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

SITE REPORT: VERMONT 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: Vermont Department of Corrections. 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.

Vermont COSA is managed by the Vermont Department of Corrections (DOC) from their offices in Williston, Vermont. As of June 2012, the Vermont DOC reported a total of 1,212 registered sex offenders, 55% of whom reside in the community on parole, probation, intermediary sanctions, or as part of a re-entry scheme. Vermont COSA (or VT COSA) was formed in 2005 using funds from a Serious Violent Offenders Reentry Initiative grant. The DOC facilitates around 50 Circles per year on current resources and funding.

Vermont COSA was awarded a fidelity score of 86%. VT COSA was found to deviate from the intended model in a number of ways. Firstly, VT COSA is managed centrally by the Vermont DOC, which has implications for COSA activity. Secondly, selected Core Members have not completed their sentence in full and are returning to the community under a combination of COSA and formal parole supervision. Thirdly, there appears to be some flexibility in the criteria for Core Member selection. The quality of data and data systems at VT COSA are excellent. The only obstacle to evaluation for VT COSA may be the potential sample size available. It is concluded that these methodological issues and obstacles can be resolved and that Vermont COSA can be considered equipped to contribute to rigorous experimental evaluation. Vermont COSA could be evaluated either as a single site or as part of a multi-site 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 offender behavior, offender management principles, the legal and criminal justice contexts.

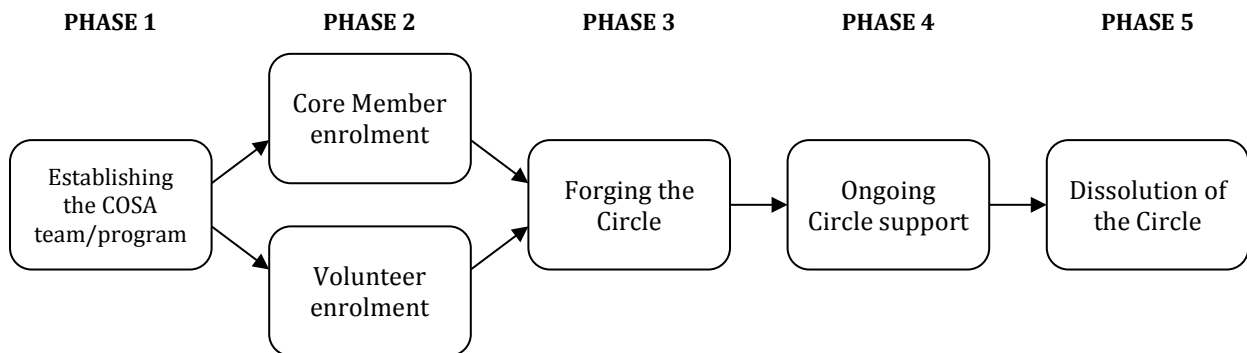
The intended model of COSA separates the elements of COSA into two components: (1) *people* - the various key players involved in the operation of COSA; and (2) *processes* - the operational procedures that take place from the conception of COSA to the dissolution of the first Circle. There are four 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 support; and

² Henceforth referred to as the 'CSC model'.

(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

Vermont COSA is managed by the Vermont Department of Corrections (DOC) from their offices in Williston, Vermont. The mission of the DOC is to work with communities to ensure safety by providing leadership in crime prevention, repairing harm, addressing the needs of victims, ensuring offender accountability, and managing offender risk³. As of June 2012, the Vermont DOC reported a total of 1,212 registered sex offenders, 55% of whom reside in the community on parole, probation, intermediary sanctions, or as part of a re-entry scheme (e.g., post-incarceration furloughs or Home Confinement)⁴. There are no civil commitment laws in Vermont and so all offenders, including sex offenders, are released back into the community.

It is Vermont state policy that principles of restorative justice be included in shaping criminal justice responses⁵ (28 V.S.A. § 2a). In the 1990's the Vermont DOC examined community attitudes towards restorative justice principles, leading to a shift from punitive to restorative philosophies within DOC practices. The Vermont DOC also secured funding to explore community support solutions for serious and violent offenders, which allowed relationships between the municipalities and local Community Justice Centers to be built and formalized. This bred a network of active community partners with a range of expertise - particularly working with sex offenders.

