

## Infrastructure Workgroup, EBP Committee: October 2021

**Overview:** Successful implementation of evidence-based practices (EBP) by a probation/parole department depends, in part, on probation/parole officers' available time. High workloads preclude the routine incorporation of practices known to promote people's success in remaining law-abiding, such as using assessments, writing and managing case plans, skill building around people's most impactful criminogenic needs, effectively using rewards and responses to noncompliance, and collaborating with service providers and family members. Staff in most Pennsylvania probation/parole departments have caseloads that exceed what the American Probation and Parole Association (APPA) recommend in order to implement EBP with fidelity.<sup>1</sup> In fact, according to the EBP Committee report *Blueprint for EBP Implementation*, surveys show the statewide average caseload ranging from 125 to 137 cases per officer, well above APPA standards.

The issue of determining appropriate caseload sizes across the Commonwealth is not a new subject. It has been discussed for years. For example, the County Chief Adult Probation and Parole Officers Association of Pennsylvania discussed survey results at their annual conference on September 30, 2013, and determined that they needed to look at various caseload studies/models; provide tools to the counties to implement workload studies; declare a vision of what they would like to accomplish at the state level; establish a workload goal standard for the counties; and conduct a time study that allows for customization within each county.

### Caseload vs. Workload

There is a strong argument in favor of using workload standards instead of caseload standards. Workload counts the number of hours it takes to complete various tasks. It can be used to provide an effective "apple to apple" comparison of different tasks conducted by different staff in different counties. Unique factors can be considered such as urban versus rural, and mixed duties such as supervision and writing court reports or conducting intakes. However, a statewide workload system requires time studies and constant modification as tasks change. More importantly, most people—especially the public—can't adequately contextualize what workload points mean. This is a major handicap when working with funding sources. However, most people understand that when an officer has 150 people on their caseload, conducting meaningful supervision is not realistic. For these reasons, while imperfect, caseloads will be the recommended measurement for Pennsylvania adult probation and parole.

<sup>1</sup> APPA standards for adult caseloads are 1:20 for intensive; 1:50 for moderate to high risk; 1:200 for low risk; and 1:1,000 for administrative.

More recently, the Pennsylvania Partnership for Criminal Justice Improvement’s EBP Committee Infrastructure Workgroup was assigned the strategic plan task of establishing statewide workload/caseload guidelines. The plan includes three tasks:

1. Collect examples of EBP workload/caseload experiences from other jurisdictions to serve as the basis for developing Pennsylvania-specific guidelines.
2. Develop Pennsylvania-specific workload/caseload guidelines customized for rural, urban, and suburban counties.
3. Work with the statewide probation EBP Standards Committee to adopt caseload guidelines.

This document addresses the first task: collecting examples of EBP workload/caseload experiences from other jurisdictions.

**Process.** A total of 12 probation/parole departments in 10 states responded to a questionnaire.<sup>2</sup> These departments were selected because they were known to The Carey Group as having undergone a method of reconfiguring their caseload/workload<sup>3</sup> to comply with research-based conditions necessary to achieve risk reduction objectives. One of these risk reduction conditions is to ensure that probation/parole officers have adequate time in their appointments to conduct case planning and teach skills related to criminogenic needs. These 12 departments now have caseloads that align or nearly align with APPA caseload guidelines, allowing probation/parole officers to better manage people assessed as medium and high risk in an evidence-based manner.

The departments were asked to respond in writing to eight questions (see below) and to send a copy of their caseload/workload policies. In addition, The Carey Group contacted the departments by email and/or phone to acquire additional information. The results are summarized in the Themes section below.

1. In what year did you reorganize your probation/parole officer caseloads?
2. What was the reason for reorganizing the caseloads?
3. How did your policy change (from what to what)? Can you provide us with a copy of the caseload policy?
4. Did you reorganize the caseloads around risk level (specialized caseloads by risk)? If not, what did you do?
5. Do you provide caseload caps where some action is taken when caseloads exceed the targeted caseload size?

