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Introduction

In January of 2014, Yolo County, California and its Community Corrections Partnership (CCP) contracted with the Crime and Justice Institute (CJI) at Community Resources for Justice to conduct an evaluability assessment of the County's realignment strategies. The purpose of this assessment is to determine which Yolo County programs and strategies funded under AB 109 are appropriate for formal evaluation. This report summarizes CJI's recommendations.

There are multiple types of evaluation, but this report focuses on outcome evaluation, a systematic investigation of whether a program causes demonstrable effects on specific targeted outcomes. Along the way to conducting an outcome evaluation, it might be necessary to carry out a process evaluation, which examines whether a program is functioning as designed and helps outcome evaluators properly design their evaluation.

Both process and outcome evaluations are time and labor intensive efforts. A formal outcome evaluation begins with a design process in which the evaluator must determine the type of evaluation (e.g., experimental or quasi-experimental), define an adequate control group (a non-impacted population to compare to the population impacted by the program being evaluated), and define how the program impact will be measured. The evaluator must then collect data on both the program participants and the control group, and in many cases must conduct extensive analyses of both groups to identify the true impact of the program on the desired outcomes. Evaluations often require significant commitment from program staff as well as outside evaluators to make sure the evaluation is accurately capturing program activities and goals and to collect and verify program data.

Evaluability assessment is a process to determine whether outcome evaluation is 1) feasible and 2) valuable for a particular program in a particular time and place. While program evaluation is a very important tool for oversight bodies as well as program managers, it is an intensive process that may fail to provide actionable information if it is conducted on a program that is not ready or otherwise inappropriate. The most common reasons a program may not be appropriate for evaluation are: 1) it is not based on a clear model which ties program activities to specific goals and outcomes, 2) it is not fully implemented, and/or 3) it is not able to track its activities and outcomes.

Evaluability assessment also looks at whether an evaluation is likely to provide valuable information either to program managers, oversight bodies, or the general research community. A program may be fully implemented based on a clear model and tracking outcomes, but so small that a statistical evaluation would have no chance of finding any impact. Pouring resources into a formal evaluation would likely not help the program function better, and would not provide useful information about its real value.

The CCP in Yolo County has invested AB 109 realignment funds in nine different strategic areas. In the CCP's July 2012 Realignment Plan, the areas are listed as:

1. Maintaining Jail Bed Capacity
2. Electronic Monitoring
3. Community Corrections Case Management
4. Local Law Enforcement

5. Long Term Planning
6. Additional AB 109 Dedicated Beds at Leinberger
7. Day Reporting Center/Treatment services
8. Pretrial Program
9. Supplemental Funding for the District Attorney and Public Defender's Offices

In this report, each funding strategy is considered separately, except for (1) and (6) which are discussed jointly.

Methods

This evaluability assessment was conducted in March and April 2014 through phone interviews, site visits, and document reviews. CJI staff visited Yolo County on March 27 and 28, and reviewed collected documents both before and after the visit. During site visits, CJI staff observed program activities and interviewed program managers, staff, and offenders. See the Appendix for interview questions and list of documents reviewed.

Evaluability of Funding Strategies

In accordance with the CCP's charge, CJI split Yolo's realignment funding strategies into three groups: 1) strategies that are ready to be evaluated within the next year, 2) strategies that are not ready to be evaluated now but may be evaluable in the future, and 3) strategies that do not lend themselves to formal evaluation.

Strategies that are ready to be evaluated

Day Reporting Center / Treatment Services

The Yolo County Day Reporting Center (DRC) opened in early 2013, and the first program graduation was held in November of 2013. In February, 2014, the DRC was serving 122 offenders, including 24 on probation, 31 in the Electronic Monitoring program, 20 on parole, and 47 in custody at the Yolo County Jail.¹ The DRC is ready for both an outcome and a process evaluation. CJI recommends that the process evaluation begin first, as its findings will inform the design and success of the outcome evaluation.

