

## **Position Paper: Overcoming Systemic Barriers to Evidence-Based Practices Among Community-Based Programming in Corrections and Increasing Access to Such Programming (December, 2015)**

There has been pressure in recent years for rehabilitative programs in corrections to be “evidence-based” to ensure effective programs that make responsible use of funding.

The National Network of Prison Nonprofits (NC4RSO) looked at the understanding of - application of - evidence-based practices relating to community-based programming. It became clear that there are broad disparities in various circles (government, non-government entities, community programming, etc.) regarding knowledge about and understanding of evidence-based programming. Further, there is a need to address various systemic challenges that prevent further application of evidence-based concepts among community-based programs. There are also related challenges that prevent increased access to community-based programs. We look here at these challenges and offer solutions that require participation of all stakeholders: community-based programs, advocacy organizations, funding bodies, and all levels of the correctional system.

### **What is Evidence-Based Programming?**

The National Institute of Corrections has this to say about evidence-based programming:

“Evidence-based practice (EBP) is the objective, balanced, and responsible use of current research and the best available data to guide policy and practice decisions, such that outcomes for consumers are improved. Used originally in the health care and social science fields, evidence-based practice focuses on approaches demonstrated to be effective through empirical research rather than through anecdote or professional experience alone. An evidence-based approach involves an ongoing, critical review of research literature to determine what information is credible, and what policies and practices would be most effective given the best available evidence. It also involves rigorous quality assurance and evaluation to ensure that evidence-based practices are replicated with fidelity, and that new practices are evaluated to determine their effectiveness. In contrast [to the terms "best practices" and "what works," evidence-based practice implies that 1) there is a definable outcome(s); 2) it is measurable; and 3) it is defined according to practical realities (recidivism, victim satisfaction, etc.). Thus, while these three terms are often used interchangeably, EBP is more appropriate for outcome-focused human service disciplines. (Source: Crime and Justice Institute at Community Resources for Justice (2009). Implementing Evidence-Based Policy and Practice in Community Corrections, 2nd ed. Washington, DC: National Institute of Corrections.) (source: <http://nicic.gov/library/package/ebppackage> ).

The National Institute of Corrections publishes and/or makes reference to “evidence-based” research on topical areas such as:

- Evidence-Based Programs and Special Populations
- Evidence-Based Programs in a Variety of Criminal Justice Settings
- Eight Principles of Effective Intervention
- Measure Relevant Processes and Practices
- At least one document references evidence-based programming for community and/or faith-based programming. See: <file:///C:/Documents%20and%20Settings/Administrator/ADMIN-9ZNKPHQ0I/My%20Documents/Downloads/IJCSV2A22-Duwe.pdf>

Source: <http://nicic.gov/library/package/ebppackage>

NOTE: This position paper about community-based programming occurs within recognition of three broad types of correctional programming: 1) programs run by correctional agencies/institutions, 2) programming delivered by professionals on contract with the correctional system (psychiatrists, etc), and 3) community-based programming (delivered by nonprofits, faith-based groups, and informal groups of local residents).

**Our Statement: In order for a broader base of community-based programming to demonstrate effectiveness via evidence-based principles and for there to be greater access to community programming, certain supports, resources, and strategies must be improved upon, thereby reducing certain barriers that currently exist. These barriers - and proposed solutions - include:**

- 1) **Programs need to demonstrate internally that they “work as intended” as a stand-alone program.** There are various evaluation and assessment resources available to community-based programs in corrections. Two examples include *National Network of Prison Nonprofit’s* assessment for member organizations (see: [http://www.nc4rso.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=102&Itemid=568](http://www.nc4rso.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=102&Itemid=568) ) and Vera Institute of Justice’s *Measuring Success: A Guide to Becoming an Evidence-Based Practice*. (see: <http://www.vera.org/pubs/measuring-success-guide-becoming-an-evidence-based-practice> ). *However, these resources are underutilized.* Community-based programs, particularly smaller and/or newer ones, are often unaware of these resources. Organizations that are aware of such mechanisms often lack the financial resources, staffing capacity, knowledge sophistication, and/or time resources necessary to make use of them.