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<sup>2</sup> Arizona (Maricopa County); California (Napa County); Florida (Lee County); Indiana (Grant County); Iowa (Sixth Judicial District Dept of Correctional Services); Massachusetts (Massachusetts Probation); Minnesota (Minnesota Department of Corrections and Washington County); North Carolina (Department of Public Safety); Ohio (Franklin County Common Pleas and Franklin County Municipal Court); Oregon (Marion County).

<sup>3</sup> The probation/parole departments initiated a deliberate restructuring of supervision caseloads between 1996 and 2018; most underwent a restructure between 2011 and 2018.

6. Did you have to stop doing some things to get caseloads to the targeted size? If so, what were those things (e.g., fewer pre-sentence reports; stop supervising certain cases; reduce supervision contacts; reduce home visits; move more people into a lower risk category)?
7. Did you consider focusing on workload standards instead of caseload standards (e.g., doing a time study and assigning workload points instead of caseload targets)? If so, what is the reason you did not take this approach?
8. What advice would you give an agency considering reorganizing probation/parole officer caseloads?

**Themes.** While there were distinct differences in policy and practice among the 12 departments, several common themes emerged.

### Reason for Caseload Restructure

- The vast majority of respondents noted that they made the decision to restructure (and therefore reduce) caseloads of those supervising people who are medium and high risk to improve their efforts at reducing recidivism. Reduced caseloads would allow the time for more staff activities aimed at behavior change. Many respondents reported having very high caseload sizes (i.e., 117, 150, 241, 400 per probation/parole officer) prior to restructuring; these sizes prohibited the routine conduct of practices necessary to positively impact recidivism rates.
- A few respondents noted additional motivations for restructuring caseloads, such as budget cuts requiring a re-examination of workload, need to improve resource efficiency, recent adoption of a risk assessment, and focus on reducing probation/parole violations.

### Policy Changes/Reorganization Around Risk Level and Specialized Caseloads

- The most-reported policy change as a result of restructuring caseloads was the separation of caseloads by risk level, with most adopting a caseload target in line with APPA guidelines. Most reported a 1:40 to 1:60 caseload target for higher-risk caseloads. And most reported low-risk caseloads ranging from 1:120 to 1:300 (with quarterly in-person contact or non-reporting) depending on officer duties.

#### Example of Caseload Targets (staff to caseload ratio)

##### Maricopa County Adult Probation

- Intensive Probation 1:15
- Prison Reentry 1:20
- Custody Reintegration 1:30
- Sex Offender 1:30
- Domestic Violence 1:30
- Seriously MI, Transferred Youth, Drug Ct, DUI 1:40
- Standard Probation, Veteran's Ct, Work Furlough 1:60
- Minimum Risk: 1:175
- Unsupervised Probation 1:250

- The number of risk-specific caseload categories varied from three (high, medium, low) to many (see the example from Maricopa County); most reported 3–5 categories.
- Several departments created supervision guidelines to achieve purposeful conversations aimed at risk reduction during supervision meetings (see guideline example below from Franklin County Municipal Court).

Job Features	High-Risk Caseload	Medium-Risk Caseload	Low-Risk Caseload
Primary objective	Protect public and build skills to reduce recidivism	Build skills to reduce recidivism	Ensure compliance to court order
Build skills (teach, practice, homework)	Yes	Yes	No
Use of cognitive tools	Yes	Yes	No
Case plans	Yes; review at each office contact	Yes; review at each office contact	No
# of office contacts and duration	2x/month; at least 20 minutes	1x/month; at least 20 minutes	Only as needed
Number of field visits	1x/2 months	1x in first 6 months	None
Program referrals	Yes	Yes (as needed)	Minimal
Policies	High-Risk Caseload	Medium-Risk Caseload	Low-Risk Caseload
Dosage target	200–300 hours	100 hours	Not applicable
Caseload size	55	90	700 (with assistance)
Primary officer skills needed	Motivational interviewing, intentional, cognitive behavioral, adaptable	Motivational interviewing, intentional, cognitive behavioral, adaptable	Highly organized; computer/technology skills; able to prioritize/time manage; reliable; customer service; work in teams

- Specialized caseloads were commonly reported. The most frequently reported specialized caseloads were sex offender and domestic violence. Other specialized caseloads were substance use disorders, mental health, LGBTQI, gang, soliciting/human trafficking, reentry,

developmentally delayed, and women/gender. It was unclear if these specialized caseloads combined risk levels.