Program model and evaluability

The DRC provides comprehensive services to offenders both in-custody at the Yolo County jail and on community supervision with a goal of reducing recidivism. The DRC model targets medium- and high-risk offenders referred to them by probation and parole officers and jail staff and provides them with structured activities, cognitive behavioral therapy, employment readiness, and individualized planning to meet other assessed needs such as substance abuse disorders, parenting or anger management classes, or assistance accessing housing. The model

¹Yolo County Day Reporting Center, The Year in Review: 2013-2014.

begins with assessment, links individuals to targeted programs and services based on those assessment results, and finally strives to achieve positive outcomes including reduced recidivism and increased employment.

A site visit in March of 2014 provided evidence that the program is functioning largely as designed. Staff correctly identified the program goals of recidivism reduction and increased positive outcomes for offenders and described the model by which those goals should be accomplished. Classroom instructors used the designated curricula, which include Courage 2 Change and Thinking for a Change. The tracking and data systems were reviewed and satisfactorily capture information on program participation, clients and client demographics, and certain outcomes. All of this suggests that the program is ready to be evaluated.

However, the DRC is still a very new program. Any evaluation with recidivism outcomes must provide sufficient follow-up time to observe recidivism changes in program participants and a control group. In addition, there are still concerns about implementation that should be addressed before embarking on a full-scale outcome study. Program staff indicated that while the model calls for treating medium- and high-risk offenders, low-risk offenders are sometimes referred to them and taken into the program, especially low-risk offenders in custody or on electronic monitoring. There is currently no measurement of inter-rater reliability in the assessment process, so it is possible that the right offenders are not being targeted even if the low-risk offenders are triaged out of the program. Finally, instructor training on certain program curriculum appeared to be ad hoc and offered in-house, suggesting the need for further review of whether evidence-based curriculums are being implemented with fidelity.

Scope of evaluation

Due to these concerns, CJI recommends starting with a process evaluation of the DRC. A process evaluation looks at how a program is designed to run (curriculum and standards), how it actually runs (implementation), and where and how those things diverge. This systematic documentation of how a program functions is key to both making sure that a program is serving the appropriate offenders in the intended way and preparing for an outcome evaluation. In the case of the DRC, a process evaluation should focus on a few key areas in the DRC model. Specifically, a process evaluation of the DRC should identify whether:

1. The DRC is reliably assessing participants, serving the right population (medium- and high-risk offenders), and using needs assessment to properly target programs and services;
2. Staff are correctly implementing program curriculum, with a focus on the training and ability of staff to implement the core cognitive behavioral programs that the model relies on to motivate offender change;
3. There are substantive differences in the in-custody and out-of-custody programs that would warrant any difference in designing outcome evaluations for the two populations; and
4. The DRC data system is accurately tracking client and program information.

In addition a few issues were identified during the March site visit that should be taken into account during the process evaluation and planning for the outcome evaluation.

First, the in-custody program began in 2013, along with the rest of the DRC, but did not fully implement the DRC curriculum until early 2014. The process evaluation should determine whether this change was substantial enough to include 2013 in-custody offenders in the outcome evaluation.

Second, in-custody DRC clients are now housed in a dedicated wing of the jail along with non-participating inmates. The outcome evaluation should consider including non-participating inmates housed in that wing as a control group, to see if any impacts are driven by the change in housing or the social environment rather than (or as a side effect of) the DRC program.

Third, some offenders start the DRC program in custody, and then are released or transferred into the Electronic Monitoring program and enter the out-of-custody DRC program. Attention should be paid to how the data regarding these offenders are managed; they may constitute a large and unique enough group to be evaluated separately from the pure in-custody and out-of-custody offenders.

Fourth, brief discussions with local treatment providers funded through AB 109 suggested that the services they provide under that funding should be seen as part of the DRC's work rather than as separate models. This should be further investigated and confirmed during the process evaluation.

