

A Case Study:

Washington State Department of Corrections Implements the STRONG

In 2008, the Washington State Department of Corrections (DOC) deemed it necessary to implement an improved adult assessment and supervision planning system. This new system would include a new Static Risk Assessment, an Offender Needs Assessment, and an assessment-driven offender supervision plan¹.

The purpose of this new system was to: (1) deliver more predictive assessment tools and improved classification of adult offenders; (2) increase accuracy in identifying which incarcerated offenders are awarded early release; and (3) increase staff and offender efficacy through the use of organized, efficient and collaborative supervision plans which could be measured for specific outcomes.

The Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP) developed the tools and did the validation². Assessments.com (ADC) built the three modules into its enterprise software application and integrated it with the DOC system, the Offender Management Network Information (OMNI).

Static Risk Assessment. There are two components to the assessment process. The first is a 26-item Static Risk Assessment, focused entirely on static factors and used solely to classify offenders into the categories:

Low Risk (Low)

High-Risk Property (HNV)

High-Risk Violent (HRV)

Moderate Risk (MOD)

High-Risk Drug (HNV)

This tool measures certain key characteristics as predictors of recidivism: demographics, juvenile convictions, prior commitments, adult felony convictions, adult misdemeanor convictions, and adult sentence violations resulting in confinement. This brief screening instrument serves as a “triage” tool to ensure, in keeping with “The Risk Principle” (Dr. Andrews, Dr. Bonta, 1994 *Psychology of Criminal Conduct*), that treatment (and limited public resources) are devoted to the highest risk offenders.

The **Offender Needs Assessment.** Once the classification has been made, then the highest risk offenders receive the Offenders Needs Assessment. Each of the individuals assessed will have unique risk and protective factors that need to be identified and taken into account when staff begins to plan for offender change. It is based upon a broad social learning theory of criminal conduct supported by evidence-based practices and professional expertise. It includes 55 items which gathers information related to offender characteristics, circumstances and attitudes.

¹ In Washington, this was implemented as the Offender Supervision Plan System (OSPS). Assessments.com now markets the system as the STRONG - the Static Risk and Offender Needs Guide.

² Robert Barnoski and Elizabeth K. Drake. (2007). Washington’s Offender Accountability Act: Department of Corrections’ Static Risk Assessment. Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy.

Offender Supervision Guide. The "Need Principle" states interventions should target the dynamic risk factors related to the criminal behavior. The Offenders Needs Assessment was developed to identify, for each offender, the dynamic risk/need factors to be targeted for interventions. It was also developed to help enable staff to understand how each offender could change in order to stay out of the criminal justice system and develop a pro-social law abiding lifestyle.

The screenshot shows a web browser window displaying an Offender Needs Assessment report. The report is titled "Offender Needs Assessment completed by Luann Kawata on 3/31/2008" and indicates a "Risk Level Classification: LOW".

| Need | | | Domain <i>Click Domain Name to Select</i> | Protective | | |
|------------|----------|------|--|------------|----------|------|
| Low | Moderate | High | | Low | Moderate | High |
| ██████████ | | | SEXUAL DEVIANCY | | | |
| ██████████ | | | COPING SKILLS | | | |
| ██████████ | | | COMMUNITY EMPLOYMENT | █ | | |
| ██████████ | | | ATTITUDES / BEHAVIORS | ██████████ | | |
| ██████████ | | | EDUCATION | ██████████ | | |
| ██████████ | | | FRIENDS | ██████████ | | |
| ██████████ | | | RESIDENTIAL | ██████████ | | |
| ██████████ | | | MENTAL HEALTH | ██████████ | | |
| | | | FAMILY | | | |
| | | | AGGRESSION | ██████████ | | |
| | | | ALCOHOL / DRUG USE | ██████████ | | |

Below the table, there is a section titled "Comply with all In Effect Conditions" with the following entries:

- Effective Date: 3/31/2008 End Date: Upon release, report to your CCO and thereafter make a correct report as directed
- Effective Date: 3/25/2008 End Date: Home Visit
- Effective Date: 3/31/2008 End Date: Obey all municipal, County, State, Tribal, and Federal laws

Buttons at the bottom include "Submit For Approval", "OMNI Conditions", and "OMNI Chronos".

Advantages.

- The Static Risk Assessment provides classifications of offenders that are objective, not subjective; are based upon validated, statistical research and conviction analysis, not judgment or personal bias; and thus, provide greater reliability and predictability.
- The Offender Needs Assessment provides a consistent method of identifying criminogenic needs (dynamic risks) and protective factors for the foundation of supervision and re-entry planning.
- The Offender Needs Guide is simpler and more user friendly

How was it implemented in Washington State?

WA DOC has a combined daily population of community supervision and institutions of about 50,000. Everyone is administered the Static Risk Assessment and the Offender Needs Assessment. In Only Community Supervision, offenders also receive a Supervision (Case) Plan.

Has WA DOC developed a different set of supervision plans for low, moderate and high-risk offenders? Yes, there is an auto-generated plan for low-risk offenders and a non-auto generated plan for all other offenders. There is the capability to override the default and add conditions/interventions.

