

Using Implementation Science to Transform Policy into Practice: The Federal Probation and Pretrial Services System's Evidence-based Journey

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MORE THAN A DECADE ago, evidence-based practices (EBP) were introduced to the federal probation and pretrial services system. In 2018, the *Guide to Judiciary Policy*, Volume 8: Probation and Pretrial Services, Part E: Post Conviction Supervision, underwent major revisions to support EBP practices and programming. Additionally, beginning two years ago, the Probation and Pretrial Services Office (PPSO) began qualitatively evaluating programming through focus groups and by coding the quality of the officers' recorded use of one EBP, effective use of disapproval. In 2019, PPSO dedicated additional resources to assess current programming using implementation science, practices, and frameworks. Using an implementation science lens to analyze results from the focus groups and the coding of tapes yielded insights into areas where PPSO and the system can increase motivation/readiness and improve messaging (enabling context); help evaluate how well a skill or practice is being used (fidelity); and identify the needed capacity and supports to ensure sustainability of the practices/programming (implementation infrastructure).

Part I: Where We Are

Background

In response to an increasing body of research in community corrections that identifies

evidence-based practices that can reduce recidivism, a major objective of the Probation and Pretrial Services Office (PPSO) is to incorporate EBP into the federal probation and pretrial services system. The federal probation and pretrial system consists of 112 decentralized federal probation and pretrial services offices. Each office has specific circumstances, structure, and needs. Since the federal probation and pretrial services system committed to adopt EBPs, the system has been investing in educating and training thousands of officers in EBP. Additionally, PPSO and the system are working to integrate evidence-based practices in policy, procedure, and day-to-day supervision activities. The theoretical constructs of EBP in community corrections that 40 years of research have produced include the risk, need, and responsivity principles; cognitive behavioral therapy techniques; and social learning theory. The research supporting these concepts has influenced the development of core correctional practices. Based on the principles and practices noted above, PPSO has created four evidence-based programs/tools: Pretrial Risk Assessment (PTRA), Post-Conviction Risk Assessment (PCRA), Staff Training Aimed at Reducing Rearrest (STARR), and The Criminogenic Needs and Violence Curriculum (CNVC). Using different methodologies and with differing degrees

of success, PPSO has attempted to train and sustain each of these innovations, which have been separately introduced. The success of the training and the sustainability of the innovation has fallen on local districts.

Revised Guide in Post-Conviction Supervision

Between 2016-2018, Part E of the *Guide To Judiciary Policy*, Post-Conviction Supervision, was revised to incorporate EBP into federal probation and pretrial policy, thereby promoting the alignment of procedures with policy, which encourage staff to be guided by EBP in their everyday interactions with persons under supervision. Some of the new wording and concepts include:

- **Evidence-Based Practices as Guiding Framework for Supervision:** Probation offices provide supervision services in accordance with evidence-based practices. Probation offices should consider the principles of risk, need, responsivity, fidelity, and measurement when providing supervision services.
- **Evidence-Informed Methods to Guide Supervision:** All probation offices should provide supervision services in accordance with "evidence-informed methods," integrating (1) evidence-based practices; (2) other available evidence (e.g., from new

and promising research or from other academic disciplines such as education, medicine, and implementation science); (3) the probation officer's professional judgment; and (4) the probation office's own evidence, which includes data on outcomes at the district level.

- **Replacement of Term “Offender” with “Person under Supervision”:** Adopting the term “person under supervision” in lieu of “offender” recognizes that the label “offender” may negatively affect the working relationship between officers and persons under supervision and result in unintended consequences, including increased recidivism.
- **Monitoring, Restrictions, and Interventions Model:** The changes to the *Guide* move policy from a model of “controlling” and “correctional” strategies to a model of “monitoring, restrictions, and interventions.” Under this model, “monitoring” is defined as “the probation office’s collection of information about the behaviors of a person under supervision, to the degree required by the conditions specified by the court or paroling authority, to stay informed and report to the sentencing court about the person’s conduct and condition.” “Restrictions” is defined as “the restriction of liberty placed on a person under supervision to the degree required by the conditions specified by the court or paroling authority.” Finally, “interventions” is defined as “the delivery of services by the probation office or service provider, which are not inconsistent with the conditions specified by the sentencing court or paroling authority, to: (1) aid the person on supervision; and (2) bring about improvements in his or her conduct and condition.”
- **“Lawful Self-Management” as a Goal of Supervision:** The changes to the *Guide* add “lawful self-management” as a goal of supervision. This term is defined as “the person’s demonstrated ability to not commit a crime during the period of supervision and beyond.”
- **Probation Officers as “Change Agents”:** The changes to the *Guide* suggest that probation officers are the primary change agents and decision-makers in providing supervision services. In the “change agent” role, officers not only perform case management, but actively engage in facilitating change in the person on supervision.

