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# CHANGING SYSTEMS, CHANGING BEHAVIOR:

## FIVE WAYS CORRECTIONS AGENCIES CAN WORK TO REDUCE RECIDIVISM

## INTRODUCTION

With more than 2.2 million people in federal and state prisons across the country and millions of people cycling through local jails every year,[1] it is no surprise that corrections officials are looking for an effective approach to reducing recidivism. But shifting from the old model of care, custody, and control to a system-wide, evidence-based approach for reducing recidivism is difficult. Despite this challenge, over the past two decades, many corrections leaders have come to consider recidivism reduction as a core part of their agencies' missions. These leaders understand that the role of corrections agencies is not limited to supervising people in custody; they are also responsible for implementing services and supports which target the factors that lead people to reoffend and set people up for success after incarceration so they are less likely to return.

By employing effective recidivism-reduction strategies, corrections agencies can help states and localities reduce crime, recidivism, and associated costs. A number of state corrections agencies have demonstrated success implementing practical strategies to reduce recidivism while maintaining public safety and saving taxpayer dollars.

This brief highlights five emerging strategies that have guided efforts to implement an evidence-based approach to reducing recidivism and can be adopted by any state or local corrections agency.

### CORRECTIONS AGENCIES AND COMMUNITY SUPERVISION

In many cases (but not all), corrections agencies are tasked with overseeing probation and parole departments in addition to institutional corrections facilities. However, regardless of whether these roles are combined or the responsibility of independent agencies, collaboration among leadership and staff from all agencies is needed to implement the strategies presented in this brief.

the NATIONAL REENTRY RESOURCE CENTER

CSG Justice Center
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# FIVE STRATEGIES FOR REDUCING RECIDIVISM

1. **Establishing partnerships with key stakeholders and organizations**
2. **Using data to understand recidivism drivers, inform programming decisions, and continuously monitor progress**
3. **Strengthening correctional culture to reduce recidivism through committed leadership and staff engagement**
4. **Tailoring supervision practices and programs based on risk and needs assessments**
5. **Using outcome data to communicate successes and continued funding needs to state leaders**

Although corrections agencies may vary in size, availability of resources, geographic location, and population demographics, the strategies employed by the agencies featured in this publication—all recipients of the Statewide Recidivism Reduction (SRR) grant awarded by the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA)—can be tailored to help any corrections agency plan and implement improvements to its recidivism-reduction efforts. The SRR grant included two competitive award cycles in which funding was initially provided to selected state corrections agencies to support the development of data-driven strategic plans to reduce recidivism. These agencies were then eligible to apply for additional grant funds from BJA to implement their plans. The agencies profiled in this brief received both planning and implementation awards and used data to identify which populations and behaviors they should focus on to reduce recidivism in their jurisdictions. They then directed their policy and practice changes to reduce recidivism among those groups, continuously monitored their progress, and conducted evaluations to measure the effectiveness of their efforts. The results of these efforts are highlighted throughout.

# 1 Establishing partnerships with key stakeholders and organizations

*"Whether through local implementation steering teams or a series of statewide partnerships, the support of state and local leaders has been paramount to Georgia's success on reducing recidivism. And now they are able to see their support produce real results, so we are fortunate to have the buy-in from elected officials, corporate leaders, and an engaged faith community to move this noble work forward."*

—Renee Snead, Georgia Department of Community Supervision

Corrections agencies can often seem isolated from the rest of the community and may have the misconception that they alone are tasked with preparing people for reentry. But successful recidivism-reduction approaches require collaboration and buy-in from community organizations, service providers, and other stakeholders across the state. By establishing these partnerships early on, corrections agencies are better positioned to gather and share appropriate cross-system data to identify people who are most likely to reoffend and develop effective reentry case plans to address the behaviors that drive recidivism. Collaboration also reduces duplication and helps strengthen connections to programs and services upon a person's release.