Are offender supervision plans being developed for both incarcerated offenders and those on community supervision? Case plans are being developed only for those offenders assigned to Community Supervision. Incarcerated offenders have a "custody plan" that is unrelated to the assessment.

How are conditions (interventions) included in the offender supervision plan? These are pre-loaded into the software, although the users have the ability to customized or add new conditions. There has been no research to determine if these work (i.e. not evidenced-based), but many are legislatively mandated or department policy.

Is there any evidence that the Static Risk Assessment provides a greater defense ability argument for the department in legal challenges? As of late 2008, DOC was in its first lawsuit over using the results of the Static Risk Assessment and both the Department and AG's office were confident about the disposition. The issue related to denial of early release based on the Department's new policy only to offer to offenders (Community Supervision or Institution), who score MOD or LOW a 50% reduction in incarceration or supervision – early release.

What have been the key advantages from the staff perspective of the implementation of this new system? The new tools are interdependent, objective, user-friendly, and do not require narratives. Staff report that they respect the validity

of the tool and have been able to "sell" offenders that the case plan is driven by a research-based, objective instrument. This helps create a more positive and engaged relationship between them.

The officers respect the court's authority, but they appreciate that the tool drives the case plan and not the court. Before, they were doing various assessments that did not relate to the case plan. Now, even though there is more work on the front end, (entering criminal history, conducting the assessment interviews, etc.), the case plan is far less time-consuming than before, and more importantly, is substantially more meaningful.

Some staff are beginning to use phrases with offenders like "We need to do or plan;", and management is seeing these officers getting far better results. Officers are being trained to say things like "you are on supervision for a year and it can be the toughest and most horrible year of your life – or, we can work together and" It is a real shift in philosophy for the staff.

The biggest advantage, according to some staff is a tremendous improvement in their sense of security. DOC personnel are civilly liable and thus, open for personal lawsuits. Officers who had concerns about not being able to successfully defend their supervision/case plan decisions now know they are working with a validated tool with defensible objectivity, which gives them tremendous comfort. This protection or decreased liability can be helpful in terms of enhanced job security in the event of negative headlines arising from criminal misbehavior by an offender, for example on early release,

What have been the key advantages from the management's perspective? Control. Management (and staff) feels like there is more continuity and consistency in the assessment and supervision planning process. Decisions are easier to make, and make more sense.

Has WA Doc used the Offender Needs Guide results to make application for funding for particular programs based on evidenced needs? It is still too early; not enough data has been collected. However, management feels a new

confidence in its ability to answer to the legislature with facts and figures in a more timely fashion in justifying funding requests, and plans on using data from the first nine months of implementation as a basis to begin writing requests for additional funding.

What are the most valuable reports you get from the new system? What outcomes do you measure? Management is extremely happy with the reports, and indicates that this has been the best "hook" that has motivated staff and has them "buying in" to the entire implementation and process.

One of the best examples of these reports is the Comparative Report. In the past, officers wondered if they were making progress; and if so, they had a very difficult time convincing and or documenting such progress. Now, they can show through the re-assessment process where there have been successes, which is very powerful. Similarly, if progress is not being made, that is also very important for both the officer and the offender to know, and for both of them to address together.

The Data Management Unit within WA DOC feels the demographic and QA reporting capabilities are very powerful, and appreciates the quick and comprehensive responses they will be able to make to requests, and in particular to the Governor's office when questioned about the state's criminal population.

Line staff are primarily measuring supervision impacts (whether or not high need domains are decreasing and protective domains are increasing), and management is measuring all different variables (age, gender, types of offenses, type of needs, mental health issues, where resources may be needed, etc).

Has the new system produced reduced case loads? Not yet, but officers are preparing for services to be redirected. The department did not go into the process thinking of case load reduction as the primary purpose, but thought instead that this new assessment system would give the work they have to do more meaning.

However, other jurisdictions, depending on their laws, processes, history, etc., could very well experience reduced caseloads based on a refocusing resources on the higher-risk offenders

Has WA DOC developed new business rules to accommodate the new way of doing business? Yes, and ADC has copies available upon request.

Is the new system creating better/faster/more effective case plans? Better: Yes; Faster: Yes; More effective: Absolutely.

What specific steps is DOC taking to encourage quality assurance and fidelity to EBP? DOC has identified and trained SMEs (Subject Matter Experts), scattered through out the department, currently observing interviews and reviewing completed assessments. Although QA is the responsibility of the supervisor/manager, when they find an office who is really struggling with the concepts, they bring in an SME for peer support and training.

Are you noticing an increase in objectivity? This has been, for everyone, the selling point, and a real morale booster for many who see their role as a probation officer as more than simply attempting to control the client. Management values the objectivity because clients are being treated and assessed more consistently.

Are staff spending more time with the offenders? This is unknown at this time, as cases are still in the process of being converted. It is anticipated that staff will be allocated more time to meet with the offender, which is a positive. Interaction and rapport with offenders is significant to successful supervision.

Is there improved job satisfaction as a result of the new system? Over all, yes. There is a general feeling within the department that the new system is an improvement. Certainly, it is simpler and more user-friendly than the old legacy system. While it is anticipated that user satisfaction will increase the new system introduced a significant cultural change in how officers classify and treat offenders. Managing this change will be a continuing challenge for the department.