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The Development of the Evidence-Based Practice Blue Print and Where We Are Now

By The Evidence Based Practices Working Group Co-Chairs:

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THE OFFICE OF PROBATION and Pretrial Services (OPPS) of the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts (AO), in keeping with guidance from the Criminal Law Committee of the Judicial Conference, has worked to support and guide the adoption of evidence-based practices in the probation and pretrial services system. The adoption of an evidence-based philosophy requires the use of assessment tools; the development of supervision and programming options that are informed by evidence; the use of research; and the development of staff skills to support programming and service delivery. The supervision and programming principles derived from research, when implemented well, lead to a more efficient and effective system, maximizing the reduction in recidivism.

In August 2009, OPPS formed the Evidence-Based Practice (EBP) Working Group to assist OPPS in developing a plan for the strategic implementation of evidence-based principles in the federal probation and pretrial services system. The working group embodies a team approach, with members representing the probation and pretrial services officers from various districts, OPPS, and the Federal Judicial Center (FJC).

The working group first met for three days in October 2009. Before the meeting, group members were asked to review literature and research that would be used to help guide our conversations in a way that would maximize the value of our time together. Our initial meeting included discussion and lively debate on various topics, including but not limited to: a historical context of the movement toward evidence-based practice in the federal system; the principles of risk, need, responsivity, fidelity and measurement; use of an actuarial risk assessment instrument; supervision skills; case planning; and implementation. Our review of the literature focused on: (1) our general impressions; (2) information gleaned from the various articles; and (3) ways to make interaction with defendants and offenders purposeful, intentional, and productive.

Throughout the course of the meeting, several things became evident and ultimately led us to identify three primary goals:

- *Goal 1: Educate all and provide a common foundation and understanding of EBP.* Unlike a local, county, or state system where things may be easier to implement uniformly and/or control, we are 94 federal districts with our own unique issues and cultures. We have varying levels of interest and varying levels of readiness. Due to the varying levels of readiness, we identified the need to establish a common foundation of knowledge as a primary goal.

Goal 2: *Implementing an Actuarial Risk Assessment*. Based on the research, the working group concluded that the use of an actuarial risk/needs assessment was absolutely necessary, and needed to be the foundation to build upon. After much discussion, the working group unanimously endorsed the use of the Post Conviction Risk Assessment (PCRA) for a variety of reasons including: 1) it was developed using data from our federal population 2) it provided continuity among the districts; and 3) unlike an off-the-shelf item, it was specifically designed to fit our needs.

- Goal 3: *Teaching officers supervision skills that will have the greatest effect on reducing recidivism*. Research tells us that the skills used by officers during their working alliance with offenders are a critical component to lasting change. The working group felt that it is essential for officers to have this skill set.

The working group also believed that transparency would be important as the system moved toward becoming outcome based. We thought that openness and inclusion of all federal probation and pretrial services districts was a critical component. In order to extend as much information as possible beyond the working group, we agreed to send out our information in the weekly memos that are issued from the Office of Probation and Pretrial Services to district chiefs as well as through other avenues available to us, such as *News & Views*, the internal newsletter for federal probation and pretrial services; Chiefs Conferences; the American Probation and Parole Association (APPA); Chief and Deputy Chief Administrative Meetings; Chiefs Advisory Group meetings; various trainings and conferences; and our system's EBP website.

Recognizing the enormity of our mission and the system-altering shift we were suggesting, the working group concluded it was necessary to put forth a document that provided chiefs and districts with a "Blue Print" to incorporate evidence-based practices in their districts, with the goal of changing offender behavior and reducing recidivism. We also believed it was important to hold a symposium for all chiefs to bring everyone together to discuss this important topic. Shortly after our initial meeting concluded, the Chiefs Advisory Group was given a summary of this meeting and advised of our plan to create a "Blue Print" and to plan a Chiefs Symposium. The Chiefs Advisory Group was very supportive, and endorsed the idea of the symposium.

