Using Technology to Improve Supervision Outcomes

Community corrections agencies increasingly use technology to meet their dual goals of addressing the needs of people on probation and parole supervision ("clients") and reducing recidivism to protecting public safety. The relevance and multiple applications of communication technologies have become much more apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic. The continued development, implementation, and evaluation of innovative technology within community corrections agencies is essential to improving supervision outcomes. This handout features strategies for integrating technology and examples of technology implementation from the field.

Technology and Supervision

The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally shifted how community corrections agencies delivered services across the country. With restrictions to in-person contact, many probation and parole agencies quickly leveraged communications technology and virtual meeting tools to enhance supervision practices and improve outcomes among clients at risk of recidivism. Technological innovations in supervision serve multiple purposes and take many forms. Sending automated text message reminders to clients can lead to reductions in missed appointments. Providing clients with access to online individual and group treatment options can eliminate barriers associated with location, childcare, and transportation. Utilizing online dashboards that monitor officer training and assess adherence to evidence-based interventions can improve practice. These and other tools may further enhance workforce, programmatic, and monitoring capacities across supervision programs.

Strategies for Integrating New Technology in Supervision Settings

Community corrections agencies identify the following key tips and strategies for successfully implementing new technologies:

- **Start small** to work through implementation logistics and barriers before scaling up.
- **Create clear protocols** for utilization so that expectations and benefits are clear from the start.
- **Build a core set of staff** who can serve as technology implementation champions.
- **Select a flexible technology partner** who will work with you to make the technology fit your unique agency needs (vs. purchasing an off-the-shelf software package).
- **Ensure leadership buy-in** to support initial implementation and secure long-term commitment.
- **Apply and integrate principles of implementation science**, the application and integration of research evidence in to practice and policy,[1] to guide technology roll out.
- **Don't be afraid to try something new**. Valuable lessons can be learned even when something doesn't go exactly as planned.
- **Train supervisors** and not just line staff, so that managers can provide adequate support.

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[1] Gleicher, L. (2017). *Implementation science in criminal justice: How implementation of evidence-based programs and practices affects outcomes*. https://icjia.illinois.gov/researchhub/articles/implementation-science-in-criminal-justice-how-implementation-of-evidence-based-programs-and-practices-affects-outcomes

- **Remember that technology itself is not the solution**; rather, it is a tool that can be strategically applied to achieve better outcomes.

- **Understand that use of technology requires ongoing shifts to mindset and culture** to support these new approaches. There will always be people who are challenged by change. To be successful, you must continually communicate and train staff and leaders to build their comfort level and understanding of the benefits these changes will provide over time.

Examples From the Field

With support from the Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs' Bureau of Justice Assistance, as part of the Innovations in Supervision Initiative (ISI) grant program, community corrections agencies across the country are working to integrate innovative approaches to enhance their supervision strategies. Three ISI grantees provide examples of how they are **using the strategies detailed in the table above** to integrate technology-based solutions to enhance services.

Example Innovations

Second Judicial District Department of Correctional Services (Iowa)

The Second Judicial District Department of Correctional Services is a community corrections agency serving 22 counties in north central Iowa. With their ISI grant, the Second Judicial District is using **mobile devices** and **virtual meeting platforms** to provide **evidence-based interventions** to clients on supervision in rural communities, where access to treatment interventions specific to criminogenic needs has been an ongoing challenge. Clients on supervision who are eligible to participate in Iowa's *Tech 2 Connect* program receive **tablets** on which they can access resources and participate in virtual treatment services. The project aims to reduce recidivism among clients at high risk by increasing treatment access and dosage through technology.

The *Tech 2 Connect* program served as a vehicle for piloting the use of technology with a **small subset of staff** who were then able to champion and support the broader scaling of these tools within the department, as technology became a necessity during the pandemic. Iowa worked with their technology partner to bring a mobile technology to their setting that did not previously exist, and they emphasized the importance of **selecting a flexible technology partner** to adapt the technology to suit their context and continue to refine and adjust over time. They also noted that initial **training on implementation science** as an overarching frame for adoption and early encouragement to **not be afraid to try something new** and even to make mistakes, were very helpful for informing their rollout process and their ultimate success.

Kentucky Department of Corrections

More than 40 percent of clients on community supervision with the Kentucky Department of Corrections (KYDOC) reside in rural areas of the State where access to services and limited transportation pose significant barriers to compliance. The agency is using their ISI grant to address these obstacles by making programs and services more accessible and encouraging positive behavioral changes.

KYDOC is working with Marquis Software Development Inc. to develop and implement a series of technological innovations. First is a **client portal** smartphone app that allows clients to perform remote check-ins, pay financial obligations online, link to needed social services, and view their supervision

information. Another product is a **texting portal** that sends text messages to remind clients of appointments and fee payments, and it delivers positive reinforcement messages. The team is also developing an interactive, tablet- and smartphone-based **reentry simulator** that allows individuals who are incarcerated to practice job interviewing skills, time management, and budget management through engaging role-play and offers instructive feedback so they are better prepared to navigate their release. To ensure successful adoption of these new technologies, KYDOC is **developing clear protocols** that detail how to identify eligible clients and appropriately disseminate phones and tablets to them. Additionally, KYDOC is **providing training to both supervisors and line staff** to foster broad understanding and support for new initiatives. KYDOC also **selected a flexible technology partner** that customizes products to meet agency priorities and emerging needs.

Alameda County Probation Department

The Alameda County Probation Department (ACPD), in partnership with Ideas42, a behavioral design nonprofit, is enhancing successful transitions from prison to community supervision through the customization and implementation of **Vergil, a web-based mobile application**. Vergil uses insights from behavioral science, such as the value of positive reinforcement, to help clients under supervision develop goals and plans, establish critical "to-dos," and engage with community-based service providers and government programs to complete their individualized conditions of supervision and other court-ordered responsibilities. ACPD selected this approach with the understanding that **technology itself is not a solution** but rather is a tool that, when applied appropriately, can enhance client outcomes.

The Vergil app contains a robust, personalized database of accessible and appropriate programs and services, and it uses the power of behavioral science to nudge users to engage with those programs and services over the long term. Through individualized pathways to success, planning and commitment tools, just-in-time reminders and prompts, and the social accountability of a support team, Vergil helps users turn their intentions (e.g., get a job, find stable housing, avoid supervision revocations, avoid substance use, find therapeutic support, complete conditions of supervision) into actions and engagement with the existing service provider community. ACPD uses clear, ongoing communication that references emerging data to build comfort, understanding and ensure sustained leadership buy-in for this technological initiative.

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