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EVALUABILITY ASSESSMENTS OF THE CIRCLES OF SUPPORT AND ACCOUNTABILITY (COSA) MODEL

SITE REPORT: COLORADO COSA

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ABSTRACT

According to the U.S. National Reentry Resource Center (NRRC) at least 95% of state prisoners are released back to their communities after a period of incarceration. Both criminal justice agencies and the general public are often particularly conscious of the issue of sex offenders returning to the community because of the potentially negative biological and psychiatric outcomes for victims (e.g., Andersen, Tomada, Vincow, Valente, Polcari, & Teicher, 2008 ; Chen et al., 2010). Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA) is a restorative justice-based community reentry program for high-risk sex offenders with little or no pro-social community support, originating from Ontario, Canada. There have been no rigorous large-scale outcome evaluations of COSA conducted to date. An evaluability assessment was conducted of COSA across five sites with the goal of assessing the readiness of COSA provision in the U.S. for rigorous evaluation. This report is a for COSA provision at one of those sites: Colorado COSA. The assessment aimed to clarify program intent, explore program reality, examine program data capacity, analyze program fidelity, and propose potential evaluation designs for future evaluation. A summarized ‘intended model’ is presented that sought to illustrate the espoused theory of COSA.

Colorado COSA (COCOSA) is a non-profit organization, funded by the Colorado Department of Corrections and seeking additional private funding. During the past four years Colorado has been reforming criminal justice practices. This has led to approximately \$25 million dollars being reallocated from the corrections budget to funding for intervention programs. Colorado COSA (COCOSA) uses an adapted version of the CSC model (CSC, 2002; 2003) that also draws from materials collected from COSA programs in Fresno (CA), Alaska, Vermont, and the United Kingdom. COCOSA is in the initial stages of

developing their first COSA Circles. Colorado COSA was awarded a fidelity score of 27%. The COCOSA model appears to deviate from the intended model in a number of ways. Firstly, selected Core Members have not completed the whole of their sentence and are in the community under a combination of COSA, and Parole or Probation supervision. Secondly, there appears to be a degree of flexibility in the criteria for Core Member selection. It was not possible to assess data management because the project is still in development. It is clear that the project is well-resourced (both in terms of finance and personnel), has a strong model in place, and has learned valuable lessons from its first unsuccessful incarnation. It is concluded, however, that at this time Colorado COSA cannot be considered to be operating at a sufficient capacity that would allow it to positively contribute to rigorous evaluation.

INTRODUCTION

According to the U.S. National Reentry Resource Center (NRRC), during 2010 a total of 708,677 prisoners were released back from state and federal prisons into their communities. Both criminal justice agencies and the general public are often particularly conscious of the complex issue of sex offenders returning to their communities because of the potentially negative biological and psychiatric outcomes for victims (e.g., Andersen, Tomada, Vincow, Valente, Polcari, & Teicher, 2008 ; Chen et al., 2010).

Due to these negative outcomes, criminal justice responses to sex offender reentry have typically involved tightening supervision for sex offenders and the introduction of stringent legislation on registration, notification, and residency. Recent recidivism data from 73 studies and 35,522 offenders, however, demonstrate an observed overall sexual recidivism rate of 12.4%, with a 10-year rate of 16.6% (Helmus, Hanson, Thornton, Babchishin, & Harris, 2012). Despite low re-offense rates, many jurisdictions have adopted containment models for sex offender community management (English, 1998; 2004) - victim-focused, multi-agency approaches that combine case evaluation, risk assessment, sex offender treatment, and intense community surveillance.

Yet, amid the increases in criminal justice system's surveillance of sex offenders, there is a growing interest among both criminal justice practitioners and academics in developing restorative justice approaches. Restorative justice is a philosophy that aims to redirect society's punitive response to crime and increase public safety through reconciliatory action between offenders, victims, and the community (Sullivan & Tifft, 2005). It has been noted that interventions offered by non-correctional enterprises may be better positioned to respond to individual characteristics and circumstances when

providing offender treatment and management than correctional organizations (Wilson & Yates, 2009).