Following approval of these revisions,

PPSO has begun updating procedures to reflect and support the policy updates.

STARR Focus Groups

To promote core correctional practices (CCP) in federal community supervision and thereby reduce recidivism among persons under supervision, PPSO developed a program of evidence-based skills and techniques called Staff Training Aimed at Reducing Rearrest (STARR). PPSO then adopted a peer coaching model to support the training of probation officers in STARR.

PPSO piloted STARR with early adopter probation offices, yielding positive outcome measures linked to a reduction in recidivism (Lowenkamp, Holsinger, Robinson, & Alexander, 2012). Since this initial wave of pilot districts, PPSO has struggled to replicate the link between STARR training and reductions to recidivism. Despite the federal system’s difficulties in replicating these outcomes, research conducted over the past 30 years with programs like STARR shows a positive correlation between use of CCP programs and a reduction in recidivism when officers use CCP programs with fidelity (Andrews & Carvell, 1998).

As part of the recent reevaluation process, PPSO conducted two focus groups from the field to gather input on training and use of STARR. The focus groups addressed five categories: implementation, leadership, coaching, measurement, and training. Participants from both groups described the challenges around accountability, support, knowledge, fidelity, implementation, and staffing.

Twelve individuals were selected to participate in focus groups. They were charged with examining their experience and involvement in STARR both locally and nationally to better understand the strengths and challenges of the program. All members of the focus groups have participated in STARR, but in varying staff or leadership roles. Staff members from PPSO listened to the focus groups’ audio recordings and generated notes, which were coded and discussed to identify themes and key findings. The key findings identified the challenges and common themes from the field regarding STARR.

Qualitative analysis revealed three overarching themes across the two focus groups, with subsequent subthemes.

1. Finding: Lack of effective national supports and incentives for districts to implement/sustain STARR skills and interventions.

Competing initiatives commonly named by participants from the focus groups are district office reviews, policy/procedure, and workload formulas that are used to determine allotment of funds to each district. Mandated periodic office reviews score district performance in different policy areas. They “provide PPSO with a condensed view of office processes—highlighting areas in which they excel and areas that need improvement. With each office review, PPSO staff also gain insight into ways in which we can help offices at a national level” (Sheil, 2019). The workload formula, which determines how much money an individual probation and pre-trial services office receives, is modified every five years based upon daily tasks and times recorded for them within the probation and pretrial services office. Most participants in the focus groups argued that STARR skills must be incorporated into one or all of these areas to create incentives for learning and employing these skills and help with long-term sustainability. As workload increases, there needs to be movement towards efficiency and removal of activities that do not align with district goals and policy/procedure.

2. Finding: Most staff lack understanding of how the use of STARR skills fits into a comprehensive supervision model.

Feedback from focus group members reflects that most staff members lack understanding of how STARR fits into overall supervision practices. Members identified this lack of comprehension as a training issue, as well as a deficit in how districts incorporated STARR into risk assessment (PCRA) and case planning after training. All these factors affect STARR implementation. Focus group participants concluded that closing this knowledge gap is necessary for STARR skills to be built into existing supervision practices.

3. Finding: Districts struggle to build internal capacity to support STARR and its sustainability.

Both middle management (supervisors) and executive management (chiefs, deputy chiefs, and assistant deputy chiefs) play an integral role in motivating and leading staff to participate in STARR. Most focus group members identified that executive management play a different role than supervisors (middle managers), but both are vital to supporting officers.

Focus group members related

different experiences in implementing STARR. They also offered ideas for improving elements of implementation. Although implementation occurs within individual districts, PPSO still exercises national influence. Consistent struggles exist at both the national and local level in understanding the next steps needed in implementation. Introducing benchmarks and qualitative measurement of STARR skill usage will help build positive morale in moving forward with implementation efforts.

Probation and pretrial services officers have emotionally taxing jobs. Officers act as a sounding board for many of the persons under their supervision, see the way people live when they conduct field visits, and must always stay aware of their surroundings for safety reasons. Management that participated in the focus groups alluded to an increase in workload and national/local initiatives that make it difficult to recruit the qualified coaches that focus group participants see as key players in the success of STARR implementation. Participants further noted that in some cases officers volunteer to be coaches only to seek promotional opportunities, and many of the best coaches become supervisors, which impacts STARR's sustainability.