**Solutions:**

**A) National campaign to educate community programs about the existence and value of assessment resources. Public and/or privately funded initiatives could include:**

- Distribute informational mailings to community-based programs on a national basis.
- Place informational posters throughout federal and state correctional institutions where community-based programs would see such posters when delivering programming (i.e., placed in entry ways or rooms where programming is delivered).
- Informational statements throughout grants.gov about the value and availability of assessments. Inform prospective grant applicants that completion of an assessment resource (and reporting on the results thereof) will result in grant applicants being given higher priority over applicant organizations who don’t complete such an assessment.

**B) Make public and/or private grant funding broadly available to individual community groups to overcome the financial, staffing, and/or time burden preventing groups from using these assessment tools.** Grants could be allocated to reduce internal payroll costs associated with paid staff participating in such assessments, pay to bring in outsiders – when needed - to assist in conducting such assessments, and/or act as an incentive to budget the time needed to conduct assessments. As an additional incentive, this funding could come with a reminder that completing such assessments make it easier to pursue other grant funding (i.e., they would be better able to demonstrate their program value when applying for other funding).

**2) Program Appropriateness for Participants.** The whole concept of evidence-based programming includes the basic concept of showing that programs work as intended. To that end, individual institutions need to identify appropriateness of individual programs for the demographic groups in their institutions as well as for individual participants. Aside from whether an individual program has been evaluated on whether it has the capacity to achieve useful and intended outcomes, determining whether a specific program is appropriate for specific institutions and individuals – and whether the program is available to people who would benefit from it – often fails to occur.

A never-ending list of anecdotal variables result in programs not being matched up in correctional institutions with people who can appropriately benefit from these programs. *On an individual level, these anecdotal variables are just that: anecdotal. Collectively, these anecdotes point to a systemic structure that too often overlooks system barriers preventing support for effective inmate participation in community programming.* At times, this lack of institutional structural support is an unintentional result of correctional facilities not being designed around the goal of participation in appropriate programming. Overcoming such barriers can be achieved by:

**A) Making appropriate programs available.** *Program offered in individual institutions and/or as a transitional re-entry programs need to match the needs of inmates at that institution, while individual enrollees need to be people (apples) who can benefit from the programs (oranges).*

Some programs have clear, broad application at many or most correctional institutions: Examples include GED programs, 12-step groups for alcoholism and addiction, workshops intended to improve communication skills (strategies for “non-violent communication,” etc.), mentoring programs, and the option of participating in religious services. In other cases, case-by-case thought needs to be given as to program appropriateness at individual institutions.

**B) Program participants need to be supported in their program participation from throughout the correctional system (i.e., “collective buy-in”). For example:**

- **Institution staff need to be broadly aware of community programming and support the programs that come into their institutions.** Without this, there is room in individual institutions for confusion, misunderstanding, lack of “buy-in” from institution staff, and even sabotage regarding programs. **Solutions:**

*A) Flyers, in-house meetings, and informal communication mechanisms to make institution staff aware of the value and content of community programming.*

*B) Foster a culture of supporting community programs among institution staff.* At times, institutional cultures are akin to institutional hierarchy structures where the institution is valued while community programs are not.

*C) Differences in how correctional institutions function (a hierarchal structure focusing on safety, protocols, and government policy) and how community-based programs function (often, a nurturing and/or community-reintegration focus) can and does result in culture clashes – sometimes involving conflict or confusion - between institution staff and the staff & volunteers who bring in community programs. This doesn't always happen, but it happens too often. A concerted front-line effort to consciously acknowledge and overcome these “culture clashes” can result in better coordination and collaboration between institution staff and community program providers. Information sheets could be developed and widely distributed – nationally - describing the cultural styles of institutions and community programs with explanations as to how and why each culture exists and offering insights into the value provided by both institution staff and community program providers.*