Circles of Support and Accountability

Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA) is a restorative justice-based community reentry program for sex offenders deemed to be at the highest risk of reoffending and with little or no pro-social community support. According to the Correctional Services of Canada model (Correctional Services Canada: CSC, 2002; 2003), the mission statement of COSA is: "[to] substantially reduce the risk of future sexual victimization of community members by assisting and supporting released individuals in their task of integrating with the community and leading responsible, productive, and accountable lives" (CSC, 2002: p. 12). An adaptation of the CSC model is described in further detail in a section below.

There have been no rigorous large-scale outcome evaluations of the COSA program conducted to date. Some small-scale outcome evaluations have been published (see Bates, Williams, Wilson, and Wilson, 2013; Duwe, 2013; Wilson, McWhinnie, Picheca, Prinzo, & Cortoni, 2007; Wilson, Cortoni, & McWhinnie, 2009) that suggest COSA may be responsible for a reduction of 77% in sexual recidivism in COSA Core Members versus controls after an average follow-up time of 4 years. Given the varying quality of these studies, however, in terms of retroactive matching of experimental and control samples, imperfect methods for matching, the integrity of statistical analysis, and the lack of statistically significant experimental results, it could be argued that this figure should be considered only an

estimate of effectiveness. Thus further, rigorous evaluation of COSA is needed before it can truly be considered to be evidence-based practice.

Evaluability assessment

This report is part of a series of reports outlining a National Institute of Justice-funded evaluability assessment of the provision of COSA at various sites in the U.S. This report is one of five, with an accompanying cross-site report, for the five COSA sites evaluated as part of the evaluability assessment. The report examines program operations, data capacity, and program fidelity at Vermont COSA, and proposes evaluation designs and challenges. The goal of this evaluability assessment is to examine the readiness of those five COSA programs for rigorous evaluation. This assessment has five specific evaluation goals (from Wholey, 2004): (1) clarifying program intent by developing an intended COSA program model; (2) exploring program reality and COSA program operations in action on site; (3) examining program data capacity; (4) analyzing program fidelity and the congruence between intended program logic and actual program operations; and (5) proposing potential evaluation designs and challenges based on site readiness for further evaluation activities.

COSA intended model

The accompanying cross-site report describes an intended COSA model¹ created for the purpose of this evaluability assessment, based predominantly on the Correctional

¹ Henceforth referred to as the 'intended COSA model' or the 'intended model'.

Services Canada model² (CSC, 2002; 2003). The intended model consists of two concentric interpersonal circles surrounding a Core Member (an offender): (1) an inner circle of four to six professionally-facilitated community volunteers who act as a supportive community to whom the Core Member agrees to be accountable; and (2) an outer circle of professionals (e.g., therapists, probation, law enforcement) who provide expert guidance on areas including, but not limited to, offender behavior, offender management principles, the legal and criminal justice contexts.