³ <http://www.doc.state.vt.us/about/vision/>

⁴ <http://www.doc.state.vt.us/about/reports/latest-facts-figures-adobe/view>

⁵ <http://www.leg.state.vt.us/statutes/fullsection.cfm?Title=28&Chapter=001&Section=00002a>

Sex offenders in Vermont are typically incarcerated for approximately 2 to 10 years, away from the communities from which they originate, and thus, they can lose much of their social support. To address this Vermont DOC successfully applied for funding through the Serious Violent Offenders Reentry Initiative (SVORI) to examine community justice initiatives. In 2003 the Vermont DOC invited Dr. Robin Wilson and Eileen Henderson, then the Restorative Justice Coordinator of the Mennonite Central Committee in Ontario, to train staff in the CSC COSA model (CSC, 2002; 2003).

Vermont COSA (or VT COSA) was formed in 2005 using funds from the SVORI grant. In the first 18 months VT COSA was able to form 20 Circles. After the SVORI funding was exhausted the number of Circles provided dropped to approximately 8. In 2010, the DOC successfully applied for a Second Chance Act grant and also leveraged Transitional Housing funding, allowing the DOC to re-build capacity.

Aims, goals, and mission

VT COSA is based on the CSC model (CSC, 2002; 2003), but adapted to meet the needs of DOC clients. VT COSA has four goals: (1) to improve community and victim safety; (2) to improve the coordination of support services and community connections for Core Members; (3) to establish and maintain clear expectations in regards to healthy and positive community behaviors; and (4) to repair the relationships between the Core Member and the community by facilitating restorative activities.

Current capacity

VT COSA is currently at capacity in terms of the number of CJs that can be maintained with the current funds. The DOC facilitates around 50 Circles per year on current resources and funding. If they were not to receive further Second Chance Act (SCA) funding, this annual output would halve to around 25 Circles per year. At the time of the site visit, over 70 Circles had been initiated overall.

IMPLEMENTATION

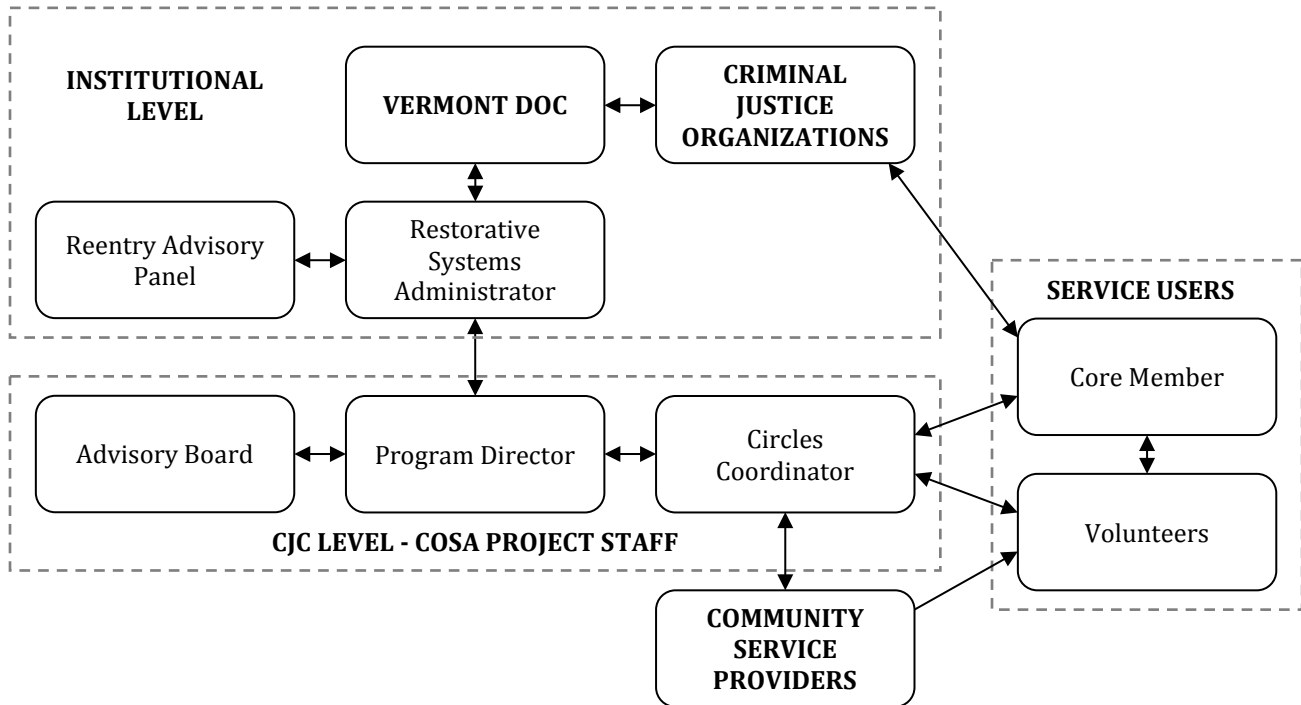
Phase 1: Establishing the COSA team and program