- Some departments reported that they decrease the thresholds (cutoff score) to move cases down to lower-level supervision when the caseloads exceed the target. Similarly, they increase the cutoff score to move cases back to the previously established risk categories when caseloads decrease.
- Almost all the respondents indicated that caseload targets geared toward behavior change resulted in the adoption of case plans and dynamic case management.
- Most reported clear contact and appointment expectations geared toward risk reduction activities.
- Two departments reported that transferring people between medium- and high-risk caseloads resulted in lost rapport when the person received a new PO. As a result, they combined medium- and high-risk caseloads (i.e., they blended caseloads). Others indicated that they use the initial assessment score to separate people into risk categories and do not allow transfers from high-risk caseloads to medium-risk caseloads and from medium-risk caseloads to high-risk caseloads. However, they do allow transfers from high- or medium-risk caseloads to low-risk caseloads to keep medium- and high-risk caseloads lower.

### Caseload Caps

- No one reported that they “cap” caseloads, but the majority indicated that they have clear targets and that the department actively monitors caseloads and/or workloads and adjusts as needed.
- When adjusting caseloads, some reported that they will take a PO out of new case rotation when their caseload exceeds the target. A couple departments noted that they will pull staff from other roles (pretrial, team leads, or supervisors) when needed. Most reported “rebalancing” caseloads on occasion.

### Discontinued or Changed Duties

In addition to creating and expanding low-risk caseload practices (e.g., non-reporting, kiosks, phone reporting), several departments stopped doing some things to free up time and, in doing so, reassigned staff to work with people who were higher risk at lower caseload sizes. As one department explained, it reflected an emphasis on quality over quantity. Some of the discontinued or changed duties included:

- decreasing the responsibilities of POs supervising people who are medium and high risk (e.g., eliminating duties such as completing PSIs and initial assessments) so they could focus exclusively on risk reduction activities
- creating specialized units to manage certain duties more efficiently, develop expertise, and match staff skills to job functions (e.g., PSIs, intake, and field visits)

- removing or transferring duties that were deemed to be non-evidence-based or to have limited value in reducing recidivism (e.g., drug testing, paperwork, financial collection); some departments have nearly eliminated the practice of field visits
- asking courts to stop ordering actionable conditions for people who are low risk so that officers have fewer conditions to monitor and so that caseload sizes for officers supervising people who are low risk could be increased
- utilizing support staff to monitor non-reporting cases, with only serious violations reported to a probation/parole officer
- completing fewer PSIs or contracting outside service providers to complete PSIs
- decreasing contact standards
- allowing for movement among risk levels
- creating an administrative early release policy to remove cases from supervision caseloads
- allowing for more collateral contacts to replace face-to-face contacts
- tracking cases for possible early termination and alerting staff to initiate the process, if eligible
- temporarily reducing reporting requirements when needed and then reinstating them when caseload targets are restored.

### Workload Versus Caseload

The community corrections field continues to debate the merits of measuring and monitoring workload or caseload when considering staffing and evidence-based practices needs. There are advantages and disadvantages to both measures. While all the departments that restructured supervision adopted a caseload approach to “right-sizing” their workloads, some of them maintained some semblance of workload analysis.

- A slight majority of the respondents indicated that they did not examine or assign workload points or conduct a time study process, or they did so once to establish a baseline but have not done it again. Most of these departments considered doing a workload analysis but found it to be too overwhelming or costly for what they would gain.
- Three departments reported that they conduct a workload analysis (i.e., use workload time studies to determine equity and capacity) either to determine the right caseload size or because it is required by statute. Two of these departments use both workload and caseload data to manage staff work. One department indicated that the workload analysis helps demystify the “I’m too busy” argument when the numbers do not sync with perceptions. Another, given their experience and adaptations with supervision techniques during COVID-19, will be conducting a new time study which will include points assigned to virtual appointments.

### Advice

Caseload restructuring can get complicated quickly. Differing opinions and concerns about the implications of this restructuring should be expected and must be addressed. Understanding other departments’ experiences can help. The departments that have undergone caseload restructuring were asked to offer advice to other departments considering a similar effort. Only those comments that were mentioned more than once are listed below, with the most common tips listed first.