Finally, the process evaluation should look at recidivism measures as part of reviewing data quality, and consider alternatives for measuring recidivism. Currently, the DRC considers any return to custody as a recidivism incident. Because of the different levels of institutional control exerted over offenders held in-custody and supervised on Electronic Monitoring, it may be difficult to compare outcomes with out-of-custody offenders served by the DRC. In addition, return to custody does not measure actual criminal behavior, especially for offenders on Electronic Monitoring who may have issues with housing or other technical problems leading to their re-incarceration. Re-arrest, time to re-arrest, and re-conviction may be more useful measures for tracking criminal recidivism and comparing across groups.

These process evaluation findings will directly set up the outcome evaluation while allowing more time for offenders to participate in the program and for recidivism follow-up on offenders who have finished the program.

Strategies that are not yet ready to be evaluated

The majority of Yolo County's funding strategies are not yet ready to be evaluated. This section lists these strategies, explains why they are not ready for evaluation, and makes suggestions for improving evaluability.

Electronic Monitoring

Since CJI's Assessment of Realignment Plan Strategies in May, 2013, the Electronic Monitoring program has successfully expanded to include more offenders. In March, 2014, there were just over 70 offenders on Electronic Monitoring, up from 20 in the spring of 2013. Staff streamlined the application process and changed the policy so that offenders are not charged a fee for their participation. Staff also created a mission statement and set of five goals, with objectives tied to

each goal. The mission of the program is to “Maximize public safety by mitigating impacts of AB 109 realignment on an overcrowded jail system.

The five goals are:

1. Maintain the most appropriate population on the electronic monitoring program
2. Maintain an appropriate level of supervision
3. Facilitate re-entry services for participant re-integration as a productive member of society
4. Reduce jail overcrowding
5. Maintain the integrity of the EM program

Unfortunately the goals are not clearly defined or tied to measurable outcomes. Currently four of the goals (#1, #2, #3, and #5) focus on the program functioning as it is designed, rather than on program outcomes. The language in these goals (such as the undefined use of the word “appropriate” in #1 and #2) is vague, making it difficult to link them to measurable program outcomes.

These goals should be revised and sharpened to tie clearly to outcomes, rather than program functions. For instance, goal #3 is focused on facilitating services for offenders. A more measurable goal might be offender behavior change or offender outcomes that could be impacted by the stated services.

Finally Goal #4, while more clearly related to the program mission, is not tied to clear measures of effectiveness. While the objectives listed (such as maintaining the EM population at or close to 100) are measurable, they are not direct measures of the desired outcome (a reduction in jail overcrowding).

Without a clear model that ties program activities to measurable outcomes the EM program cannot be evaluated for effectiveness.

Recommendations

Many of the problems and solutions identified in CJI’s May 2013 report are still applicable. Focusing on evaluation, the key first step is to clarify the program mission, goals, and objectives so that they are more measurable and outcome-focused. Once that model is in place and being followed, an evaluation would be appropriate.

Community Corrections Case Management

Community Corrections Case Management (CCCM) describes a comprehensive system of managing offenders in the community. Yolo County’s CCCM system was assessed by CJI in May 2013. Recommendations included implementing and validating a new risk and needs assessment and implementing the use of case planning with offenders. Currently, Yolo County is in the process of implementing a new risk and needs assessment tool and conducting a procurement process for a new case management data system. Because this program is not yet fully implemented, it is not appropriate to evaluate it at this time.

Recommendations

Once the new risk and needs assessments and case management system have been implemented, the Probation Department should set up ongoing quality assurance processes focusing on the reliability of assessment practices and the successful implementation of case management. These processes will help collect data and form the basis for a process evaluation, which will also help clarify the logic model of this program for use in an eventual outcome evaluation. Depending on the outcome measures chosen (particularly how recidivism is measured and the follow-up period desired), it will likely take two to three years for there to be a large enough sample of offenders who have passed through the system and had sufficient follow-up time to conduct an outcome evaluation.