Coding of Effective Disapproval Tapes

In the spring of 2020, to assist in a data science project, PPSO staff members coded tapes of officers using effective use of disapproval. The tapes were extracted from the STARR Information Tracking System (SITS), which allowed coders to review tapes from any district that uses SITS. PPSO staff reviewed 660 tapes with 60 duplicate tapes. To review the tapes, coders used a STARR proficiency tool for effective use of disapproval that had been developed by the Middle District of North Carolina.¹ The review instrument assigns performance on the tool to one of three categories: excellent; satisfactory, and needs improvement. Of the 600 tapes, 51 percent were scored as needing improvement.

Staff who coded the tapes discussed their observations of many officers struggling to effectively communicate with persons under supervision. The intent of the skill use did not come across in most interactions. In fact, in some interactions the way the officer

used the skill centered around blame, guilt, and failure. This experience highlighted the importance of fidelity and of creating a sound tool for evaluating skill use that can then be used by coaches.

Analysis of Where We Are

The system's ongoing growth and development in use of EBP reflects its openness to continuously assessing its strengths, weaknesses, and outcomes. The revised policy has laid the foundation for future advancement, in addition to supporting the current evidence-based programming that includes PTR/PCRA, STARR, and CNVC. Operationalizing this revised policy and evidence-based programming into practice has proven to be difficult in a decentralized system. When assessing these challenges with implementation in mind, three main themes arise: enabling context, fidelity, and implementation infrastructure.

In their book *Implementation Practice and Science*, Dean Fixsen, Karen Blase, and Melissa Van Dyke introduce a Formula For Success (Figure 1). This formula's components add up to socially significant outcomes. In the federal probation and pretrial system, the specific goals include executing the sentence, increasing community safety, and providing meaningful opportunities for change by fostering lawful self-management. These objectives should produce the desired outcome of a reduction in recidivism.

In considering this formula within the system, I will present the components of the formula in a different order, beginning with enabling context, then effective innovation, and last effective implementation.

Enabling Context

Those thinking about "enabling context" as part of the formula for implementing an effective, usable innovation should carefully consider the current progress of the system, readiness for and sustainability of further

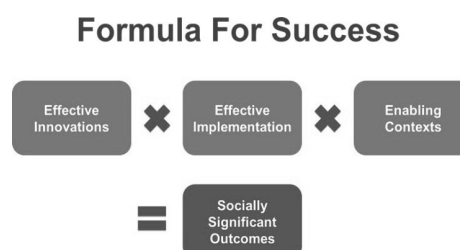
change, and messaging about change. To test-drive all aspects of implementing an innovation in a manageable situation, and therefore identify all the variations and considerations, the system should use local pilots so that all implementation needs can be addressed going forward.

Implementation is inseparable from context. By context, we mean the set of circumstances or unique factors in which implementation takes place, for example, an organization, a community, or the wider system. The influence of context explains the variation in implementation success. (Pfadenhauer et al., 2017; see <http://implementation.effektiveservices.org/context/implementation-in-context>, July 31, 2020.)

Local factors must be considered when conducting pilots. When a person under supervision commences supervised release, the person's supervision officer must assess readiness and motivation to change. If the person lacks motivation around the goals of supervision, the officer should engage the person under supervision to learn about what intrinsically motivates that person to want to change current aspects of decision making and lifestyle. This work mirrors that of enabling context and the importance of preparing for change.

Within the current system, confusion exists about how policy works together with PCRA, STARR, and CNVC in a comprehensive evidence-based supervision framework. One reason for this lack of understanding of our system's various programs and initiatives occurs in part because of segmented training. For example, the PCRA provides a risk level and violence category, in addition to identifying criminogenic needs, elevated criminal thinking styles, and responsivity factors. The results of the PCRA provide a diagnosis that forms a prescription. That prescription directs what supervising strategies (including monitoring, restrictions, and interventions) are needed to help the person under supervision successfully complete supervision and avoid recidivism. This information transforms into a relapse prevention plan or case plan for the change agent and the person under supervision to work as a team to reduce the supervisee's risk of reoffending under supervision. Many officers fail to incorporate the PCRA results into post-supervision planning

FIGURE 1.



(*The Formula for Success*. Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, July, 2008.)

¹ Developed by U.S. Probation Middle District of North Carolina, v2.0 (original May 2013, revised Sept. 2014, July 2015).

and do not know how to connect PCRA with other evidence-based programs like STARR and CNVC. Additionally, the STARR focus groups disclosed that local districts feel as though PPSO has competing initiatives at the national level and that it is hard for districts to juggle all that is being asked of them. As a result, many feel overwhelmed: Officers feel that the expectations of them continue to increase, and no other tasks are being taken away. The ongoing feedback from officers and from management doing the day-to-day work has strongly influenced action for a revised plan.

Additionally, feedback from STARR focus groups revealed a lack of consistent messaging and focus on quantitative measures. For example, national programming has emphasized EBP, but it is not viewed as a policy area in the office review process described earlier in this article. Desiring a favorable review, districts then must make decisions about where best to focus time and energy. Recently, our national workload formula was updated based on daily tasks of all employees in the probation and pretrial services offices. This new formula includes authorized workload units for a full-time EBP coordinator and, in bigger districts, potentially more than one coordinator. This change in the formula is intended to help districts begin to build the local infrastructure needed to better support EBP.

Effective Innovations—Fidelity

Innovations must be teachable, learnable, doable, and assessable in practice. Practice profiles are tools used to assist in operationalizing an innovation. Examples include a clear description of the innovation, clear essential functions that define the innovation, operational definitions of essential functions, and evidence of effectiveness such as a practical performance assessment (Fixsen, Blase, & Van Dyke, 2019, p. 69).

Based upon the results of coding STARR disapproval tapes, shortfalls exist around fidelity. This makes it difficult to know how well the programs are being used. Many people ask questions such as: Does STARR or CNVC work? Has PPSO been able to replicate the original STARR study? Although outcomes are supposed to show what works and what does not work, we need to consider specific variables that contribute to the outcomes themselves. For example, if we look at recidivism rates across the system, and outcomes show a reduction in recidivism, what caused the reduction? Was it because officers

continuously used their STARR skills? Or was it because the person under supervision had a great 12-step program sponsor or a great job that was keeping him or her busy? Just as PPSO teaches officers that each person is an individual and has specific needs, so what impacts recidivism is also specific to each case. If PPSO and the system want to achieve the objectives and desired outcomes, which include reducing recidivism, there must be a uniform fidelity instrument that assesses the EBP practices and programming. The lack of a consistent fidelity tool makes the current EBP practices/programming fall short of the criteria needed to create a “usable innovation.”

Implementation Infrastructure:

To help build infrastructure for an innovation, the Active Implementation Frameworks provide an actionable summary of the evidence related to implementing practice and policy effectively (Blase, Fixsen, & Van Dyke, 2019).

These frameworks include having a usable innovation, building implementation teams at different levels of the system (national, regional, and local), attending to the key activities aligned to each implementation stage (exploration stage, installation stage, initial implementation, and full implementation), implementation drivers (competency, organization, and leadership) and ongoing improvement cycles (plan, do, study, act).

Attempts to implement these innovations have fallen short of desired results not because of the innovations themselves, but in part because the system currently lacks the needed infrastructure. This infrastructure does not exist at any level in the system unless individual districts have taken the initiative to build local implementation capacity through hiring outside consultants. For example, during Wave 1 of the implementation of STARR, all new coaches were assigned a national coach. They worked with the coach and reached a certain level of proficiency before coaching users (officers in their districts). As demand grew, the system did not have enough capacity or national coaches to support the new coaches. The result was that new coaches did not have the necessary experience or proficiency to coach new users. In order to build a sound implementation infrastructure, our system will need to make a significant effort to build the foundational support needed to fulfill the expectations in policy. An important aspect of this infrastructure is the crucial role of coaches.

Part II: The Vision for Next Steps

Comprehensive Supervision Framework

In order to address problems noted during focus group feedback and coding, and using concepts from implementation science, two substantial modifications to implementing our programming must be considered. Instead of thinking of and presenting PCRA, STARR, and CNVC as separate entities that have independent effects on supervision outcomes, PPSO has created a draft for an integrated, comprehensive supervision framework. The framework includes components that incorporate the current programs. Having a single framework should propel the system's efforts to put policy into practice and therefore transform all of the programs and practices into a formula of how to effectively supervise persons under supervision.

The other needed modification is to develop and test a practical fidelity assessment that incorporates each component of the comprehensive supervision framework. This will promote consistency in expectations and encourage the supervision framework to be used as intended, providing a usable innovation for our system. Figure 2 (next page) depicts a draft comprehensive supervision framework, along with a key.

Enhancing Positive Outcomes Through Evidence-Based Supervision and Training

Change Agent Practice (Inner Circle):

- Develop core correctional skills/techniques
 - Active listening, giving feedback, role clarification, effective use of reinforcement/disapproval, and effective use of authority/punishment.
- Develop the ability and knowledge to make evidence-informed decisions.
- Develop relationships, build engagement and accountability to support the person under supervision's lawful self-management and compliance with conditions.
- Evaluate supervision components and persons under supervision skill development.

Supervision Process (Outer Circle):

Supervision Components:

- Risk Assessment (*Risk*)
 - PCRA 2.0, behavioral analysis, and acute risk.
- Collaborative Case Planning (*Need*)
 - Supervising targets (criminogenic needs), identifying reinforces/punishers and protective factors and creating a relapse prevention plan.

- Supervision Strategies (*Responsivity*)
 - Monitoring
 - Restrictions
 - Interventions (Client Skill Development)
 - COG model, problem solving, and structured skill building.

Foundations:

Fidelity:

- Measure “how well” change agents carry out practices and supervision processes.
- Positive Intended Client Outcomes:*
- Lawful self-management.
- Successful completion of supervision.
- Reduce risk/ lessen likelihood of recidivism.
- Policy, Procedure, and Suggested Practice Implementation Infrastructure.*
- Ensures organizational readiness, capacity, sustainability and needed improvements to support the desired outcomes of the framework.

In preparing our system’s introduction to one consistent framework, creating an enabling context will be key. Ongoing engagement will be needed to receive feedback that provides information on how to best motivate and build excitement for implementing this cohesive, singular framework. Additionally, it

is important to assess readiness and pick pilot sites that are eager to try an integrated supervision framework and implementation plan.

Implementation Infrastructure

The implementation infrastructure acts as a foundation for the comprehensive supervision model, which in turn enables the intended positive outcomes. These are socially significant outcomes not just for society, but for the person under supervision. The Active Implementation Frameworks will inform the planning of the next steps in this process (Blase, Fixsen, & Van Dyke, 2019).

In order to build implementation infrastructure, PPSO will use Active Implementation Frameworks. The first objective will be to build national and regional capacity by creating Implementation Teams comprising PPSO staff and temporary duty officers. These teams will be trained in implementation science, practices, and frameworks and in the comprehensive supervision model, which will prepare them to support the local pilots. Each pilot site will in turn create a local Implementation Team. This local team will work alongside the regional team to learn how to build readiness, capacity, coaching

infrastructure, support from leadership and feedback loops and to engage in ongoing improvement cycles.

Implementation Teams will work closely with management to help integrate and embed Implementation Drivers that can support the comprehensive supervision framework. The drivers focus on three main areas: competency of staff, coaching, and hiring; organization of decision-support data systems, facilitative administration, and system interventions; and technical and adaptive leadership (Fixsen & Blase, 2008).

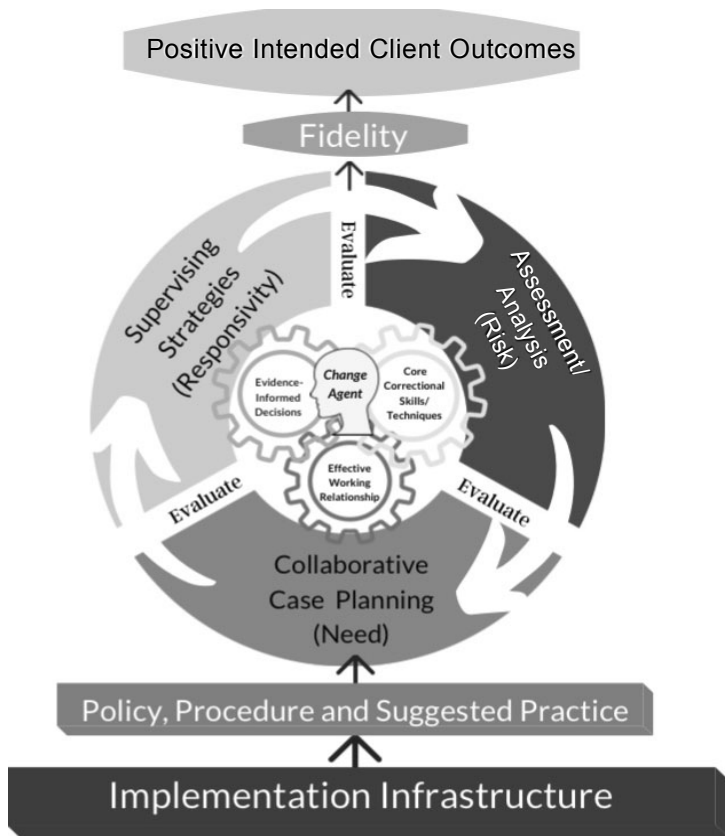
These interactive processes are **integrated** to maximize their influence on staff behavior and the organizational culture. The integrated Implementation Drivers also **compensate** for one another so that a weakness in one component can be overcome by strengths in other implementation components. (AIRN, <https://www.activeimplementation.org/frameworks/implementation-drivers/>, accessed July 31, 2020).

