

## How Communities Can Impact the Justice System

“Community” is made up of many different groups, including people who live and work in a neighborhood, business leaders, individuals and agencies that support people who are justice-involved, people who have been directly or indirectly impacted by crime, those who were previously or are currently under community supervision, and their families.

All community members are responsible for ensuring the health and well-being of a neighborhood; the justice system cannot do it alone. And, all perspectives are needed to understand issues, generate ideas, and make action plans. The following are some ways that communities can engage in the justice system:

### 1 Learn About Evidence-Based Practices

Explained simply, evidence-based practice (EBP) involves using scientific evidence to guide decision making, with the goal of achieving successful outcomes for people involved in the justice system. The field now has years of research showing what strategies are and are not effective in helping people stay law-abiding. Community members should attend community meetings, follow justice system agencies on social media, browse their websites, and ask questions to learn what evidence-based practices they are implementing, why, and how.

### 2 Support People in the Justice System

Family and community members can positively influence a person’s life, for example, by helping them practice new skills, reinforcing their positive behavior, and working with them to address barriers to their participation in programming and treatment. They can also volunteer as mentors, provide employment opportunities, and share success stories as a way of encouraging others to give people a second chance.

### 3 Address Stigma

Many people in the justice system experience shame and embarrassment as a result of their past and are defined—by themselves and/or others—by their illegal activity. To broaden people’s perspective, those who were or are under community supervision may wish to share their stories and educate others about their pathways to being arrested, barriers to success, and struggles within the justice system. Other community members can listen, show compassion, acknowledge that people are more than their past behavior (e.g., by avoiding terms such as “criminal” or “offender”), and empower people rather than shame them.

### Key Ideas Behind Evidence-Based Practices

#### Focus on the Right People

**People assessed as medium or high risk to reoffend are the ones most likely to benefit from correctional intervention.**

#### Target the Correct Areas

**Focus treatment and other interventions on the areas that will most likely reduce a person’s likelihood of engaging in future illegal behavior (e.g., thoughts and beliefs, coping/self-control skills, friends, family/relationships).**

#### Motivate Change

**Acknowledge that change is difficult, and use targeted communication skills to increase a person’s motivation to change.**

#### Build on People’s Strengths

**Identify, affirm, and help people build on their strengths. Make it clear that you want to help them succeed.**

#### Help People Learn New Skills

**Model, practice, and give feedback on new skills. Encourage people to use those skills in a range of day-to-day situations.**

## 4 Give Feedback

People who were or are under community supervision, as well as their families, have valuable information about what services have or have not been effective for them, unintentional harms caused by the system (e.g., loss of employment and housing), and community supports and services that might prevent illegal behavior. People impacted by crime can offer feedback on services and supports that were or were not helpful for them. And, other community members can discuss successes or challenges that they see people who are justice-involved experiencing.

## 5 Support Agencies that Work with People Who Are Justice-Involved

There are numerous ways that community members can support agencies working with people who were or are on community supervision:

- Volunteer with, advocate on behalf of, or donate to agencies addressing issues such as homelessness, food insecurity, and mental health.
- Serve on policy teams and on boards and task forces such as reentry coalitions, criminal justice advisory boards, and opiate task forces.
- Encourage government officials and funders to finance programs, treatment, and services for people impacted by the justice system.

## Key Ideas Behind Evidence-Based Practices

continued

- **Increase Positive Reinforcements**  
**Reinforce positive behavior while also responding to noncompliant behavior. Rewards should outnumber responses to noncompliance by a ratio of at least 4:1.**
- **Engage Family and Community Support**  
**Family and community members can positively influence a person's life.**
- **Use Quality Assurance**  
**Quality assurance practices, such as training, booster sessions, and coaching, can help ensure that EBP is implemented correctly and consistently across an agency.**
- **Use Data as a Guide**  
**Collecting, analyzing, and sharing data are key to assessing outcomes and identifying where improvements are needed.**

## How Justice System Agencies Might Reach Out

Justice system agencies know that community “buy-in” is needed for the effective implementation of EBP. The following are some ways they might reach out to connect with people; raise community awareness, understanding, and support of EBP; and engage the community in decisions regarding system improvements:

- Open houses and special events
- Websites and social media
- Meetings with the public, community associations, and faith-based organizations
- Newsletters, press releases, and op-eds
- Surveys and polls
- Small-group discussions and focus groups
- Citizen justice advisory boards