A Ten-Step Guide to Transforming Probation Departments to Reduce Recidivism

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The Council of State Governments (CSG) Justice Center has released a guide for policymakers committed to reducing the likelihood that probationers will reoffend. A Ten-Step Guide to Transforming Probation Departments to Reduce Recidivism provides probation leaders with a roadmap to overhaul the operations of their agencies so they can increase public safety in their communities and improve rates of compliance among people they are supervising.

Download the entire report in PDF [2]

Introduction:

Probation officials across the country increasingly have to do more with less. They oversee agencies that are responsible for record numbers of people under community supervision; according to recent estimates, 1 in 45 adults in the United States are on probation or parole. Though their budgets are being cut, probation departments are expected to improve the success rates of the increasing numbers of individuals they supervise and to reduce crime in the community by preventing reoffending. These high expectations and the intense public scrutiny that follows a high-profile failure require that probation officials revisit their agency’s goals, processes, and measures for success.

The core mission of a probation department is to reduce probationer recidivism. Reviewing a growing body of knowledge and experience, experts point to four core practices that are essential to probation agencies’ success in achieving this mission.

Based on current best practices, probation departments should

1. Effectively assess probationers’ criminogenic risk and need, as well as their strengths (also known as “protective factors”);
2. Employ smart, tailored supervision strategies;
3. Use incentives and graduated sanctions to respond promptly to probationers’ behaviors; and
4. Implement performance-driven personnel management practices that promote and reward recidivism reduction.

To maximize its positive impact in the community, a probation department must fully implement each of the four practices. Many departments have made efforts to put in place some of these practices, but few have been able to design and implement a comprehensive plan that reflects all four. In many cases, agencies committed to transformation have encountered practical barriers that have impeded implementation of one or several of the practices even if they succeed at implementing others.
For example, a probation department may have adopted a new assessment tool to determine an individual's criminogenic risk and need, but if department officials were unsuccessful in using the findings to determine the conditions of supervision, then the tool likely had limited or no impact. Similarly, if the department's strategies for sanctioning probationers do not support its supervision and treatment goals and the judiciary doesn't ensure that supervision and sanctioning policies are consistent, then those goals will be undermined.

Transforming a department to implement each of the four practices of recidivism reduction can seem impossibly complex, especially for agencies facing funding cuts and growing numbers of probationers. Department transformation is not a simple or quick process, but is possible (as is evidenced by the case study described in this guide). This guide provides a 10-step action plan to see the department through the transformation from beginning to end and align it with the four practices of recidivism reduction. The 10 steps are meant to work in tandem. Departments undergoing a transformation should pursue each step to maximize effectiveness.

**Audience**

The guide is meant for officials at probation departments already committed to recidivism reduction, as well as the county and state leaders prompting change. These departments have already reached a consensus that transformation is necessary, and that the agency's mission should bring recidivism reduction to the front and center. As such, this guide does not offer advice to stakeholders about making the initial case for transforming their probation agency. Rather, it focuses on actions department leaders should take after stakeholders have agreed that agency transformation is necessary.

**How to Use this Guide**

The 10 steps outlined in the guide help probation officials refocus the agency toward reducing crime and re-offense rates among probationers. As a whole, they provide an action plan for realizing the practices of recidivism reduction. They are presented in three phases: 1) setting an agenda for change; 2) redesigning the department's policies and practices; and 3) implementing procedures to ensure quality and monitor progress.

It is important to note that the 10 steps are not all meant to function as a sequence of events; in particular, the steps in phase two will often be concurrent actions (e.g., step four may happen at or around the same time as step seven). The probation department should, therefore, plan to pursue these steps at the same time, rather than staggering one after the other. When the department starts one step, it should immediately start thinking about commencing the subsequent steps—rather than waiting until completion of the prior step. Officials must ensure that the time that lapses between steps doesn't kill the momentum of the project or lead to distractions that derail it. Furthermore, the steps won't all take the same length of time; officials may accomplish some in a single meeting, whereas others may take years to complete.

Each of the steps described in this guide must be in place and well integrated to create a major cultural and philosophical shift in the agency. To help agencies assess their progress, a checklist of key activities is at the end of each step. The guide also provides a resource section that relates to the topics in each step, and includes appendices with sample documents from a probation department that underwent a transformation similar to what is described in this guide.

Shepherding a probation organization through the lengthy and intricate process of change is not easy. Probation departments are complex structures with many moving parts. They perform many functions; not only do they manage the massive number of daily needs of individuals under their supervision, but they also oversee complicated administrative and operational systems. To
achieve any meaningful measure of success, department administrators and involved personnel must fully commit to the transformation endeavor and agree on shared goals. Equally important, leaders involved in the transformation project must remain flexible, patient, and optimistic as the effort may take multiple years. This guide will help departments keep these important points in mind as they get started.

Reference:

Links

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