1. **Be inclusive and transparent.** To maximize buy-in and long-lasting change, it is important that a wide variety of individuals, including the following, are provided opportunity for input early in the process.
  - a. All staff. This includes staff at all levels of the department, not just POs. Give everyone a voice as their jobs will be significantly impacted.
  - b. Unions. Union representatives should be involved from the very beginning and throughout.
  - c. Stakeholders. Do not assume that stakeholders will be disinterested. Their endorsement will be important. Find your judicial and other stakeholder champions and make sure they are informed, have input, and are supportive of your efforts. This will become especially important when and if the transition to the new caseload structure disrupts people's jobs and creates temporary frustration and dissatisfaction. This can result in probation/parole staff complaining to stakeholders, potentially undermining the department efforts.
2. **Be strategic, careful, and measured.** Most caseload restructuring efforts will have a ripple effect across staff, management, work processes, stakeholders, and clients. Departments often report a period of confusion—even chaos—as the change unfolds. For this reason, it is important for the department to not rush the effort. This was communicated by the respondents in many ways: “be strategic;” “go slow to go fast;” “it is a marathon, not a sprint;” “don’t rush it;” and “take your time in the planning stage.”
3. **Communicate.** Anxiety about the proposed changes is normal and to be expected. For this reason alone, communication is crucial; it is not possible to overcommunicate during this time. Insufficient communication can result in people filling in the blanks with their own often misinformed assumptions, discussing these with others as if they were facts, and, in so doing, creating a new set of perceptions that can be hard to rectify later. Communication should be diverse (e.g., in person, by email, discussion-oriented, small group, large group) and constant. During this time, it is especially important to communicate the “why.” What is the reason we need to make this change? Will it really make things better? What is broken or what is the opportunity we are trying to achieve?
4. **Use technical assistance.** Consider using an outsider—an objective party who can facilitate and guide the effort. Whether external or internal, an experienced facilitator will be knowledgeable about other departments’ experiences and lessons learned and will be able to anticipate what will likely unfold, identify potential gaps in the planning, pull out unheard voices, and talk about issues that others may find uncomfortable raising.
5. **Give choices.** When caseloads are restructured, staff duties and/or expectations will likely change. Some will fear worst-case scenarios, such as being assigned a job for which they are not well-suited or that they are not interested in performing. When possible, give staff choices for which job they are assigned under the restructure. Some departments allowed staff to “bid” on their preferred choices after laying out in clear terms the job expectations for each caseload type.

6. **Think about capacity.** The department will be adjusting to new policies and practices during the caseload reorganization. Operations will not be smooth during this time. Management needs to think about people's capacity to perform their duties under this new structure and should prevent starting other new initiatives, if possible. Duties that do not need to be performed—that are considered lower priority—should be suspended temporarily or permanently. This will also reinforce the fact that the department is going to focus on the things that matter the most. This may require some sacrifices around duties that have traditionally been performed but that do not add enough value to continue. Emphasize quality over quantity.
7. **Guard against mission creep.** It can be tempting to backpedal on the change when people are struggling and voicing a desire to return to the previous structure. Be patient. Stay the course. Focus on the goals you are trying to accomplish with people who are low, medium, and high risk and identify specific actions expected from staff within those assignments. Be adaptable as needed and make small mid-course corrections without forfeiting the core of what you are trying to achieve with the caseload restructure. Consider holding off on significant changes to the caseload restructure until the plan has a chance to be put in place and functions start to become streamlined.
8. **Words matter.** Restructuring caseloads provides departments with the opportunity to name things in a positive light in order to shape the culture of the department. Be careful about the word "high risk." One department noted that naming the caseloads "high risk" resulted in staff believing that this caseload was dangerous, and it drew officers too far toward the accountability side of their job. Consider calling the caseloads something other than low, moderate, and high risk, and consider giving probation/parole officers a title other than high-risk or low-risk officers.
9. **Celebrate.** It is easy to get focused on all the things that need to be done, that are going wrong, and that are inefficient as people are learning their new jobs. Take the time to celebrate the small victories to keep the energy positive.