## SRR STRATEGY IN PRACTICE

**Georgia Department of Community Supervision** (Georgia DCS)[2] increased coordination with existing service providers and established relationships with new ones to meet the needs of people on community supervision and reduce their risk of recidivism. Georgia DCS used a three-pronged approach: increased communication, including a web-based platform to manage individual contacts; local steering committees; and collaborative efforts such as reentry planning meetings held prior to a person's release. Over the course of a two-year period, Georgia DCS's community (reentry) coordinators logged over 30,000 contacts with service providers into the resource-tracking web platform, including more than 10,000 face-to-face meetings. This process helped the department understand the full breadth of providers available in the community and strengthened coordination among providers to facilitate a continuum of services to meet the needs of people on community supervision. The steering committees, with assistance from the department, were tasked with identifying new resources and partners in the field and connecting them to help build a continuum of support. Through these efforts, Georgia DCS's relationship with its partners was strengthened, and more than 700 community partners across the state participated in Georgia's annual Reentry Summit—a number never seen before in the state. This demonstration of commitment set the stage for continued collaboration with community partners to improve referral processes, reduce wait times for program slots, and improve feedback to DCS on program participation and quality.

Due to these and other recidivism-reduction practices (e.g., connecting participants to stable housing and employment opportunities upon release), Georgia showed steady declines in recidivism, with some counties reporting up to 30-percent reductions in the risk for arrest depending on the type of offense and number of months after release.

## WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE

✓ Corrections agencies lead the approach but establish partnerships with key agencies, service providers, and other stakeholders across the state that are essential to reducing recidivism and strengthening programming to meet individual needs. Potential partners include:

- Community supervision agencies
- Law enforcement agencies
- Judges and court staff
- Defense and prosecution attorneys
- Treatment and community service providers
- Workforce service providers
- Educational/vocational institutions

✓ Partners formalize roles and responsibilities through Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) and contracts.

✓ Partners establish information-sharing agreements to gather and share relevant data in an effort to complete a full analysis on the drivers of recidivism and connections to programs and services.

✓ Partners work together to ensure that sufficient high-quality programming is available to meet the needs of people returning to their communities from incarceration and help reduce their chances of recidivating.

✓ Partners develop Collaborative Comprehensive Case Plans, based on assessments, that address factors that put people at risk of reoffending and direct them to the appropriate programs and services to meet their needs. Case plan information is continually updated and shared among partners to ensure a continuum of care exists to support people after release and services are not duplicated, as well as to provide feedback about program participation and outcomes.

### COLLABORATIVE AND COMPREHENSIVE CASE PLANS LED BY CORRECTIONS OR COMMUNITY SUPERVISION AGENCIES

Developed in consultation with relevant partners—such as behavioral health treatment, supportive housing, and vocational and educational providers—Collaborative Comprehensive Case Plans are tailored to address a person's distinct criminogenic and behavioral health risk and needs to support successful reentry and reduce their risk of recidivating. These plans also include input from the person preparing for reentry (and their support system) to keep them actively engaged and invested in their own success. More information on the National Reentry Resource Center's web-based tool "Collaborative Comprehensive Case Plans: Addressing Criminogenic Risk and Behavioral Health Needs" can be found at csgjusticecenter.org/nrrc/collaborative-comprehensive-case-plans.

## 2 Using data to understand recidivism drivers, inform programming decisions, and continuously monitor progress

*"The SRR initiative has completely revolutionized the way we do corrections. We are more focused than ever on cross-agency collaborations, evidence-based practices and programming, and ensuring that everything we do moves us forward toward better outcomes."*

—Beth Skinner, Iowa Department of Corrections

What gets measured gets done. By collecting and then examining data, corrections agencies can begin to identify key drivers of recidivism[3] and prioritize investments in specific areas of the agency that need reinforcement. For example, agencies can examine types of reconvictions to determine immediate program and services needs in the facility. They may also examine probation and parole supervision violations to determine what risks and needs are most prevalent in a community. By analyzing the needs of their population and the availability of resources to address those needs, corrections agencies are better positioned to make adjustments to ensure needs are met and criminogenic risk factors are mitigated to reduce recidivism.

### WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE

- ✓ Corrections agencies collect and analyze baseline data to examine the main drivers of recidivism and establish a target population, develop recidivism goals, and prioritize evidence-based practices for achieving those goals.
- ✓ Corrections agencies conduct a system-level assessment of population needs and available programs and services to understand existing resources and identify gaps in services, staffing, and other capacity issues based on need.
- ✓ Corrections leaders and partner organizations develop an implementation workplan and metrics to monitor progress toward established goals to track recidivism and other outcomes.
- ✓ Corrections leaders use data to continuously evaluate processes and outcomes to determine opportunities for improvement and areas where resources can be optimized to reduce costs.

## SRR STRATEGY IN PRACTICE

**Iowa Department of Corrections** (IDOC), which is responsible for institutional corrections as well as probation and parole, developed and implemented a program assessment to better understand its capacity to deliver evidence-based programming to people in its custody and to gather baseline data on program quality and effectiveness. For example, IDOC conducted an inventory of over 200 programs across all 9 of its prisons and discontinued 73 programs that were shown to be ineffective at reducing recidivism. IDOC then reallocated staff to increase the availability of the effective programming. All 9 prisons statewide now conduct new program screens annually, in addition to an annual review of programs to ensure long-term sustainability and fidelity to the intended model. Additionally, IDOC implemented training for staff on evidence-based community supervision practices and revised policies to improve pre-release planning and reentry.

Early results suggest that these and other improvements made through SRR may have successfully targeted and reduced recidivism among people on probation and released from prison to parole who were assessed as most likely to recidivate (moderate-to-high and high risk).[4]

## 3 Strengthening correctional culture to reduce recidivism through committed leadership and staff engagement

*"Engaging staff to become agents of change is critical to the sustainability of your efforts. But a project of this magnitude also required commitment of leadership to communicate about changes that were coming, a willingness to hear from staff about what works and the challenges they are facing, and consistent reinforcement of the long-term vision."*

—Monica Weeber, Vermont Department of Corrections

Fostering a correctional culture that embraces recidivism reduction as a core focus requires buy-in from leadership and staff at all levels. Corrections leaders must demonstrate that commitment by placing the same level of emphasis on recidivism-reduction activities as they do on security and containment strategies. But commitment from leadership alone is not enough. Strengthening correctional culture also hinges on recruiting and retaining qualified candidates for all correctional staff positions who embrace an evidence-based approach to reducing recidivism and can carry it out.

### WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE

✓ Leadership is involved in every aspect of the recidivism-reduction approach from planning to implementation; for example, they may lead discussions on potential pilot programs to implement recidivism-reduction practices or hold kick-off meetings to inform staff of changes to come. Corrections leaders should also participate in early planning sessions, remain informed throughout the development of a strategic plan, and provide regular updates to staff at all levels.

✓ Corrections leaders are the driving force when planning for and implementing strategies that are aligned with what research says works, and they use the principles of implementation science[5] to anticipate and prepare for barriers at the outset of implementing any of these strategies.

✓ Leadership places an emphasis on hiring and retaining staff who are focused on rehabilitation by reviewing job descriptions to ensure they require some social work background (i.e., counseling experience and previous experience with evidence-based practices), reevaluating where job postings are advertised, and examining current positions to ensure they are aligned with the new hiring practices, among other activities.

✓ Leaders ensure that staff have the skills and knowledge they need to carry out evidence-based practices. For example, staff receive training on effective implementation of evidence-based practices in correctional settings but also get regular updates on relevant policy changes. Booster trainings are also scheduled and given just as much emphasis as initial skill and knowledge training.

✓ Leaders engage staff at all levels to increase buy-in and support through internal communications such as executive memos, town halls, and small group meetings.

### ENGAGE A RESEARCH PARTNER

If a corrections agency does not have the capacity to collect and analyze data, research partners can provide expert guidance and services to ensure that policy and practice decisions are rooted in data, evaluate the effectiveness of the changes, and provide feedback to the corrections agency about whether and how things are working to inform adjustments. These partners may include local universities, research firms, or other external evaluators.