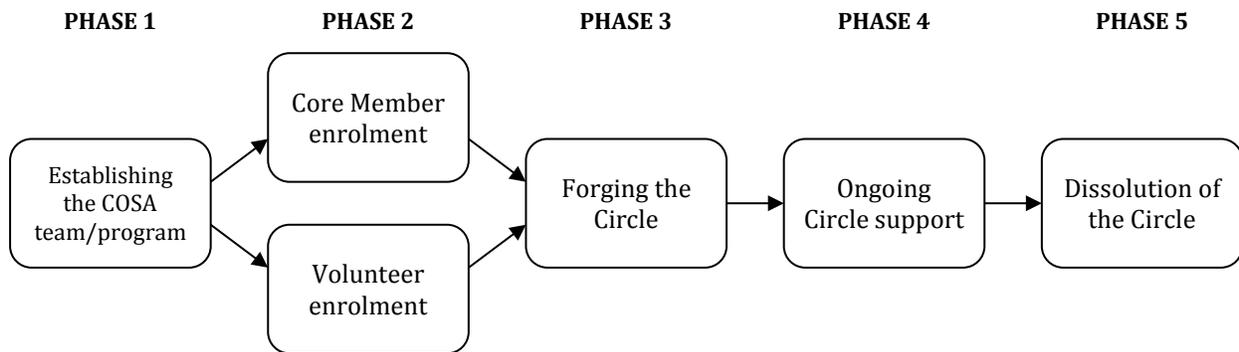
The intended model of COSA separates the elements of COSA into two components: (1) *people* - the various key players involved in the operation of COSA; and (2) *processes* - the operational procedures that take place from the conception of COSA to the dissolution of the first Circle. There are four groups of key players. The first group is the COSA project staff - the Advisory Group, the Program Director, and the Circle Coordinator. The second group is the service users - the Core Member and the volunteers. The third group is the specific criminal justice staff or organizations (the referrers) - the Department of Corrections (DOC), parole and probation, and local police forces. The fourth group is the community service providers, including survivor advocacy groups, lawyers, treatment providers/psychologists, social workers, healthcare professionals, educational professionals, and faith-based organizations.

The Program Director oversees the five phases of the COSA program development process (see Figure 1): (1) establishing the COSA team and program; (2a) Core Member enrolment and (2b) volunteer enrolment; (3) forging the Circle; (4) ongoing Circle support;

² Henceforth referred to as the 'CSC model'.

and (5) dissolution of the Circle. The following sections outline each of the phases of the model in turn.

Figure 1. The five phases of the COSA program development process.



Having summarized the intended model, the following sections of this report will: (a) describe the history and context of COSA provision at the site, outline it's aims, and report current capacity; (b) apply the five phases of COSA model development process model to implementation at the site; and (c) draw conclusions on the fidelity of the COSA program and make recommendations about capacity for evaluation at the site.

SITE INFORMATION

History and context

Colorado COSA (COCOSA) is a non-profit organization, funded in part by the Colorado Department of Corrections and seeking additional private funding. It was formed by a group of experienced community justice practitioners specifically to centralize, formalize, and coordinate the activities of a variety of local community projects who facilitate restorative sex offender reentry programs.

In 2004 the Colorado Department of Corrections (DOC) attempted to develop COSA using funds obtained through the Second Chance Act. When the volunteers became aware that the program was being run by the DOC and that criminal records checks would be necessary they withdrew from the program and the initiative failed. In 2011, the DOC, the Sex Offender Management Board (SOMB), the Criminal Defense Bar, and the Ethical Education Task Force of the United Methodist Church participated in a symposium with the Correctional Services Canada (CSC) COSA model developers, Drs. Robin Wilson and Andrew McWhinnie. This symposium was attended by delegates from Colorado Probation, Parole, and other interested professionals, including treatment providers and faith-based organizations.

From this symposium a COSA working group/advisory board was created that initially met around once a month and examined ways in which COSA could be developed in Colorado. Learning lessons from the first incarnation and seeking to establish a level of autonomy from the DOC, in March 2012 several members of the COCOSA advisory board filed for status as a non-profit organization. The DOC successfully applied for additional

Second Chance Act funding in January 2013. COCOSA collected materials from the CSC team (CSC, 2002; 2003) and additional materials from COSA programs in Fresno, Alaska, Vermont and the United Kingdom and developed a reference guide for staff and volunteers. This reference guide was adapted to meet the needs of COCOSA, with input from the advisory group. In March 2013 COCOSA held a volunteer training event, which was videotaped with the aim of using it to introduce new volunteers to the COSA concept.