Local Law Enforcement

Four local police departments (Woodland, West Sacramento, Davis, and Winters) received realignment funding to help with the impact of AB 109 on local communities. The Woodland Police Department used the funds to pay for one police officer (paying for a second officer with local funds) focused on supervising AB 109 offenders in the community. This two-officer team makes contact with offenders released onto AB 109 supervision in Woodland, conducts home visits, searches, and otherwise monitors these offenders while they are in the community. During interviews two potential impacts of this program were mentioned: a deterrent effect on offenders who know they are being watched more closely, and a policing/informational impact for the department which has better information to help with the investigation of new crimes and the apprehension of suspects within the pool of supervised offenders. Information about officer activities (such as contacts, searches, and arrests) is tracked and is able to be tied to individual offender records.

Similar work is being carried out in the other jurisdictions, though the programs are just starting in those other areas, while the Woodland program has been going for over a year. There may also be different types of offenders targeted in the different jurisdictions. Within Woodland, there also appears to be some slippage in terms of the targeted population (AB 109 offenders) versus the population actually involved in the program (which may include some offenders on other types of supervision).

While program staff seem to have a generally consistent view of the desired activities of the officer funded with realignment dollars, there is no formal model which ties those activities to specific goals and outcomes. When asked if the program was “working,” different potential outcomes were mentioned, and it was not clear whether or how the specific work officers do is tied to those potential outcomes.

All four police departments are tracking data on these offenders and officer activities, which will allow for an evaluation at some point in the future. Those data should continue to be tracked. However before an outcome evaluation can take place, the program needs to more carefully define its goals and specific/measurable outcomes.

Recommendations

The Woodland Police Department (as well as the other participating departments) should work with internal or external research staff to create a logic model for the program using available

evidence on preventive policing practices. The department should define the desired outcome(s) (which may be reduced recidivism for AB 109 offenders, improved information for investigations, some other outcome not mentioned in this process, or some combination of outcomes) and how they will be measured. The departments should identify whether their goals and outcomes are the same or different, and if they are the same, whether or not they can align their target populations so that all programs can be evaluated together, or if each department will require a separate evaluation.

Pretrial Program

The Yolo County Pretrial Program assists the Court in making release/detention decisions and monitors and supervises defendants released on supervised own recognizance (SOR) pending trial. A May 2013 assessment by CJI indicated that the pretrial program was not consistently basing release decisions on a validated risk assessment tool nor was it systematically collecting data on key decision-points or outcomes. Since then, the program has moved to using one assessment tool (the ORAS) but still is not using it to make release recommendations. Since the program is not being implemented according to its own model of risk-based decision making and the data resources are currently insufficient, it's not a good candidate for an evaluation at this time.

Recommendations

CJI recommends the Pretrial Program review the May 2013 assessment and create a work plan to address those areas highlighted, including making release decisions based on valid risk assessment results and collecting data to reflect those decisions and their outcomes. Once those issues are resolved, a program evaluation could be conducted.

Strategies that are likely not appropriate for evaluation

Several of the strategies funded by the CCP were explicitly or implicitly aimed at maintaining current policies and practices while handling a higher number of offenders or court cases. Formal evaluation is not well-suited to address the maintenance of the status quo, and therefore CJI would not recommend evaluating these strategies. These, along with programs for which evaluation is inappropriate for other reasons, are addressed below.

Maintaining Jail Bed Capacity / Additional Beds at Leinberger

The CCP provided funding to open 30 additional beds in the Yolo County Jail and keep open 75 beds, both at the Leinberger facility. These beds provide space for the additional offenders sentenced to serve jail terms under AB 109, and allow the sheriff's department to keep other offenders (including those serving time for misdemeanors) behind bars while staying in compliance with the consent decree. Because the explicit goal of these beds is maintaining the status quo under new circumstances, rather than working towards a new goal (such as reduced recidivism either for AB 109 or other types of offenders, or fewer disciplinary problems in the jail), it is not an appropriate program for evaluation under AB 109 funding.

