



NYC Probation on Track

For many years, the New York City Department of Probation (NYCDOP) measured success using the “contact model” of probation. Under this model, a success would occur when the offender “contacted” his or her probation officer the required number of times during a specified period.

“If the contact numbers were met, everybody was happy,” says Frank Domurad, NYCDOP director of Staff and Organizational Development. “The only problem was we had no idea what was happening in those contacts or if they had any impact on offender behavior. We counted the contacts but had no way to measure the outcome. We saw that we were not producing any real, tangible results that were important to anybody except ourselves.”

“In other words,” says Jerrold Alpern, assistant commissioner of the agency’s Manhattan Adult Services, “NYCDOP had plenty of data, but no real knowledge of how its programs were affecting probationers or the community.”

In 1992, however, NYCDOP, with the support of city officials and funding from the local Office of Management and Budget, set out to change how it managed its probation services. The result is the Adult Supervision Restructuring (ASR), a program designed to meet the needs of various levels of nonviolent and violence-prone probationers through the use of a redesigned classification system and technology.

One of the first things the department did was enlist the help of outside experts to develop a probationer classification instrument that would better predict violent rearrests. The department’s previous instrument focused simply on general recidivism. Now, offenders deemed to be at high risk for violent re-offense are placed in the Enforcement Track, where cognitive-behavioral methods are used both in individual case management and in group settings. Probationers whose attitudes and conduct improve can then move to a relapse prevention unit to receive supervision and support.

The Special Conditions Track is for probationers not considered to be violence prone, but rather who received court-ordered special conditions. This track is also for those deemed violence prone who have completed

relapse prevention but have not completed court-ordered special conditions.

The use of technology is most apparent in the Reporting Track—through the use of automated reporting kiosks. The Reporting Track is designed for probationers who present minimal risk for violent recidivism along with violence-prone offenders who have graduated from the Enforcement Track. After an initial face-to-face meeting with a probation officer, the probationer in the Reporting Track maintains contact with the agency through the kiosks.

“One thing we recognized was that if we wanted to do cognitive-behavior group interventions, we couldn’t have groups of 150 and talk about anything meaningful in

A FEW POINTERS

For the New York City Department of Probation (NYCDOP), the development of its Adult Supervision Restructuring (ASR) program was not an overnight task, nor was it an easy one. Technology aside, agency administrators needed to involve personnel. They asked staff to detail what did not work in the old system and create a list of requirements for a new one. In addition, clerks, supervisors, managers, and probation officers were asked to provide feedback on pilot programs, a process that continues today.

Agency administrators also needed to work with the probation officers’ union. An agreement was struck under which money saved as a result of using new technologies was returned to union members in the form of productivity bonuses. Thus far, ASR has saved about \$3.5 million each year, 30 percent of which has been returned as bonuses.

Another notable change has been staff attitude and behavior—going from an agency of “bean counters” to a team of workers focused on behavioral change,

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terms of behavior change,” Domurad says. “We wanted to free up our human resources, and [automated reporting] kiosks were an emerging technology at that time.”

The ASR program, Domurad says, currently uses 14 kiosks among 5 probation offices. This has freed officers to focus on higher risk clients as well as freed probationers from the tedium of regular visits with their probation officers. “Now,” he says, “they report to a kiosk, which resembles an ATM, to check in and update their records—a process that takes less than 3 minutes.”

The check-in at the kiosk starts with a “talking head” video that narrates the text appearing on screen. The probationer indicates what language he or she uses and then enters an identification number. Hand geometry and photography are used for verification. Once user identity is verified, the probationer is asked for updated contact and employment information as well as whether he or she has been arrested since the last check-in. “When someone comes to the kiosk and gets the arrest question and answers it falsely, there is an immediate reaction on our part. The computer sends a silent signal to the attendant sitting nearby, who notifies a probation officer. We admonish [the client] and address the underlying causes of the arrest,” Domurad says.

According to Domurad, the foundation for ASR is a new database designed to process an avalanche of information. The prior system was little more than papers filled with “pedigree” data on each probationer. With the new system, officers can now use more than 400 data fields. Data can be accessed in a number of ways and used to tailor and prioritize each probationer’s case.

“Information is just a bunch of data,” Domurad notes. “We needed to change it into knowledge, which is information that is useful to produce something. This new database produces knowledge. The probation officers can open up a case file and get a lot of information that will allow them to work on behavioral changes. It saves them time and provides them with the things they need to prevent relapse and determine whether the offender is succeeding or not.”