During the past four years Colorado has been reforming criminal justice practices. This has led to approximately \$25 million dollars being reallocated from the corrections budget to funding for intervention programs. It currently costs approximately \$33,000 a year to house an individual in prison for one year. Colorado also recently passed legislation requiring the DOC to participate in an independent audit of their sex offender treatment program, the result of which makes it likely that there will be a number of sex offenders moved from incarceration into the community, and there will be encouragement for community organizations to assist in reentry and supervision. It is worth also noting that Colorado has legislation implementing indeterminate sentencing and lifetime supervision of eligible (typically SVP category) sex offenders.

Aims, goals, and mission

Colorado COSA (COCOSA) uses an adapted version of the CSC model (CSC, 2002; 2003) that also draws from COSA programs in Fresno (CA), Alaska, Vermont, and the U.K. COCOSA has produced a comprehensive policy and procedure document that explains the COCOSA model and provides a salient theory of change. The mission statement is “[to] substantially reduce the risk of future sexual victimization of community members by

assisting and supporting released men/women in their task of integrating with the community and leading responsible, productive, and accountable lives.” COCOSA does not currently have any active Circles. Their aims are to train 100 volunteers during the period of the Second Chance Act grant and to develop 20 Circles.

Current capacity

COCOSA is in the initial stages of developing their first COSA Circles. At the time of the site visit, COCOSA was developing a full request for proposals in order to formalize the funding process of local community organizations.

IMPLEMENTATION

It is important to note that because COCOSA is currently running at zero capacity, the following sections discuss *intended* implementation that may not represent eventual program reality.

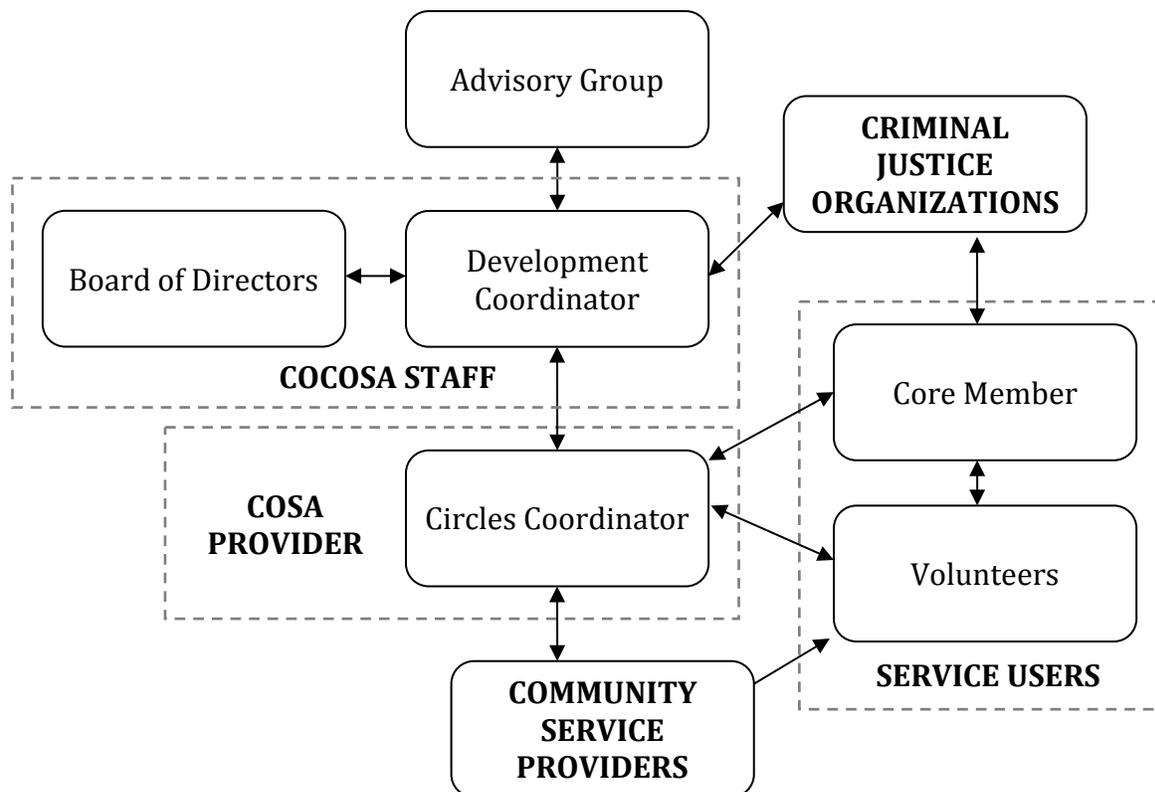
Phase 1: Establishing the COSA team and program