The Vermont COSA program is directed by the Vermont DOC through a Restorative Systems Administrator, who sub-contracts responsibility and resources for implementation to around 20 independent Community Justice Centers (CJCs) in various locations across the state (see Figure 2 for a schematic illustration of the management structure). The Vermont DOC's Restorative Systems Administrator is engaged in COSA activities for 50% of their salaried time. Each CJC has a Program Director, for whom typically around one-third to one-half of their time is assigned to COSA activity, who is responsible for implementation of COSA at each site and the reporting of data back to the Restorative Systems Administrator. The majority of CJs employs a full-time Circles Coordinator and also has part-time operational and administrative staff assigned to COSA. Other staff assigned to COSA activity at the DOC includes five DOC Volunteer Coordinators and the Vermont DOC Restorative and Community Justice Executive Director.

The VT COSA program is built on the relationships between State agencies (DOC, Parole and Probation) and the CJs. Each CJC develops as many Circles as their resources allow. All of the CJs have an Advisory Board. There are also DOC-administered Reentry Advisory Panels that makes decisions on Core Member selection and recruitment. These panels are made up of members from law enforcement, CJC Directors, community representatives, Parole and Probation, victim advocacy groups, and employment and housing groups. The CJs have working relationships with various community groups and

faith organizations. VT COSA also has links to victim advocacy groups and various stakeholder agencies through its Reentry Task Force.

Figure 2. The Vermont COSA management structure.



Phase 2a: Core Member enrolment

Referrals are made by Case Managers at case management reviews, which are scheduled 6-12 months before release. In rare instances a Parole Agent can recommend a potential Core Member already in the community, if they meet the remaining criteria and are motivated. Some CJs also take self-referrals from current inmates and family members of inmates, after review by the Probation and Parole department. Few potential Core Members are referred from mental health facilities. The Case Manager or Parole Agent has

the applicant sign a waiver of confidentiality in order to pass their details on to CJs. The Case Manager completes a case summary form for the applicant's Parole Agent. This summary is subsequently approved (or denied) by the Restorative Systems Administrator, based on assessment of transition plans, and Level of Service Inventory-Revised (LSI-R) and Static-99 risk assessment scores. If approved, and once the applicant is within 6-months of release, the information is passed to the regional CJC Director.

The CJC Director maintains a waiting list of applicants. The CJC Director and the Parole Agents prioritize the applicants before making recommendations to the DOC's Reentry Advisory Panel. This broad set of stakeholders meet on a monthly basis and review recommendations to decide which represent the most effective use of resources. If the Reentry Advisory Panel finds the applicant suitable their decision is reported back to the CJC. The CJC Director then schedules an interview with the applicant. If this interview is successful the CJC Director either encourages or discourages the applicant to formally apply. If encouraged to apply, the CJC Director completes a checklist of information required including DOC IDs, sentencing computation, affidavits for current and past offenses, prior assessments, etc.