Long Term Planning

This funding was provided to the Yolo County Probation Department to assist with data improvement, and other long-term process improvements that relate to many of the other funding strategies outlined. In practice, it is used for internal probation support, including administrative support, data analysis, and ad hoc funds for probationer needs. Because the money is not spent based on one model with a single goal, it is not appropriate for evaluation.

If future funding for planning was tied more specifically to one or more long-term problems or goals, it might be possible to do a process evaluation on whether the planning efforts were conducted in such a way that they addressed those long-term problems. However long-term planning efforts have rarely, if ever, been the subject of formal outcome evaluations as it is generally more appropriate to evaluate the outcomes of the strategies which the planning efforts led to than the planning efforts themselves.

Supplemental Funding to District Attorney's Office

The CCP provided funding to the District Attorney's office to maintain and expand victim services, including victim notification and restitution services, and case processing capacity in the face of increased AB 109 caseloads. New case processing needs include filing new cases against offenders on probation instead of in prison in addition to pursuing revocations against offenders on probation and parole. Like the maintenance of jail capacity, this falls under the rubric of maintaining status quo practices and policies rather than working toward a new, specific goal. An evaluation of the value of the status quo programs would be a much larger undertaking and would not necessarily contribute additional value to the question of where AB 109 funding is best spent.

Supplemental Funding for Public Defender's Office

The CCP also provided funding to the Public Defender's office to maintain case processing capacity. In addition, the Public Defender used this funding to create two new positions: first, a position for a social worker focused on connecting offenders released from County Jail without supervision to follow to programs and services, with the goal of reducing recidivism, and second an expungement specialist to focus on helping former felons expunge their records and relieving the burden of that work from other lawyers in the office.

Because these are new positions with specifically stated goals, they could be appropriate for evaluation. Both staff members have general models linking their work to recidivism reduction and both collect data on clients and outcomes. However, given the size of their caseloads (the social worker serves approximately 10 clients per month, and the expungement specialist files approximately five petitions per week), it would not be cost-effective to conduct a formal evaluation of these positions. A formal outcome evaluation (including the creation of a control group, and most likely survey or individual follow-up with former clients and controls to clarify certain outcomes which are not currently collected by staff) would be time consuming and expensive, and because of the small number of clients would likely not show statistically significant findings even if the positions are having meaningful effects. Meta-analyses of these types of low-impact interventions (voluntary employment and education services, for example)

suggest that while they may have a positive impact on recidivism, it is relatively small.² If the program leads to a 10% reduction in recidivism, it would require a sample of over 1,000 clients to find the difference statistically between clients and controls. It would take over eight years for either position to serve that many offenders.

CJI met with the staff in both new positions and suggested ways for them to better track their own outcomes. Short of a formal evaluation, they can and should still report performance (including outcome) measures and the Public Defender should disseminate this to the CCP.

Conclusion

Evaluation is an important tool for program managers and staff, administrators and oversight bodies, and for the broader community. Evidence-based practices require constant questioning, re-evaluation, and revision, and the fact that a particular program or practice worked in one place does not mean it should be blindly implemented elsewhere. However, formal outcome evaluation is also a resource-intensive process that should be undertaken only when it can both be done well, and can provide useful information for the program, the funders, and/or the field.

Yolo County is making a concerted effort to put funding toward proven programs and practices. Formal evaluation is a key piece of that effort. The Day Reporting Center, Yolo County's flagship recidivism reduction effort, is an important place to start looking at outcomes. Other programs need to refine their models and make sure those models are fully and consistently implemented before they are ready for a formal evaluation. In the meantime, all programs funded by realignment can and should report performance measures to the CCP to ensure they are meeting their stated objectives.

²Drake, E. (2013): *Inventory of evidence-based and research-based programs for adult corrections*, Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy.