

Travis Community Impact Supervision (TCIS): Progress Report

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Adult Probation Department as Incubator Site to Strengthen Probation

Probation departments in Texas and across the country are being challenged by increasing demands for services and expectations that probation should more effectively reduce recidivism. Departments have been moving towards a model of "evidence-based practices" that orients supervision to recidivism reduction. This entails changing operations, from paper-work management to casework. The change requires the implementation of more effective assessments based on scientific tools, use of supervision strategies that fit the needs and risk of the population and programs that can produce results.

Not many departments in the state or nation have been able to institute an organization-wide change to support this operational model. The Travis Community Impact Supervision (TCIS) is a "top to bottom" realignment of organizational practices to support a more effective operational model. TCIS is a methodical two year initiative that has been supported by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, Community Justice Assistance Division and County officials. Dr. Tony Fabelo, *The JFA Institute*, has provided technical assistance to guide the project. Dr. Geraldine Nagy, director of the Travis County Community Supervision & Corrections Department, is leading implementation.

The initiative began with a comprehensive evaluation of the department in the summer of 2005 that identified the strengths and weaknesses of the department. Working with department leaders, a two-year plan was developed and the project started in November 2005. The goal of TCIS is to develop, test, implement and document organization-wide changes directed at improving assessment, supervision, sanctioning, staff training and quality control policies. Travis County is an "incubator site" to determine the best strategies to strengthen probation. This publication provides a brief progress report of the project.

Major Milestone of Creating a Central Diagnosis Process in the Works

Improving assessment practices is critical in reforming probation. Diagnosis of offenders along risk and criminogenic factors using evidence-based assessment tools is critical to: (a) distinguish offenders along characteristics that identify their supervision needs; (b) guide judges in setting appropriate conditions of supervision; (c) guide probation administrators in designing differentiated supervision strategies; (d) provide probation officers with reliable information to formulate and implement effective supervision plans; and, (e) devise clear outcome expectations for the different populations. Therefore, the first major task for the project was to reform the assessment practices in the department.

An initial internal review showed that the department, like most other probation departments, did not have a cohesive process to assess the risk and criminogenic characteristics of offenders. Redundant paper work, a lack of connection between assessment processes, and the setting of conditions of supervision that did not match supervision strategies made for much ineffectiveness.

Therefore, these processes were radically altered by creating a new Diagnosis Report and a Central Diagnosis Unit. Both were approved for implementation by the Travis judiciary in August 2006.

The new assessment practices include:

- (a) streamlining of assessment procedures and forms;
- (b) integration of evidence-based assessment tools (risk assessment and offender classification protocols) into the diagnosis process;
- (c) creation of a Diagnosis Report for court officials;
- (d) organization of supervision strategies to match the assessment of offenders; and,
- (e) creation of a Central Diagnosis Unit to consolidate all assessment work.

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The department is presently making major organizational changes to support the new diagnosis process, with full implementation by April 2, 2007. These changes include:

- Consolidating into one physical location the diagnosis process which requires physically moving staff, renovating office space and redesigning computer databases
- Redesigning the intake and orientation processes to absorb much of the paperwork completed by probation officers during the first field office visit. This requires adding staff at the present intake office and redesigning orientation to include explaining the conditions and making referrals to standard programs and services
- Redesigning field supervision procedures to have probation officers more engaged in “motivational interviewing” techniques and to free time for case-planning and the achievement of supervision goals. This requires redesigning field forms and procedures and retraining staff
- Redesigning conditions of supervision and sanctioning strategies to match the diagnosis matrix which requires the development of agreements with judges on the use of the new uniform policy

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Other Related Milestones Achieved

Significant changes include:

- Reduction of caseloads in regular units from an average of 129 direct cases to 108
- 8,650 hours of training in new practices between June 1, 2005 and August 2006
- Creation of a Felony Revocation Staffing and Review Committee to review officer revocation recommendations and the applicability of alternative sanctions in lieu of revocation
- Staffing and Review Committee reviewed 1,200 cases between May and September 2006 with 192 cases of 240 recommended for revocation receiving an alternative sanction instead.

- Creation of a Technical Violation Docket by Judge Mike Lynch providing an opportunity for violators to remain on probation with modified conditions
- Creation of a Mental Health Docket by Judge Julie Kocurek for technical violators with mental health diagnoses
- Creation of new procedures encouraging probation officers to recommend early termination for appropriate cases and ending the prior department policy of never recommending early termination
- Creation of an Absconder Unit that reviewed 2,772 cases between January 05 and August 06 leading to a 23% decrease in the absconder population (2,000 fewer absconders)
- Implementation of a web-based interactive workforce development program working with Texas State Technical College as an incentive for probationers
- Redesign of the Sex Offender Management Program to be evidence –based, including a new policy and procedures manual
- Adoption of a “Voice4net” voice assisted telephone system now receiving thousands of calls that would otherwise occupy officer’s time in answering routine inquiries
- Enhancement of the SMART residential treatment program, including the hiring of additional counselors for cognitive and family programs

TCIS activities will continue in many other key areas in 2007, with further incubator reports forthcoming.

Major aspects of the initiative are being documented in reports prepared by Dr. Fabelo working with Dr. Geraldine Nagy and staff of the department. Eight reports have been published and can be found at: http://www.co.travis.tx.us/community_supervision/TCIS_Initiative.asp.