## SRR STRATEGY IN PRACTICE

**The Vermont Department of Corrections' (VDOC)** leadership undertook a multi-pronged approach to transform their correctional culture to align with evidence-based practices to reduce recidivism. One part of their approach was to expand efforts under their Policy Development Unit (PDU) whose main responsibility was to ensure the policy development process included an in-depth review of all policies and their adherence to evidence-based practices. Before the PDU was established, agency staff and community partners were typically not involved in the process, which often resulted in policies that were at odds with best practices. With SRR funds, the PDU created mechanisms for feedback from internal leadership and staff as well as external stakeholders, which included a public comment period, legal reviews, union negotiation, and review of any other logistical and/or operational concerns. This increased communication helped ensure that policies were ready to be implemented and were vetted among agency leadership and staff.

Once new policies were formalized, VDOC disseminated them to staff and developed associated trainings to help staff implement the provisions. For example, under the direction of the PDU, VDOC's new case management policy included a dissemination plan with scheduled trainings and information sessions led by central office directors. These trainings ensured that staff were given opportunities to develop or hone needed skills, reinforced the department's support of the new directive, and helped ensure that all staff understood the vision for the new case management process and how to carry it out consistently.

By incorporating this internal system of checks and balances, VDOC's policies and practices are being continuously updated, are better received by staff, and adhere to evidence-based practices. Since the PDU established the new process, nearly 100 rules, directives, and memos have been created or updated, and 91 guidance documents have been finalized. These materials superseded many decade-old policies with updated and consolidated information. When surveyed, the majority of staff respondents felt they had a voice in developing policies since the multi-pronged approach was implemented. This internal buy-in and the associated trainings of the policies resulted in better performance and policy adherence by staff.[6]

## SRR STRATEGY IN PRACTICE

The **Iowa Department of Corrections (IDOC)** developed a comprehensive matrix of core competencies for corrections agency positions at all levels—from new officers to seasoned executives—to clearly articulate and ensure a consistent understanding of what skills are necessary to effectively carry out each role. Developed over a three-year period, the matrix draws on a comprehensive review of available research on what works to reduce recidivism as well as evidence-based practices conducted by IDOC. Competencies include skills and knowledge related to risk-needs-responsivity, Core Correctional Practices, as well as effective supervision and reentry strategies. The matrix is used for hiring, performance evaluation, and career advancement. It is even reflected in job descriptions, so people applying for IDOC positions know what is expected of them. Recognizing that staff may not have all of these skills and competencies to start, IDOC also offers training in certain areas.

All nine of Iowa's adult state correctional facilities are using the new job descriptions, interview questions, and promotional checklists and evaluations based on the core competencies matrix. As a result of these efforts, IDOC has been able to strengthen correctional culture to focus staff on effective recidivism-reduction approaches through clear job expectations as well as hiring and promotion criteria that reflect these priorities.

# 4 Tailoring supervision practices and programs based on risk and needs assessments

*"Through the support of our SRR grant, our department and county partners changed supervision policies to align with the evidence of 'what works.' We're now able to provide more interventions to those who need it most."*

—Kelley Heifort, Minnesota Department of Corrections

Research has shown that using validated assessment tools to guide supervision decisions and tailoring programming to the distinct needs of people in correctional facilities and/or those who are preparing for reentry greatly reduces their likelihood of reoffending.[7] Doing so can also help corrections agencies optimize their existing resources by focusing on supervision programs and practices that have the greatest impact on recidivism reduction. For example, directing the most intensive supervision and treatment resources to the people who are most likely to recidivate not only improves outcomes for people on correctional supervision but also helps maximize limited resources.

## WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE

✓ Corrections agencies implement a risk and needs assessment tool that is validated on their population and is periodically revalidated to ensure that any changes which may affect the tool's validity are included and addressed.

✓ Staff are trained on how to conduct assessments and use the results to tailor interventions and services to address individual needs.

✓ Leaders use risk and needs data at the individual and agency levels to guide decision-making.

- Individual: Information is used to direct people to appropriate programming, and results help guide the development of case plans to promote successful reentry and strengthen a person's connections to services and care.
- Corrections agency: Risk and needs levels of the population are identified, as well as the people who are most likely to recidivate, and this information is used to focus correctional programming and resources on people assessed as having a high risk of recidivating. Resources are then cascaded for people assessed as medium to low risk.
- Community supervision agency: Risk and needs assessment data is used to help people successfully transition from correctional facilities to community supervision, with greater supervision resources allocated for people assessed as higher risk. Assessment information is also used to facilitate connections to community programs and to ensure appropriate services are available to meet the needs of people returning to the community. Additional data that can be shared to aid transitions include specialized caseload information, medical and medication history, previous assessment results, and number and type of service provider contacts a person received while incarcerated.

## SRR STRATEGY IN PRACTICE

**Minnesota Department of Corrections (MDOC)** improved its prison reentry and supervision services by ensuring that people are connected to programs and supervised according to their risk and needs. To do this, MDOC automated its data-sharing processes across state prison reentry and community supervision systems to share case plans based on individualized risk and needs information. This information was then used to focus risk-reduction strategies (e.g., tailoring reentry case plans and connecting people to behavioral health services) for people assessed as high or very high risk to recidivate as part of a study to analyze the impact of the strategies. Several strategies were employed to address high-risk populations. One strategy was the launch of a pilot program with the Minnesota Department of Human Services that allowed people to apply for public assistance before leaving prison; services and benefits were then available immediately upon their release.

MDOC has seen early signs of progress in the state's efforts to reduce recidivism since implementing these and other changes. Though more likely to return to prison due to technical violations of the conditions of their community supervision, overall, people who experienced the improvements made through SRR had lower rates of re-imprisonment than people released prior to the implementation of these improvements.

# 5 Using outcome data to communicate successes and continued funding needs to state leaders

*"We provided our director and the legislature with program data that highlighted lessons learned and updates on the status of our goals and SRR grant deliverables. Thanks to these efforts, the funded positions allow us to continue providing critical programming and services to reduce recidivism and the long-term costs associated with incarceration."*

—Kim Thomas, Nevada Department of Corrections

With strapped state budgets and competing demands for resources, it is critical for corrections agencies to find creative ways to secure support from state leaders for their recidivism-reduction efforts. Support from governors' offices and other elected officials not only helps safeguard any existing funding that corrections agencies have secured, but also positions them to better advocate for new resources with data that demonstrates the positive impact of the approach and the return on investment for policymakers. It is also important to promote innovative programs that may not have as much data behind them but show preliminary positive results. Corrections agencies can use various opportunities (e.g., surveys, testimonials, and roundtable discussions) to engage policymakers in ways that help them better understand the people who benefit from the recidivism-reduction efforts and why continued investments are needed.

## WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE

✓ Corrections agencies share regular reports presenting data on the impact of their recidivism-reduction strategies with policymakers to inform them of progress and increase accountability. These reports can also be used to advocate for legislative policy change, more funding, and/or reallocation of resources to support recidivism-reduction strategies that are shown to be effective and could benefit from continued investments.

✓ Corrections leaders partner with leaders from other service systems to identify and leverage existing resources to avoid duplication of services and reduce costs.

✓ Leaders identify other ways to engage policymakers, including visits to correctional facilities, testimonials of program participants, and roundtable discussions with corrections leadership and staff.

✓ Elected officials invest in sustainable change for the long term.

## SRR STRATEGY IN PRACTICE

**Nevada Department of Corrections (NDOC)** identified the need to build staff capacity to support their recidivism-reduction efforts and sought out grant funding to increase the number of substance abuse counselors and program officers to work with high needs clients who were also assessed as having a high risk of recidivating. NDOC spent three years tracking data and outcomes related to the effectiveness of these grant-funded positions.