- **Inmates need reasonable, accessible accommodation to participate in programming.**  
*Correctional institutions, at their very core, are governmental institutions organized around specific policies and protocols with a functional safety purpose. While this is a defining aspect of correctional facilities, this produces a culture of rigidity that doesn't always support a culture of assessing how best to accommodate the inmate participation in rehabilitative programming. Exploration needs to occur on how to address this. NOTE: Such support does sometimes already occur, such as:*
  - A) One institution had a college courses brought in for inmates. At one point, an inmate got “stuck” on her algebra or geometry homework. Correctional officers assisted her by going online at home – when they were off shift – to look up mathematical equations and explanations to help her learn the concept in that week’s math lesson.
  - B) At another institution, control room staff would routinely tell incoming volunteers about “problems of the week” among inmates so that community programs could address emergent problems (i.e., “there’s been a lot of bullying this week. Could you watch for that and maybe talk about interpersonal skills tonight?” or “We have had three overdoses in the institution this week. There’s a high level of tension about these overdoses. Is there an aspect of your program that you could draw on to help reduce this high level of anxiety?”).
  - C) Individual institutions sometimes allow inmates participating in particular programs to be assigned to a collective group to accommodate their particular program needs. For example, institutions with mother-baby programs sometimes have separate wings or departments for inmates who give birth after being sentenced. Since “wings” will have a daycare center or regular doctor visits for the infants who remain with their mothers.
- C) **Programs delivered in institutions need to be given adequate resources such as meeting space and timely, collaborative access to relevant institution staff (staff who make scheduling decisions, volunteer coordinators who manage background checks for volunteers, etc.). Challenges and solutions:**
  - a. ***Institution staff, including those charged with overseeing volunteers and community programs are often overworked and lack sufficient resources to do their jobs effectively.***  
Too often, this results in community programs not getting timely access to the resources they need within institutions to make their programs flow effectively. New volunteers don't get cleared, rooms don't get booked, etc.  
**Solution:** In this age of wanting to reduce government spending, maximize resources, and reduce incarceration levels, failing to provide community programs with access to the resources they need results in not achieving “any of the above.” We need to create a culture across the correctional system of valuing community programming – in terms of community engagement, reduced recidivism rates, and cost savings – and thereby have adequate staff to accommodate community programs. Such prioritization can make strides toward reducing this barrier to program success for people who are incarcerated.
  - b. ***Make it easy for community programs going into a specific correctional facility to connect with each other and create a culture of dialogue between groups and between groups and staff.*** Such dialogue will facilitate communication about the needs of community groups delivering programs (need for meeting space, etc.).

**D) Despite the fixed operational structure of correctional institutions, there is often a lack of clarity between institutional operations, the communication needs of community groups that come into institutions, and inmate access to information about available programming. This reduces the functional delivery of programs. For example:**

**1) The amount of communication between community groups and the institution staff who oversee them varies from one institution to another. This results in good communication and information sharing between institution staff and community programs at some institutions and not at others. Solutions:**

- Adequate staffing of volunteer coordinators at individual institutions.
- Create communication flows that create intentional levels of information sharing.
  - A) Some institutions send out “informational newsletters” to community programs on a regular basis. Newsletters contain information such as dates when programming may be disrupted, new phone number systems within institutions so that programs can reach staff if the institution’s phone system changes, information about changes in institution policies that may affect programs, and suggestions on when to best reach a volunteer coordinator.
  - B) Volunteer coordinators at institutions can periodically “check in” with community programs to clarify whether they have needs that require attention (“our new volunteer has been waiting six months for their orientation session,” “inmates are telling us that x or y is getting in the way of them attending our workshops,” etc.).

**2) Inadequate communication can and does result in inmates at some institutions not knowing about or having access to community-based programs. This results in programs being underutilized. [This is a broad generalization. It doesn’t apply at every institution.] Community programs wonder why their programs are underutilized, while inmates complain about not having access to programs. Solutions:**

- ***Provide listings of available programming that are made universally known within individual institutions.*** Information to be provided to those incarcerated at each institution: Names of programs, information about program outcomes, how to enrol in programs (sign up through the volunteer coordinator, show up on Monday nights at the library, etc.), and any other participation requirements. Some institutions already deal with this by having weekly sign-up sheets for programs (particularly institutions with restricted movement within the institutions), while other institutions have room for improvement.
- ***Intercom Announcements.*** Some institutions that allow more freedom of movement within the institution make intercom announcements when program staff or volunteers arrive (“if you wish to participate in the yoga class, go to the gym in five minutes.”).

**The National Network of Prison Nonprofits (NC4RSO) looks forward to leading national dialogue around improved effectiveness of community-based programs by reducing systemic barriers to such improvements.**