The Green Sheet
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Effective Parole Systems Don't Just Happen

pa board of probation and parole

The field of parole, like most professions, has undergone many changes over the years. The efforts to reduce recidivism, and the failure of many of those efforts, has caused the pendulum to swing from the belief that "everything works" to believing "nothing works."

Today, fortunately, public policy research and practice about effective parole systems has come a long way. In December 2008, The PEW Center on the States released a public safety brief *Putting Public Safety First: 13 Strategies for Successful Supervision and Reentry,* which summarizes the latest research and best practices about how probation and parole systems can improve their outcomes.

As part of its endeavor to improve outcomes, the Board continually examines and refines its policies, procedures and practices in light of the latest research and has implemented many changes.

Below is a description of how the Board's changes align with PEW's 13 strategies:

1. Define Success as Recidivism Reduction and Measure Performance

According to the PEW brief, "In order to accomplish their public safety mission, parole and probation agencies should adopt risk reduction and behavior change strategies and measure their performance against the standard of recidivism reduction, substance abuse, employment, victim restitution and other reintegration outcomes."

The Board's goal *is* the reduction of recidivism. And it has adopted "risk reduction and behavior change strategies" to help the offender lead a law abiding lifestyle through the application of evidence based practices. To evaluate these new strategies, several performance measures have been developed.

Some recent key performance measures are:

- The Board's three-year year recidivism rate has dropped from 52 percent for releases in FY 2004/05 to 44 percent for releases in FY 2010/11. The current one-year recidivism rate is 20 percent, a decrease from 22 percent five years ago.

- The number of offenders who successfully completed parole was 6,788 in 2014.

- During FY13/14, 89% of the 122,140 drug tests given to detect illegal drugs were negative.

- The percentage of absconders (parolees who stop reporting to their agent) has declined from 6.2 percent in FY 2004/05 to 3.4 percent in FY 2013/14.

- The proportion of parole interviews held has increased (9.5 percent increase over two years) by prioritizing for placement on the interview schedule inmates who had all programming completed, a positive Department of Corrections (DOC) recommendation and appropriate institutional adjustment.

- The approval process for home plans has been expedited for inmates granted parole but not released (from a six-month average of 2,669 offenders awaiting release to an average of 1,392).

- The number of days from the inmate's minimum sentence date to release from prison is reduced (from 34 days to 11 days) - a 67.4 percent reduction resulting in cost avoidance of approximately $12.4 million. The median number of days for offenders with no obstacles to release is zero – they get released at their minimum date.

- Shorter sanction periods as required by the Justice Reinvestment legislation caused an estimated 1,006 fewer technical parole violators (TPV) to occupy state prison beds (December 2013-September 2014).

2. Tailor Conditions of Supervision

Parole interventions and conditions of parole should target dynamic – changing - factors that are the biggest contributors to criminal behavior. The Board uses a risk and needs assessment to identify those contributors in order to establish conditions of parole. These conditions become part of the overall reentry plan for case management purposes. The field agent may add or modify conditions as the offender adjusts to life outside of prison.

3. Focus Resources on Higher Risk Offenders

According to the risk principle, offenders should be targeted with supervision and treatment interventions that are commensurate with their risk of re-offending. Low risk offenders should not be treated like high-risk offenders – an intervention may increase the failure rate for low risk offenders. The Board follows this principle by targeting interventions to mid to high risk offenders in order to maximize the effectiveness of the agent's time and resources.

4. Frontload Supervision Resources

The first year on parole is critical to an offender's success. The Board created transitional coordinator positions to provide intensive case support to mid to high risk offenders, up to six months, when parolees are most likely to recidivate.

The TC becomes involved with the offender prior to release from the institution to ensure continuity of care and treatment, and provide employment and housing assistance.

Once the offender is stable in the community, the parolee is assigned to a general supervision caseload.

5. Implement Earned Discharge

The Parole Act does not allow the Board to discharge offenders from parole prior to the completion of their sentence. However, Act 81 of 2008 established the Recidivism Risk Reduction Incentive (RRRI) which allows inmates who comply with all of the criteria to earn credit to be paroled at an earlier minimum date, but this does not change the sentence length imposed by the court.

The RRRI provides an incentive for inmates to participate in prison programming and treatment and to behave while in prison, all toward the goal of changing behavior. If an inmate receives RRRI certification from the DOC – meaning they have met the criteria as set in law - they are seen by the Board at the earlier minimum sentence date.

6. Supervise Offenders in their Community

State parole agents perform most of their work in the community; they are not office based. Generally, 3 out of 4 workdays are spent in the field making contacts with the parolee, the parolee's family, friends and employer. In this manner, they get to know their neighborhoods, build relationships and learn about valuable resources available to help the offender transition to a law-abiding lifestyle. The agent spends at least one day in the office to complete paperwork for supervision, parole hearings or pre-sentence investigative reports.

7. Engage Partners to Expand Intervention Capacity

The key to success in the community is collaboration with external and internal stakeholders. Offenders, while incarcerated for many years, have been separated from economic, career, prosocial, and psychological supports.

As a partner in community corrections, the Board seeks partnerships with community and faith based organizations, works with state and county agencies to ensure continuity of mental health care, connects with providers prior to release to set appointments for inmates once they are released into the community, and meets with criminal justice advisory boards to share the message that state parole needs and wants to work with local partners to address the needs of returning offenders.

8. Assess Criminal Risk and Need Factors

The Board uses reliable and validated risk and needs assessment instruments. The LSI-R (Level of Service Inventory – Revised) is a quantitative survey of 54 attributes of offenders. This assessment helps predict parole outcomes, success in correctional halfway houses, and institutional misconducts and recidivism.