As co-chairs of the working group, we embarked on creating a draft "Blue Print" that was based upon the relevant research and encompassed all of the information the working group discussed, reviewed, and debated during our meetings. The National Institute of Corrections (NIC), in concert with the Crime & Justice Institute (CJI), developed *An Integrated Model* for the effective implementation of evidence-based practices that combines Evidence-based Principles; Organizational Development; and Collaboration. The "Blue Print" embraces this integrated model with an approach that takes into account the different levels of readiness in the federal probation and pretrial services districts. The plan supports both interdependence and local innovation. The eight principles for effective interventions outlined by the NIC/CJI have been used as a starting point and foundation for the federal system to build upon. The strategic plan utilizes the conceptual framework of the eight, while incorporating others that have been supported by empirical data to identify five core principles of effective intervention for our system. Initiating and maintaining offender interventions and supervision practices consistent with these five principles will maximize our system's ability to reduce recidivism rates. The five principles are: Risk, Need, Responsivity, Fidelity, and Measurement.

Our initial draft of the blueprint was vetted through a subcommittee of the working group before eventually being vetted through the entire working group. On December 11, 2009, the working group approved a draft document that was posted on the federal judiciary's internal website (J-Net) for comments from the field. We then focused on the plan and agenda for the symposium. In February 2010, a two-day Chief's Symposium on Evidence-Based Practice took place in Houston, TX.

Since the development of the blueprint and the Chief's Symposium, significant progress has been made toward achieving the goals identified in the strategic plan.

- Goal 1: *Ensure a common foundation of knowledge and understanding of EBP and research on risk and reducing recidivism by providing EBP 101 to all districts*.

Working collaboratively with OPPS and the Administrative Office of the U.S. Court's Office of Public Affairs, the working group helped develop EBP 101 training for the field. The training, which was held live in the District of Maine, was taped and has been available to all districts through the federal judiciary's intranet since October 2010. Districts conducting the training with the use of the viewer's guide have reported much greater success with training and implementation of the new Post Conviction Risk Assessment (PCRA). Feedback suggests that districts find the practical discussion very useful in addition to the lecture portion that discusses the science behind the principles.

- Goal 2: *Ensure the national use of the Post-Conviction Risk Assessment by September 2011 with the rollout of PACTS Gen 3.*

Although we have no control over the rollout of PACTS Gen 3, the newest generation of our system's Probation and Pretrial Services Automated Case Tracking System, we have successfully completed 13 PCRA training sessions and as of this writing in the summer of 2011, have 3 remaining. By September 2011, all current supervision officers will have completed the training. Along the way, there have been minor adjustments to the training based on feedback received from attendees, information gleaned from the Pre-PCRA Conference Calls, and districts' completion of EBP 101. Trainers have become increasingly comfortable with the material and process, and feedback from the training sessions has been positive.

- Goal 3: *Ensure that officers are providing effective interventions in their direct contact with offenders with Core Correctional Skill Building.*

Over the last year OPPS has trained 155 officers in STARR (Strategic Techniques Aimed at Reducing Re-Arrest). As a system, we are beginning to build a contingency of STARR coaches, which is a critical part of the process. The EBP Working Group and OPPS are continuing their efforts to develop models of delivery for STARR training. Interested districts need to be able to support implementation efforts by using the PCRA and developing local coaching expertise.

In concert with the Office of Probation and Pretrial Services and the EBP Working Group, the Federal Judicial Center committed to take on the domains of organizational development and collaboration set out in the NIC *Integrated Model*, to provide education and consulting services to probation and pretrial managers, district and magistrate judge, and federal defenders. The following programs have been developed or reengineered to meet this goal:

- Facilitating Offender Reentry to Reduce Recidivism: A Workshop for District Teams
- Quality Improvement Seminar for Federal Reentry and Post-Conviction Drug Courts
- Leading Organizational Transitions Training for Trainers
- Customized Consultation on EBP and Reentry Projects
- Executive Team Training
- New Chief Training
- New and Experienced Deputy Chief Training
- New and Experienced Supervisor Training

As co-chairs of this very active working group, we are proud of the commitment, motivation, and dedication the members of our group have demonstrated. We continue to work diligently to meet our goals and to provide the field with the most current research and information relevant to the incorporation of evidence-based practices in the United States Probation and Pretrial Services System.

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