With evidence of successful outcomes and the critical role these counselors and program officers played in reducing recidivism on hand, NDOC leaders secured funding in the state budget for two substance abuse counselor and two program officer positions. The additions to the state budget helped to ensure sustainability of their efforts beyond the grant period.[8]

# A PROMISING APPROACH FORWARD

Corrections agencies that were awarded the SRR grant have taken innovative steps to address drivers of recidivism in their communities and make changes that will have long-lasting impacts. While the goal of reducing recidivism can't be accomplished overnight, early results from the states highlighted in this brief are promising. And many have experienced greater reductions in recidivism as they have continued implementing their strategies, highlighting the importance of sustaining efforts to see real improvements. Because of these successes, they've also experienced more buy-in from leadership and front-line staff and developed even stronger relationships with community partners.

Through a combination of the five strategies described above and other recidivism-reduction efforts,

- In Georgia, people who experienced improvements through SRR were 10 percent less likely to be rearrested within the first 6 months of release than people who were not impacted by the improvements;
- Iowa's two-year return to prison rates declined slightly from 11.4 percent for the group examined prior to SRR implementation to 11.2 percent for the group supervised during the first year; and
- In Minnesota, the re-imprisonment rate among people impacted by the SRR strategies was 2 percentage points lower than people released prior to the implementation of these improvements.

Together these states are demonstrating that meaningful recidivism reduction is possible, but it takes strong collaboration, committed leadership and staff, and data-driven decision-making. Drawing on their collective experience, this brief outlines a promising approach forward—a way for corrections leaders across the country to successfully help people reenter their communities and reduce crime.

# ENDNOTES

1 The Sentencing Project, *Trends in U.S. Corrections* (Washington, DC: The Sentencing Project, 2018), https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/trends-in-u-s-corrections/.

2 While the Georgia Department of Corrections applied for and received the SRR grant funding, most of the programmatic work was completed by Georgia DCS once the agency was created in 2015 as part of then Governor Nathan Deal's ongoing criminal justice reform efforts. In a bill signed into law in May 2015, Georgia DCS was given the responsibilities of overseeing community supervision of people on parole, people on probation, and select juveniles. See "About Us," Georgia Department of Community Supervision, accessed September 30, 2019, https://dcs.georgia.gov/about-us.

3 Tracking multiple measures of recidivism is critical to fully understanding state recidivism trends and developing policies and practices to address the drivers of these trends. While the most common way for states to measure recidivism has been to look at an individual's return to prison—in 2017, for example, 96 percent of states tracked and published reincarceration data—other recidivism metrics that states should examine include rearrest and reconviction. However, only 25 and 30 percent of states were tracking these metrics, respectively, in 2017. See 50 State Report on Public Safety: https://50statespublicsafety.us/part-2/strategy-1/action-item-1/.

4 Iowa observed individuals' return to prison in multiple "cohort" groups after implementing various recidivism-reduction practices funded by their SRR grant award. These cohorts included all people on probation and parole: a pre-SRR cohort (starting parole/probation in FY15) and three post-SRR cohorts (starting parole/probation in FY16, FY17, and FY18). The recidivism of these groups was then tracked within each year. More tracking time is needed to fully assess the outcomes of the SRR initiative in Iowa, and IDOC is continuing to study the impact of these recidivism-reduction practices over the next several years.

5 "Implementation science is the study of methods to promote the adoption and integration of evidence-based practices, interventions, and policies into routine health care and public health settings." See "Implementation science news, resources and funding for global health researchers," National Institutes of Health, accessed August 27, 2019, https://www.fic.nih.gov/ResearchTopics/Pages/ImplementationScience.aspx.

6 Evaluation efforts in Vermont to examine the impact of SRR strategies on recidivism remained underway at the time of this publication.

7 D.A. Andrews and J. Bonta, "Rehabilitating criminal justice policy and practice," Psychology, Public Policy, and Law 16, no. 1 (2010): 39-55.

8 Evaluation efforts in Nevada remained underway at the time of this publication.