The LSI-R is incorporated in the Parole Decisional Instrument, which is used as a guide for the decision maker. The Parole Decisional Instrument is research-based and validated on Pennsylvania's population and includes many other factors in addition to the results of risk and needs assessments.

Included are assessments from the Department of Corrections to assess criminal thinking, anger and hostility, mental health, psychological, and substance abuse issues. These assessments analyze changes in outcomes that demonstrate a reduced risk of re-offending which is a key contributor to the parole decisional process.

The results of the LSI-R establish the level of supervision and identify the offender's needs for the development of a supervision plan. The LSI-R also is used when the offender is on supervision to regularly re-evaluate the risk and needs as his or her situation changes.

9. Balance Surveillance and Treatment in Case Plans

Supervision by itself does not reduce recidivism; effective interventions are needed along with monitoring and control.

The Board's case plans balance surveillance and treatment. The Board provides cognitive behavioral programming, works in collaboration with local drug and alcohol and mental health providers, and assists offenders with employment through career link and employment classes. Curfews and electronic monitoring may be used along with treatment and counseling.

10. Involve Offenders in the Supervision Process

The offender is engaged in the process of change and interventions are targeted appropriately to identified risk and needs. While still in prison, the offender works with the institutional parole agent to complete the Re-Entry and Transition Accountability Checklist. Indicators noted are the type of identification an offender has, i.e. birth certificate, Social Security card, driver's license; risk assessment scores; programs completed and recommended; social services applied for; follow up appointments; and a family or other support system.

11. Engage Informal Social Controls

Relationships with family, friends and neighbors and employers are effective in promoting positive behavior changes. The Board conducts family education and support meetings prior to an offender's release. Contacts with these individuals – collateral contacts - are required under the Board's supervision procedures.

12. Use Incentives and Rewards

Research shows that a 4:1 ratio of rewards to punishment is optimal for promoting behavioral change. The Board accomplishes this as a result of using Motivational Interviewing techniques.

Affirmations and rewards are built into motivational interviewing. Agents are encouraged to use affirmations – something as simple as

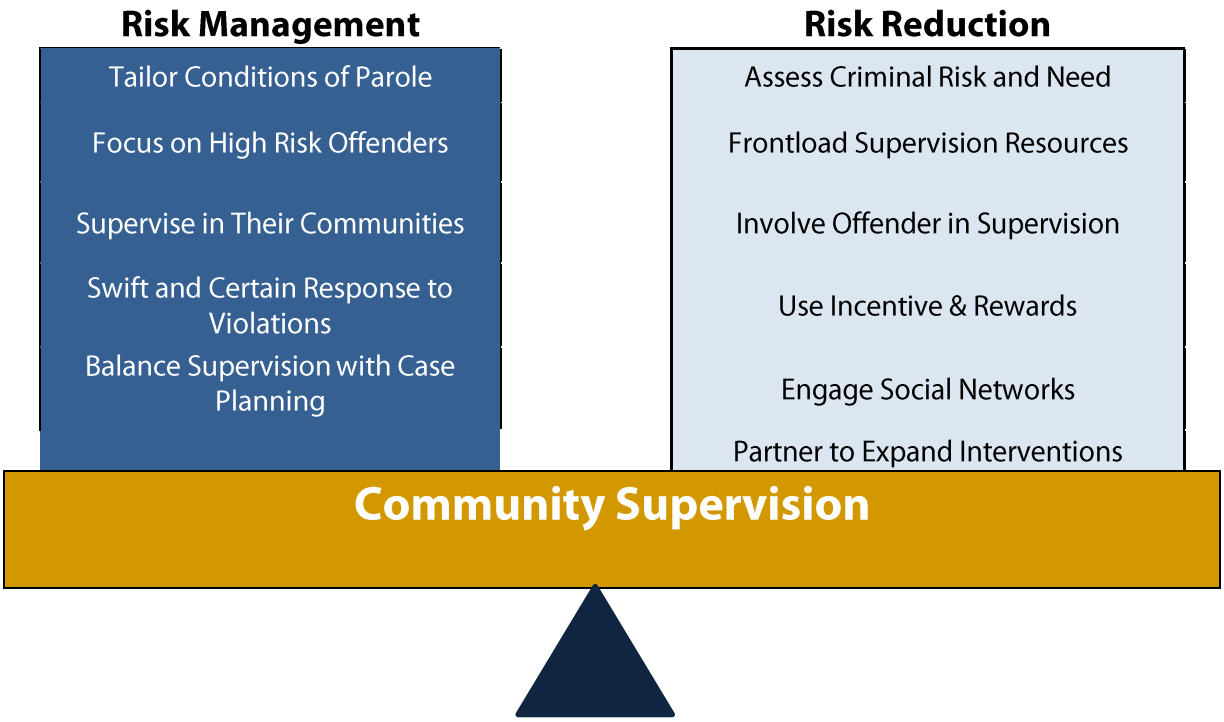
saying thanks to the offender for showing up for an appointment. This type of relationship builds the therapeutic relationship that is needed to foster change.

Eligible offenders can be placed on administrative parole one year after release on parole supervision if they qualify. Administrative parole has reduced reporting requirements for offenders who have been complying with their conditions of parole and there is no indication they are a danger to public safety.

13. Respond to Violations with Swift and Certain Sanctions

The Board sets conditions of parole and monitors them to encourage success, which results ultimately in less victimization.

Working with the Center for Effective Public Policy, the Board developed a Violation Sanctioning Grid (VSG) for agents to respond with swiftness and certainty to technical violations of parole. The VSG conforms to evidence-based practices and is used by all field parole agents to apply graduated sanctions that are timely, progressive and proportional to the offender's behavior.



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