The selection criteria for applicants suitable for COSA is: (1) on Conditional Reentry Status; (2) present moderate to high risk of either sexual or violent reoffending (Static-99) or present a moderate to high need for pro-social supports (LSI-R); and (3) within approximately one year of release. The DOC carries out assessments on the Core Member during incarceration, but the results of these are not available to the CJs due to HIPAA regulations. The CJs have stated their enthusiasm for carrying out their own assessments for Core Members. Priority will be given to potential Core Members who are treatment

compliant whilst incarcerated. CJs have also, albeit rarely, provided Circles for perpetrators of theft and those with offenses related to the distribution of drugs.

Upon acceptance of an application, a member of the DOC Victim Services team contacts the identified victims of the applicant to discuss the COSA program. If there are any concerns about that applicant returning to the community then the process can be halted. A second pre-release interview is conducted with the applicant to complete a Strengths and Needs Assessment, that includes housing and employment options, counseling requirements (including treatment, substance abuse, and mental health needs), and family resources. After this the CJC, the Case Manager, and the Parole Agent together construct a release plan.

On release, the CJC Director helps the Core Member create a realistic budget. Some CJs offer financial assistance in exchange for requiring Core Members to participate in voluntary work. For example, a number of Core Members have worked for maintenance teams for the municipality. The biggest challenge is often housing, and at least one CJC provides some Core Members with funding of up to \$3,000 to assist in covering security deposits and the first and last month's rent.

Phase 2b: Volunteer enrolment

Volunteers are recruited by the CJs, who seek a mix of genders, ethnicities, ages, and experience. Some CJs also encourage Core Members to identify a known trusted individual who can be encouraged to join the Circle (e.g., a former teacher). The DOC Volunteer Coordinators carry out criminal background checks via the FBI National Instant

Criminal Background Check System and check personal references for all applicants. Successful applicants receive State level clearance to volunteer on criminal justice programs.

An in-depth interview with the Director of the CJC and the Circle Coordinator follows, where suitability is assessed and applicants are asked about their background experience and their motivations for getting involved in COSA. The selection criteria specifies individuals who can create and maintain strong personal boundaries, who are stable and resilient, are able to accept the 'no secrets' policy, and are willing to commit to one year of COSA. All successful applicants are subsequently invited to attend Vermont DOC volunteer skills training. Training sessions are scheduled every other month and take 12 hours in total. A training manual is provided to volunteers that outlines the history of COSA, offender reentry, expectations and benefits for the Core Member, and guidelines on safety and personal boundaries. Core Member-specific training is provided by a Parole Agent. Waiting lists of trained volunteers are maintained by CJsCs. If there is a deficit of volunteers the Director of the CJC will initiate recruitment procedures.

Phase 3: Forging the Circle

Standard operating procedures, however, are left to the CJsCs to develop, with the assistance of the Restorative Systems Administrator. The Restorative Systems Administrator makes a minimum of quarterly visits to each site to assess implementation. The Circle is forged by the Circle Coordinator and comprises at least three volunteers per Core Member. In the first meeting the COSA Coordinator reads the covenant and has

everyone state their goals and expectations for the Circle. A covenant is developed that defines the obligations of the Core Member to their Circle and the responsibilities and behaviors that are expected of them. The Circle Coordinator attends all meetings and are there to facilitate the conversation. It is their responsibility to direct the meeting by guiding discussion rather than using a structured format. They ensure that the key points are being covered where necessary. Circle meetings are formally scheduled on a weekly basis and thus do not need Parole Agent permission to attend. Unscheduled activities (e.g., 1-to-1 meetings with volunteers) need be authorized by the Parole Agent. Attendance at Circle meetings by non-volunteers (e.g., family, partners, etc.) also need to be authorized by the Parole Agent.

CJCs are required have a Coordinator attending Circle meetings for the first year. Issues regarding appropriate and inappropriate behaviors and boundaries are discussed by the Circle in the early meetings. Volunteers and the Core Member also discuss their personal boundaries and state that these boundaries need to be respected. Trust and transparency are key features promoted in VT COSA, who take their 'no secrets' policy seriously. There can be no secrets held between the Core Member and individual volunteers. All sex offenders re-entering the community in Vermont are bounded by a series of mandated and special conditions of release, which they are required to carry on their person at all times. These are discussed in the first meetings and the CJC, Circles Coordinator, and volunteers are all provided with copies of this document. Circles are also expected to assist the Core Member in understanding and adhering to their conditions. Conditions of release are considered clear boundaries and violations of those boundaries are taken very seriously.