Focusing on Implementation Drivers will strengthen local districts’ processes and help districts better achieve community safety by providing persons under supervision with meaningful opportunities for change.

Pilot sites will use improvement cycles (plan, do, study, act) to make continual improvements to their implementation plan. These cycles allow staff to review data about implementation processes to determine when improvement is necessary in order to make full and effective use of the usable innovation. The local team will work to incorporate improvements into their overall implementation approach so that, when they expand to the next group of change agents, they can assess the new changes through the next improvement cycle. The improvement cycle also includes a quality assurance component, with persons under supervision participating in surveys about their supervision. This will promote collaboration and further aid the change agents in building an effective working relationship.

Building a solid foundation for an innovative practice takes patience, flexibility, and time. This process will be slow and intentional to ensure that Implementation Teams can address the unique circumstances of each local district in the implementation plan. The Full Implementation Stage is reached when at least 50 percent of the practitioners in an

FIGURE 2
The Federal Supervision Framework



organization meet fidelity criteria. The 50 percent criterion is a benchmark established by the Active Implementation Research Network (AIRN) as an indicator of Full Implementation (Blase, Fixsen & Van Dyke, 2019). Although 50 percent may seem low, this benchmark considers the effect of turnover in organizations, in addition to changes in leadership.

Conclusion

Committed to the use of evidence-based practice in probation and pretrial services, the federal probation and pretrial services system continues to assess the progress toward improving the outcomes of persons under supervision and revisiting and adjusting the processes, methods, and procedures used to do so. PPSO’s qualitative work has generated key findings that can be addressed through implementation science, practices, and frameworks. The three components in the Formula For Success—enabling context, creating a comprehensive supervision framework with sound fidelity assessments, and building the needed implementation infrastructure to support the framework—will guide our improvement efforts (Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2008). The vision for next steps focuses on intentional, methodical, effective implementation to progress in a sustainable way toward the system’s desired goals and outcomes, which include increasing community safety by providing persons under

supervision with meaningful opportunities for change by fostering lawful self-management and reducing recidivism.

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APPENDIX A:

Current Evidence-Based Programming in the Federal Probation and Pretrial System

Program Name	What Type of Tool/Program	Officer Skills Introduced in Training	Interventions	Training
Pretrial Risk Assessment (PTRA)-2010	Assessment that predicts risk of failure to appear, new criminal arrest, and technical violations.	Knowledge and proper use of scoring rules	None	Complete an e-learning module and yearly certification
Post- Conviction Risk Assessment (PCRA)-2009	Assessment that predicts the likelihood/risk of re-offending. It also identifies criminogenic needs, responsivity factors, violence category, and elevated criminal thinking styles.	Knowledge and proper use of scoring rules	None	Attend a three-day initial user training and a yearly certification
Staff Training Aimed at Reducing Rearrest (STARR)-2009	A program centered in core correctional practices that teaches officers how to communicate effectively and address risk, need, and responsivity. Also introduces two interventions.	Active listening, giving feedback, role clarification and effective reinforcement, disapproval, authority and punishment	Cognitive model and problem solving	Attend a three-day initial user training. Attend ongoing local booster sessions run by local coaches. One-on-one feedback meetings with coach.
Criminogenic Needs and Violence Curriculum (CNVC)-2016	A manualized curriculum that does not need to be completed in order and addresses each PCRA domain, including violence. Manuals exist for officers, persons under supervision, a peer support person, and treatment providers creating a common language and understanding.	Active listening, giving feedback and role clarification	Building motivation/ engagement, thinking, thought process/content interventions, and structured skill building	Attend a three-day initial user training. (This program has only been implemented with TDYs and a handful of demonstration sites.)