

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

Moving Forward with a Plan



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At the same time as the juvenile system was embarking on their journey of implementing evidence-based practices (EBP), I was promoted to chief of both the juvenile and adult probation departments in the newly formed Butler County Department of Community Corrections. I quickly recognized that the skills and tools that we were using with the juvenile population could and should be applied to the adult population, so I began an initiative to implement EBP across both populations. Our department had the support of our president judge, and the Juvenile Courts Judges' Commission provided us with training and guidance.

Accomplishments. After completing an evidence-based readiness assessment, we realized that we had a lot of work to do. We started off with motivational interviewing (MI) training and subsequently developed a sustainability plan by having staff trained as MI instructors. I would smile as I heard staff use their newly acquired skills on other staff. I then started to hear them use the same skills in their contacts, and I saw evidence of MI in their journal entries. Recognizing that

MI is a skill set that needs to be consistently practiced and refined, we have regular booster sessions.

One of the most important parts of implementing EBP is selecting the right risk/needs assessment tool. Our department chose the Level of Service/Case Management Inventory (LS/CMI) due to its similarities with the Youth Level of Service (YLS) assessment that we were using with our juvenile population. As a system, we often make quick judgments about the person standing before us based on their current charge or history. For youth and adults, we now have tools that look beyond the symptoms and identify the cause. We gain true insight into what people need and how we can effectuate positive long-term behavior change.

Before we began to use the LS/CMI, we had an outside expert conduct a validation study in our county and measure interrater reliability. A tool is only useful if it is validated (to ensure it does what it is supposed to do) and if staff are conducting and using it correctly. As with MI, we had staff trained as assessment trainers and master trainers. We also have booster sessions and do targeted trainings if we see common issues across staff.

We have also started developing—collaboratively with the people we supervise—case plans that address their criminogenic needs, as identified using the risk/needs assessment. And, we have worked with our community partners and vendors to provide cognitive behavioral programs, such as Thinking for a Change and Back on Track, that address these needs. We are in discussions with them to add more programming. In addition, we recently embarked on a gap analysis of services and are identifying our needs and developing a plan to meet them.

Fidelity (making sure we do things right) is an integral part of our plan. In addition to the steps mentioned above, we have incorporated monthly case reviews, developed clear expectations and policies, and incorporated evidence-based practices into our performance appraisal system.

The department has seen numerous positive outcomes; perhaps the most impactful has been the decrease in caseloads. Previously, our officers had an average

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caseload exceeding 400 individuals. Given that, our department could only be reactive at best, and our ability to have a meaningful and long-term impact was minimal. As a result of using risk/needs assessments, changing policies on how cases are assigned, encouraging early termination, and adopting other evidence-based practices, our targeted caseloads (medium and high risk) currently average 75–95 individuals. We can now be proactive instead of reactive and help create long-term behavior change. We anticipate that caseload sizes will continue to decrease, and we will be able to do so much more.

Obtaining Staff Buy-In. One of the largest struggles of implementing EBP was obtaining staff buy-in. My number one recommendation to my peers is to change what you look for when hiring staff. I realized that many of the traits and skill sets that we were seeking were either easily trainable or conflicted with the changes we were implementing. We moved away from focusing on people with criminal justice majors or people who had worked with other law enforcement agencies. Instead, we started recruiting staff who were empathetic, recognized the level of life change that we were trying to help our population achieve, cared, and believed in EBP. Once we started hiring the right people, we began to see better staff buy-in and outcomes.

In hindsight, there are some things that I would have done differently when I started the implementation process. Most importantly, I would have created an implementation committee—comprised of staff who were respected by their peers and invested in EBP—to assist with and guide the process. This would have helped with staff buy-in, and it would have streamlined EBP implementation.

It's a Marathon, Not a Sprint. Implementing EBP is not easy. As leaders, we need to make sure that we are not only heading in the right direction but also going at the right speed. I understand that some agencies are moving quickly due to the current

availability of money and uncertainty about future funding or because of concerns about standards; however, I encourage them to develop a slow and deliberate plan. EBP implementation is not just checking off a box saying that you did something nor is it hanging a certificate on the wall. Evidence-based practices only work if we do them with fidelity. We need to be deliberate in our rollout, train and coach staff, and verify that they have grasped a skill and begun to use it before introducing the next skill. We should also always be building and reinforcing previously learned techniques as we move forward.

Next Steps. As we continue to implement EBP, we are exploring two larger goals. The first is evaluating if we can conduct risk/needs assessments earlier in the process. Like other jurisdictions, we assess people after they are sentenced. We currently have a test case where the assessment was completed prior to sentencing, and we are evaluating the impact. I foresee that the assessment information will aid in plea bargaining, identifying people who may be more appropriate for diversion, determining length of supervision (i.e., based on risk and needs instead of the seriousness of the charge or the deal) and assigning conditions that address criminogenic needs. I am very hopeful that this will be of great benefit to the system.

Our second goal is to introduce EPICS to the adult population. I believe the EPICS model will provide staff with the structure to impact behavior change more effectively.

Conclusion. I would encourage jurisdictions to develop a clear implementation plan that is slow and deliberate. We need to move our field in the direction of EBP, but we need to do it with fidelity if we want to see meaningful outcomes.