The COCOSA program is directed by a Board of Directors, led by the Board President, who sub-contracts responsibility and resources for implementation to independent community providers (see Figure 2 for a schematic diagram of the management structure). COCOSA is in the process of appointing a full-time Development Coordinator, whose responsibilities will include the forging and maintenance of Circles, coordination with the sites, recruiting volunteers, distributing DOC funding to COSA providers, and the collection and management of data. A Circle Coordinator will be appointed at each COSA provider, who will be responsible for maintaining program integrity and submitting monthly activity logs to the COCOSA Development Coordinator.

A COCOSA Advisory Board has also been established that includes members from the Colorado DOC, Sex Offender Management Board (SOMB), Community Corrections, Parole, Probation, Colorado Coalition Against Sexual Assault, Public Defenders, and faith-based and community nonprofits. COCOSA is also developing working relationships with the Colorado DOC, Parole and Probation departments, and the Colorado SOMB. COCOSA also works with organizations with experience in working with criminal justice, such as the

Community Re-Entry Place, and the Inside Out ministry. They also partner with Uncommon Solutions (an employer), and the Colorado Sex Offense Information Coalition.

Figure 2. The COCOSA management structure.



Phase 2a: Core Member enrolment

COCOSA plan to develop two distinct types of Circle, based on referral source. The Probation and Parole Departments are separate agencies in Colorado with different regulations, and so each will identify and refer potential Core Members. The first, 'Parole Circles', will be for paroled DOC offenders and operated by sub-contracted community organizations. The second, 'Probation Circles', will be referrals from the Division of Probation Services COCOSA is currently seeking funding to sub-contract community

organizations to facilitate Circles for probation clients. The Division of Probation Services is currently taking legal advice to ensure that their service is legally covered and not liable before formalizing relationships with COCOSA.

Referrals will be received by the Development Coordinator in writing, by email, or by telephone, preferably 90 days before release. The referring agent is required to obtain authorization from the applicant for the release of file information to COCOSA. Upon receipt of the referral the Development Coordinator contacts the relevant Circles Coordinator. An interview is scheduled by the Development Coordinator and the regional Circles Coordinator, in which suitability is gauged and the applicant is introduced to the COCOSA program, the concept of covenanting, and the expectations of a Core Member and what the applicant can expect. COCOSA's selection criteria state that suitable offenders: (1) be high-risk sex offenders; (2) have no support network; (3) accept responsibility for their crimes; (4) are willing to co-operate with judicial sanctions placed on them; (5) commit to dealing with related issues (e.g., substance abuse, mental health concerns, vocational or educational pursuits). COCOSA has also stated that offenders may be considered eligible with any risk level if they are designated as high need and lacking pro-social support.

The applicant's file information is then reviewed. A comprehensive Needs and Resource Assessment form is also completed to examine accommodation, employment, education, health, counseling, relationships, and relapse prevention plans, supervision, money management, boundary setting, sexual behaviors, and mood management. A subsequent determination will be made whether to accept or decline the application or referral or to obtain further information needed to make such a decision. If the applicant is willing to commit to COCOSA, forms authorizing the release of file information to

volunteers and other professionals will be obtained. If the applicant is accepted, the regional Circle Coordinator will identify suitable volunteers, and a Circle will be formed with the first meeting occurring within 30 days of release.

