
- ◆ Agency leaders participated in the program, Community Safety through Successful Offender Reentry: An Agencywide Training, through the Center for Effective Public Policy. This 3-day policy and skill-building training focused on issues pertinent to Pennsylvania as developed from a strategic planning session. As an outcome of this program, agents, supervisors, and managers will play an active role in developing recommendations on how to move our reentry system forward.
- ◆ Certain staff have obtained certification as facilitators in the National Curriculum Training Institute’s Cognitive Life Skills program. This program addresses an offender’s thinking patterns, negative attitudes, antisocial values, and beliefs and the decisions that have led them to this point in their lives. The Bureau will launch pilot programs this year in two districts to incorporate these strategies into the overall offender management structure.
- ◆ Agents are also receiving training by Pennsylvania’s Department of Public Welfare (DPW) on skills for working effectively with individuals who have mental illnesses. The training covers how to collaborate with county mental health programs, focusing on locating and accessing community mental health services.
- ◆ Parole agents are also being trained in motivational interviewing techniques, through which they can carry out positive, collaborative interactions with offenders to get them thinking about making changes in their lives.

Outreach to community partners and informal networks. Overcoming barriers to reentry requires the participation of many partners and agencies if programs are to succeed. The Board is enhancing its relationships with key state and local agencies and community and faith-based organizations.

- ◆ The DPW and state Department of Health (DOH) have implemented a reentry pilot project for seriously mentally ill offenders to provide continuity of care for this population. These agencies also have created a workgroup to examine the issues faced by all offenders with mental illness or co-occurring disorders who are leaving prison.

- ◆ Pennsylvania has 67 counties. We are reaching out to county commissioners, judges, probation and parole chiefs, and mental health and substance abuse treatment providers at the county level to share the message that state parole needs and wants to work with local partners to address the needs of returning offenders.
- ◆ We also are actively seeking partnerships with faith-based groups, such as Prison Fellowship, Justice and Mercy, and Yokefellows.
- ◆ Informed families, as well, can act as a parole support system and positive influence to newly released offenders. Last year the Board implemented Family Parole Education classes in all of its districts statewide to help offenders' family members learn about the parole process. Topics include the home plan investigation process, conditions of parole, field and office contact requirements, agents' authority to search the residence and property without a warrant, and how family members can best support successful reentry.

Designing a New Technical Parole Violator Management Program

Parolees who do not comply with their conditions of release and return to prison on a technical violation are more likely to later recidivate than those who are able to maintain ties in the community. Knowing this, we were disturbed that prison admissions of parole violators had increased 37% from 2000 to 2006. Recognizing the inherent inefficiency of returning technical parole violators (TPV) to prison, we implemented a TPV management process designed to maintain parolees in treatment programs in the community if it can be done safely and effectively.

Incarceration of TPVs is considered a last resort and is used only in circumstances warranting imprisonment. Examples include violations with a new criminal arrest, situations in which violators are a serious threat to themselves or others, or cases where the offender is unmanageable and has a protracted and escalating history of violations.

The results of this updated strategy are impressive. Last fiscal year we diverted 600 TPVs from Pennsylvania state prisons, and we anticipate that this year we will divert 1,000 cases. From February 2006 to June 2007, the monthly number of offenders with technical parole violations declined 20%, and there was an accompanying 3% decrease in violators charged with a new crime. The overall impact on the prison population was a 13% decline in the average number of weekly admissions to prison of parole-violation pending cases.

Review of violations options. As part of our effort to increase successful parole completions, we've identified the need for better responses to violations. In conjunction with the TPV management program, the Board is involved in a research project that will analyze alternative sanctions imposed on parolees,

measure their success, and develop a guide for greater uniformity statewide in the use of sanctions. This research will provide us with ongoing statistical analysis of the field agents' use of intermediate sanctions and whether the sanctions being imposed are proportional, progressive, and corrective relative to the violation behavior.

The analysis also will enable management to guide agent responses to violations and provide agents with broader sanctioning alternatives.

- ◆ For example, the Board is developing internal programmatic capacity in the field offices to provide the behavioral interventions needed to respond to certain violation behaviors. This will enhance the agents' ability to safely and effectively extend community supervision of parolees who have exhibited those violation behaviors.
- ◆ We are also seeking additional community-based interventions, services, and supports. One especially important tool for diverting offenders from recommitment to prison is the use of the DOC's community correctional center beds. TPVs typically are placed in these residential centers for up to 90 days to address seriously noncompliant behavior on parole.

In conjunction with our analysis of sanctioning options, the Board is also developing an improved violation recommitment assessment process. A new decisional instrument will identify the factors decision-makers are expected to apply consistently when determining whether to recommit parole violators to prison.

Development of Statewide and Local Performance Measures

The enormous undertaking of applying evidence-based practices across the entire spectrum of the parole system would be for naught without proper feedback through performance measures. For that reason, we have developed performance measures across all of our programmatic and production areas.

Current program measurements, a total of 45 in all, analyze a wide realm of processes and outcomes within major categories of our operations and services:

1. Parole business processes, including release consideration and reentry planning;
2. State supervision processes, including reentry case management, risk reduction, and community protection;
3. State supervision fee collection, including job retention and financial accountability; and
4. Program areas, including victim services and sex offender assessment.

We have identified the top four most important performance measures as successful parole completions, employment rate, TPV reduction, and supervision fee collections. (In addition to reflecting compliance with conditions of parole, supervision fees generate funds that can be reinvested in agent training.)

To extend more local accountability into each of its district offices, the Board in January 2007 launched the Board Excellence Accountability and Measurement (BEAM) System. Agency and district managers develop the fiscal and operational data and benchmarks they need to effectively manage their areas of responsibility. In addition to monthly reporting, managers hold a quarterly review for feedback and make adjustments as necessary. Managers are held accountable for their decisions and will be evaluated and promoted based on their overall success. This is an important step forward, because performance measures and local accountability directly affect our success in requesting additional resources.

Building a Case for Additional Budget Resources

The changes the Board has implemented to this point have occurred at a time when there has been no budget increase for 4 years and no new staff. Our initial progress with reentry has been accomplished by staff who retained their prior, non-reentry duties and also assumed responsibility for the new reentry efforts. Institutional and field staff learned new policies and procedures, attended trainings on evidence-based practices, and implemented the new TPV management strategies—all without a decrease in workload or caseloads as the population continued to increase.

After 4 years of budget-tightening and implementation of operational efficiencies, we recognized that full implementation of comprehensive reentry practices would be possible only with significant additional resources. The parole budget for the fiscal year that began in July 2007 reflected the agency's proposed full implementation of recidivism-reducing strategies. For the first time, the Board calculated the anticipated reduction in recidivism that would result from our new programmatic enhancements and projected the fiscal impact over 4 years.

Based on this forecasting, our budget submission requested funding for new staff positions and comprehensive agent training in evidenced-based practices.

New positions. The budget included funding for two new categories of agent positions to focus specifically on reducing recidivism.

- ◆ **Transitional Coordinators** (TCs) will provide intensive transitional case support during the first 3 months of parole, when parolees are most likely to recidivate. Their responsibilities include reviewing each offender's final reentry plan, addressing prior to release any needs related to continuing the care and treatment that has been provided in the institution, making necessary appointments, ensuring all necessary personal identification is available, submitting paperwork to community providers, and assisting with especially hard-to-place offenders seeking housing arrangements. After parolees are

successfully stabilized in the community, they will transition to a general supervision caseload.

◆ **Assessment, Sanctioning and Community Resource Agents (ASCRAAs)** will provide technical assistance to parole agents by providing case review for offenders who have not responded positively to sanctions for parole violations and are therefore in jeopardy of recommitment to prison. These positions, to be located in the district and sub-offices, will provide much-needed, day-to-day guidance to our more than 400 field agents. Their involvement will help ensure the effective and consistent use of sanctions for technical violators to target behavior change; provide offender reintegration programming, such as cognitive-behavioral programming; develop and expand various community resources (such as housing, employment, and support services); extend referral support to needy family members; and assist agents in the review, interpretation, and selection of effective management responses to parolee assessments.

New training. The myriad changes occurring throughout our system cannot be accomplished and sustained without adequate funding for training. The skills and competencies required in a system focused solely on supervision are different from those required in a system that focuses on both supervision and case management. We have developed a full training plan to achieve this goal, and we successfully conveyed the importance of this training need in our budget request as part of the calculations for reducing recidivism. Without this transformation in our agency culture, our goal of making Pennsylvania's communities safer will not become a reality.

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History has demonstrated that tougher sentencing and incapacitation alone will not reduce the risk of new crimes or new victims. Further, research has demonstrated that supervision and monitoring alone are not as effective as a balance of supervision and effective, problem-solving case management in creating successful parole outcomes. As we move forward in this new era of research that holds promise for reducing the number of offenders who fail upon reentry, the Pennsylvania Board of Probation and Parole will continue to step up to the challenge of defining our role in reentry.

We're excited about the progress we have made so far, but we also recognize that this is just the beginning. Through our performance data, we will be able to measure the effectiveness of our effort to apply evidence-based practices and research across the continuum of our parole system. We look forward to publishing these results in a future edition of *Topics in Community Corrections*. ◆

Resources

National Institute of Corrections and The Crime and Justice Institute, 2004. *Implementing Evidence-Based Practice in Community Corrections: The Principles of Effective Intervention*. Online at <http://www.nicic.org/Library/019342>.

Re-Entry Policy Council, 2005. *Report of the Re-Entry Policy Council: Charting the Safe and Successful Return of Prisoners to the Community*. (New York: Council of State Governments.) Online at <http://reentrypolicy.org/Report/About>.