Phase 4: Ongoing Circle support

Ongoing Circle meetings involve all members of the Circle discussing their prior week. This develops into a focus on the Core Member discussing his/her week prior and any concerns or issues raised by the Core Member. The Circle works on critical thinking, self-awareness, and decision-making for the Core Member and how these may affect their behavior. Support for appropriate behavior and accountability for inappropriate behavior is at the forefront of conversations, with clear boundaries set by the Circle as to what constitutes appropriate behaviors both inside and outside of the Circle.

In some CJsCs volunteers occasionally meet without the Core Member before a session, but the Core Member is always informed of the content of these discussions. In the event that a Core Member violates their conditions of release, the Circles will encourage the Core Member to inform their Probation Officer. In one CJC, a protocol has been developed to more formally involve the Core Member's Circle if there is a violation of conditions of release and provide them with an opportunity to participate in the accountability process. Because the Core Member is under supervision, their Parole Agent will also have regular contact with the Core Member and every 3 months the Parole Agent meets with the Circle to discuss the Core Members' goals, finances, employment, housing, and so forth.

The Circle Coordinator takes basic notes and keeps track of the time that each volunteer has spent with the Core Member, including phone calls. CJsCs are also required to maintain records of Core Member and volunteer attendance at meetings. This information is reported back to the Restorative Systems Administrator. Core Member review meetings

are also carried out, whenever they are deemed necessary but typically every 6-8 weeks, where the Core Member's progress is discussed. These are attended by the Circle, the Core Member's Parole Agent, the landlord, employers, representatives from the Department of Labor, and the Core Members family.

In terms of ongoing support for volunteers, most CJs host annual volunteer appreciation events. There is also ongoing communication between CJs about additional training opportunities for volunteers, including the opportunity to attend training and orientation to become a certified DOC volunteer. The DOC has an appointed Volunteer Supervisor and 5 Volunteer Coordinators, supervised by the Restorative Systems Administrator, who provide training and support to volunteers across DOC programs. Many volunteers are recycled onto new Circles when their current Circle is completed.

Phase 5: Dissolution of the Circle

Circles can be dissolved if: (a) the Core Member is re-incarcerated; (b) the Core Member is deemed to not be adequately invested in the COSA process; (c) the Circles reach the 1 year duration; or (d) the Core Member becomes incapacitated (e.g., illness). Circle outcomes are kept on file in hard-copy form. No formal report of outcomes is provided to the Parole Agent aside from verbal reports where there is a concern or violation. Since the Core Member is supervised closely by the Parole Agent and in many cases is required to wear a Global Positioning System ankle bracelet then the Parole Agent rather than the Circle may be the first to be aware of new offending.

After one year the Restorative Systems Administrator meets with the CJC Director to assess the need for continued support and extensions are approved on a case-by-case basis. Continued support beyond one year often involves less frequent meetings. The option to continue a Circle while a Core Member is incarcerated, to be restored on subsequent release, is possible if considered appropriate.

FINDINGS

Fidelity score

Vermont COSA was awarded a fidelity score of 86%. 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

VT COSA deviates from the intended model in a number of ways. Firstly, VT COSA is managed centrally by the Vermont DOC, which has implications for COSA activity. For example, a number of Circle activities other than the scheduled meetings require Parole Agent approval. Also Core Member selection requires DOC approval, through the Reentry Advisory Panel. This could have implications for the philosophy of community-driven support and accountability if the Vermont DOC has such clear responsibility for various

elements of the process, especially if any evaluative activity were to include multiple-sites with varying institutional structures.

Secondly, selected Core Members have not completed their sentence in full and are returning to the community under a combination of COSA and formal parole supervision. As above, this could make it difficult for evaluators to isolate and differentiate the relative effects of COSA from the effect of 'supervision as usual'. Furthermore, this issue would have implications should a future evaluation include multiple-sites that operated Circles for both 'fully-completed' and 'under supervision' offenders, as it could represent a systematic divergence in the combination of criminal justice and community support provided to each type of Core Member. This would, however, not hinder COSA Vermont from being evaluated as a single site.