Although the jury is still out on whether the ASR program will lower recidivism rates, some things have become apparent already:

- Before ASR, low- and high-risk cases were usually mixed together in each caseload, sometimes with an offender-to-officer ratio of more than 200 to 1. Now, low-risk cases are isolated, and with the aid of kiosks and other changes, probationers are supervised effectively, even with a ratio of 500 to 1. This enables the agency to supervise the high-risk cases at ratios as low as 35 to 1.

A Few Pointers (continued)

says Frank Domurad, NYCDOP director of Staff and Organizational Development. “Our question is, ‘Are we introducing what will work in terms of changing offender behavior?’ ”

As part of the restructuring process, the agency redistributed resources to better meet the needs of high-risk offenders. In addition, the agency started doing a better job of ferreting out high-risk offenders, using the newly designed risk prediction instrument. NYCDOP also created a program using education and support to change probationers’ behaviors. Termed “cognitive behavioral interventions,” these classes teach problem solving, anger management, decisionmaking, and thinking skills.

So far, probation officers like the ASR program, and as a result have an increased sense of teamwork and involvement with their clients’ progress. The system has reduced the agency’s staff attrition rate from 25 to 10 percent.

One of the biggest challenges in the restructuring, however, was taking an information systems application built by consultants and adapting it. “As we went through the process, we were surprised that the technology was never actually capable of supporting the number of users we ultimately had in mind,” notes William Dorney, NYCDOP assistant commissioner for Management Information Services. “My advice is that if you buy something off the shelf, you’d better be happy with all the features, because it isn’t easy to change. You also need to keep in mind that this is a long process. I thought it would take 1 to 2 years. Five years later, we’re still here and starting on another technology change of going from Windows® NT client/server application to a web-based application.”

Jerrold Alpern, assistant commissioner of the agency’s Manhattan Adult Services, agrees with Dorney’s characterization of the technology implementation process, calling it “an unending story.” “The more users you add,” Alpern says, “the more deeply involved you are in making the technology serve your needs, and the more changes you have to implement to keep going. And the logistics—every time you add users, you have to train them. Then you have to have refresher training every time the system becomes more sophisticated. We also have a whole list of items we need to prioritize in terms of future development. That list of to-do items is always much bigger than the time available to do them in, or than the budget allows. But I’m glad of that. It means the system is serving our needs. If we didn’t have a whole lot of items to consider, it would mean the system was no longer responding.”

- Each kiosk logs about 1,000 visits per month, which has reduced failure-to-report rates from 50 percent per month to 10 to 15 percent per month.

“The kiosk system allowed us to free up our resources,” Alpern says. “It lets us handle large numbers of probationers efficiently and cheaply. It lets us respond immediately to information and increases probationer accountability.”

Alpern, Domurad, and William Dorney, NYCDOP assistant commissioner for Management Information Services, all agree that technology was the single most important factor in enabling NYCDOP to restructure its operation.

“Technology enabled us to envision what we wanted,” Alpern says. “It allowed us to envision things we never would have been able to think about before.” The National Institute of Justice (NIJ) was important to the restructuring process, Domurad adds. Its conferences, workshops, and seminars provided NYCDOP officials with information about emerging technology and how it could be used in the realm of corrections.

In addition, NIJ’s National Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Center (NLECTC)–Rocky Mountain provided technical assistance by providing information about biometric systems and other technologies. “Prior to our involvement with NLECTC–Rocky Mountain, if we had a question about a type of technology, we had to go to a variety of sources. About midway in the process, we got involved with the [NLECTC–Rocky Mountain] office. Having that one place to go for information on a whole variety of criminal justice issues made our jobs a whole lot easier,” Alpern says.

NIJ and NLECTC are still involved with NYCDOP, as is the National Institute of Corrections’ Training Academy, which has provided leadership training to the agency for

the past 3 years. NYCDOP eventually wants to integrate its database with the relevant criminal justice agencies in its area. Some of the data already are available to the New York City Police Department.

NYCDOP also is implementing a pilot project in Brooklyn and Staten Island called the Neighborhood Shield Program. The agency’s goal is to increase its presence and participation in the community and to change what Alpern calls “fortress probation,” where probation officers stay in the office and wait for their clients to report in. The Neighborhood Shield Program stations these officers in storefronts, working alongside police officers “to address the fact that public safety is our main priority,” Alpern says. “To do that, we have to work with the other agencies in the county, like the board of education, housing projects, and the courts. If the community sees us as a real presence, one where we can do some good, our services become more important and more effective.”

For more information concerning the New York City Department of Probation’s Adult Supervision Restructuring program, contact Joe Russo at the National Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Center–Rocky Mountain, 800–416–8086. Or, log on to www.ci.nyc.ny.us/html/prob/html/asr.html.



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