Phase 2b: Volunteer enrolment

COCOSA will seek to identify and recruit volunteers from faith-based organizations and congregations, colleges and universities (with an emphasis on those with justice programs), civil rights and advocacy groups, and service organizations. Upon receipt of a volunteer application form, official police criminal record checks and personal reference checks will be made. This will be followed by a volunteer intake interview that inquires about suitability, motivations, previous experience, prior victimization, outside interests, personal boundaries, ability to work as part of a team, and their ability to commit to the time-frame.

COCOSA uses the following criteria stating that suitable applicants: (1) are stable in the community; (2) can demonstrate maturity; (3) possess healthy boundaries; (4) demonstrate balance in lifestyle and viewpoint; (5) are willing to participate in training; (6) are willing to undergo a criminal history check; (7) have adequately resolved any personal issues of victimization; and (8) are willing to commit to a one-year Circle lifetime.

Training will be provided to all volunteers. COCOSA volunteer training aims to cover the COSA program, sex offender behavior, Core Member needs, the needs/concerns of victims, restorative justice principles, the correctional system, volunteer safety issues, and specialized instruction for topic areas (e.g., substance abuse or vocational/education issues). Training is planned as 20-30 hours of initial training and ongoing thereafter.

Training session will be scheduled to be provided several times a year, but also as and when needed.

Phase 3: Forging the Circle

The COCOSA reference manual outlines Facilitator guidelines on how to implement the first meeting and then subsequent meetings. At least one volunteer meets in person with the core member every day of the week for the first few weeks. The first meeting is to make introductions and discuss the expectations of each of the Circle members, before distributing a draft covenant. A pro-forma covenant is included in the reference manual. It outlines the Core Members commitment to a successful return to the community, the volunteers' commitment to assist the Core Member in this endeavor, and the Circle's commitment to safety in the community. It sets out the rules on confidentiality and trust within the Circle.

The Core Member also agrees to comply with the legal requirements imposed on them. Behaviors and activities identified as specifically inappropriate for the Core Member can be included in the covenant if necessary. The reference guide also includes discussion of 'lapse behaviors' or 'red flags', such as non-attendance, avoidance, secret-keeping, or antisocial thinking patterns. In balanced contrast, healthy behaviors are also discussed, such as attendance, engagement, respectfulness, and increasing self-management skills.

Phase 4: Ongoing Circle support

Beyond the first few weeks, weekly meetings are scheduled and attended by the Core Member and Volunteers, with the Circle Coordinator attending once per month. Circle meetings begin with the volunteers discussing their prior week followed by the opportunity to focus on Core Member activities and concerns. The Circle Facilitator is encouraged to steer conversations towards accountability wherever possible.

If there is an emergency (e.g., potential breaches of parole/probation conditions, new offences, or if the safety of the Core Member or a member of the community is at risk) an emergency meeting will be arranged and the entire Circle will be invited to attend (including the Core Member). The Core Member will be confronted according to the understanding set out in the covenant and a positive plan for re-mediating the concerns will be formed. If court-imposed conditions have been breached these will be reported to the authorities by the Core Member with the Circle's support, or if the Core Member is unwilling, by the Circle. The Core Member can be excluded from meetings only in necessary instances where there are safety concerns on behalf of the volunteers.

The Circle Facilitator is required to complete and submit meeting report forms and circle accomplishment forms and arrange the schedules of contact between the Core Member and volunteers. Also, the Circle Facilitator is responsible for checking in regularly with the Program Director and the Core Member's Parole Agent. A monthly meeting report will be completed by the Facilitator that includes attendance, topics discussed, summary of discussions, goals, and concerns. After 6 months the Facilitator should initiate conversations/activities related to victim empathy.