Thirdly, there appears to be some flexibility in the criteria for Core Member selection. It was noted that the program can be made available to high-need, but not necessarily high-risk offenders. Some CJsCs have provided Circles for non-sex offenders for offenses such as theft and distribution of drugs. Such flexibility has implications for program integrity and would need to be addressed if the site were to be recommended for evaluation.

Quality of data systems

The quality of data and data systems at VT COSA are excellent. The only evident data issue is that some data are held in hard-copy formats and thus may be laborious to locate and collect. The centralization of COSA in a government department means staff members

are already versed in data management. The requirement to report data in a timely and comprehensive manner placed on VT COSA by funding agencies means that those data requirements are also expected of CJs. This allows the CJs to build data management into policies and procedures proactively. Any CJs funded through the SCA are required to supply data for standardized Federal performance measures. Monthly reports are provided to the DOC from the CJs. These reports include numbers of active Circles, Circles opening and closing dates, Core Member demographics, and service provision. Aggregate data from each CJC is compiled by the Vermont DOC and reported to the Bureau of Justice Assistance for Second Chance Act grantees, using metrics were developed by the Department of Justice. As reports need to be authorized for SCA and Transitional Housing grant funding, volunteer time in Circle meetings, one-on-one meetings, training, travel, etc, are all translated into dollar costs to be reported quarterly and 6-monthly to Bureau of Justice Assistance/National Institute of Justice.

The DOC maintains a quarterly spreadsheet that includes information about each Core Member, their offense, Circle start and end dates, reasons for closure, and current capacity. The CJs have been asked to retrospectively provide this information for any SCA-funded Circles. Information regarding outcomes such as housing or education is also collected and reported to the Parole Agent. The Parole Agent too maintains an updated chart on clients over a year, including those with Circles. The Vermont DOC also has access to prior assessment and treatment history information for all Core Members during their time incarcerated, including supervision and treatment history, but these are not available to the CJs due to HIPAA regulations. CJs are also contractually obliged to cooperate in

any and related research efforts or evaluative activity by collecting and providing individual-level participation and service data during all years of the project.

Obstacles to evaluation

The only obstacle to evaluation for VT COSA may be the potential sample size available. Vermont is one of the least-populated states in the U.S. and the number of state registered sex offenders is small compared to more densely-populated states, at approximately 1,000. Within that population the number of COSA-eligible sex offenders is also likely to be small. If experimental methods were to be recommended for evaluation then the demand for potential Core Members would be even greater in order to construct a control sample. If VT-COSA was able to build only a small sample of participants, combined with low rates of recidivism that would be expected in either the COSA and non-COSA groups, any evaluation would only be capable of detecting relatively large treatment effects, missing smaller effects, and thus potentially underestimating the value of COSA.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, both program fidelity and data management at Vermont COSA are excellent and the program is well-resourced and appears to have longevity. There are, however, potential obstacles to successful evaluation. Because Core Members are provided with COSA in addition to formal community supervision it may be difficult to isolate the effect of COSA from the overall supervisory experience of Core Members. Given U.S. legislation for sex offenders making it increasingly less likely for sex offenders to be released into the community without any formal supervision, this issue is unlikely to be a factor for any U.S.-based COSA program.

A second issue is the size of the population from which eligible Core Members could be drawn is relatively small. This would not, however, rule out the possibility of rigorous evaluation at the site, including the use of a randomized controlled trial. As St. Pierre (2004) noted, although studies based on large sample sizes yield the greater statistical power, it may be possible for smaller sample sizes to increase the precision of impact assessments in other ways, such as by controlling more carefully differences in baseline characteristics of participants that are related to the outcome. Given the excellent data management demonstrated by VT-COSA it may be possible to control variables to such an extent that allows for the required levels of statistical precision.

It is concluded that these methodological obstacles can be resolved and that Vermont COSA can be considered equipped to contribute to rigorous experimental evaluation. Vermont COSA could be evaluated either as a single site or as part of a multi-site evaluation. It is recommended that Vermont COSA be included in any evaluative activity relating to the effectiveness of COSA in the United States.

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