Volunteer safety issues and boundary-setting are included in the core training. COCOSA make it clear in their RFPs that volunteers should at all times be protected from negative consequences of their work with a Circle. An Annual Volunteer Appreciation event (picnic, supper, ball game, banquet, etc.) is planned. Also, special events such as Volunteer birthdays, anniversary dates, and other life-events are recognized and celebrated (if appropriate).

Phase 5: Dissolution of the Circle

There are currently no policies or procedures to guide the dissolution process. After one year a review will be carried out to determine whether the Circle continues and what its future course should be. It is anticipated that healthy Circles will remain active for as long as is deemed appropriate by the Circle and the Project Coordinator. If the Core Member is re-incarcerated then the Circle will be encouraged to continue to provide support. If the period of incarceration is considered too long then the Circle is disbanded.

FINDINGS

Fidelity Score

Colorado COSA was awarded a fidelity score of 27%. Fidelity was assessed using a fidelity item measurement tool that examines 41 intended program elements across 10 fidelity categories, including management, model, operations, outcomes, staff, Core Members and volunteers. There were 100 items in total that could be endorsed. The fidelity score represents the percentage of these fidelity items that were observed in program reality.

There is no definitive consensus on what constitutes high program fidelity, but evidence suggests fidelity levels of 60% and greater (i.e., 60% match between program intent and program reality) are associated with strong outcomes (Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Latessa & Lowenkamp, 2006). Thus, for this evaluability assessment programs with an implementation score approaching or exceeding 60% are considered to be well-implemented.

Deviations from the intended model

The COCOSA model appears to deviate from the intended model in a number of ways. Firstly, selected Core Members have not completed the whole of their sentence and are in the community under a combination of COSA, and Parole or Probation supervision. The different referral and Circle types ('Probation' or 'Parole' Circles) also mean that 'supervision as usual' may differ between Core Members. This could have serious implications if any future multi-site evaluation were to include both 'fully-completed' and 'under supervision' offenders. This would represent a systematic difference in both the

relative community support and accountability environments into which each type of offender would reenter.

Secondly, there appears to be a degree of flexibility in the criteria for Core Member selection. COCOSA has indicated that it may consider Core Members that are high-need, but not necessarily high-risk. It was noted that the program is to be made available to high-need, but perhaps not necessarily high-risk offenders. Also, it was also noted that the selection criteria was not entirely consistent between the referring agencies and the program staff. This has implications for program integrity and would need to be addressed if the site were to be included in comprehensive evaluation.

Quality of data systems

It was not possible to assess data management because the project is still in development. However, COCOSA appears to be taking a proactive approach to data management and have recruited a Statistical Analyst from the Sex Offender Management Board to their Advisory Board. There remains some concern as to whether or not certain key evaluation variables held by the criminal justice authorities will be accessible by COCOSA. The Division of Probation Services note that a memorandum of understanding would need to be developed for any data to be made available to COCOSA, and that data movement would rely on Core Member consent.

Obstacles to evaluation

The key obstacle to evaluation is that the site is currently at very low capacity. This means that the site would not be able to either: (a) generate the numbers of participants (or controls) required to contribute to an evaluation; or (b) demonstrate a level of operational fidelity that would allow for the adequate control of program variables.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, COCOSA is currently operating at zero capacity. It is clear that the project is well-resourced, has a consistent model in place, and has learned valuable lessons from its first unsuccessful incarnation. COCOSA is in the process of developing comprehensive policies and procedures and developing their working relationships with criminal justice agencies.

The changes in legislation relating to the treatment and long-term incarceration of sex offenders in Colorado also appears to suggest that there will be an increasing number of suitable Core Members for the program in the near future. If this leads to a surplus of suitable Core Members compared to the available resources then this may also provide a setting in which we can effectively randomize those either receiving COSA or being placed on a waiting list.

It is concluded, however, that at this time Colorado COSA cannot be considered to be operating at a sufficient capacity that would allow it to positively contribute to rigorous evaluation.

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