

# Colorado Probation Research in Brief

## *Incentives to Shape Offender Behavior*

**Source Document:** Taxman, Faye S., Eric S. Shepardson, and James M. Byrne. 2004. *Tools of the Trade: A Guide to Incorporating Science into Practice*. National Institute of Corrections Publication, pp 58-64.

**Key Words:** Incentives, intermediate sanctions, behavior management, motivating offender change

### *Using Incentives*

#### Summary/Conclusions

The article is part of a larger document that includes a number of useful tools for offender management. Research has shown that incentives, when implemented properly, can have a significant impact on a probationer's behavior. The effects can lead to long-term change, thus reducing recidivism and enhancing community safety. The article provides some tips and tools for using incentives in conjunction with sanctions. By using the two in tandem, the probation officer can motivate the probationer to comply with supervision and accept responsibility for change.

#### Limitations of Information

The article does not address how public agencies should obtain incentives with a monetary value. The information is general in nature and does not provide many examples of sanctions or incentives. For more information, the reader is directed to DPS Memo 07-07, which addresses the use of incentives in Colorado Probation. In addition, jurisdictions have local policies to which individual officers should adhere.

**Caveat:** The information presented here is intended to summarize and inform readers of research and information relevant to probation work. It can provide a framework for carrying out the business of probation as well as suggestions for practical application of the material. While it may, in some instances, lead to further exploration and result in *future* decisions, it is not intended to prescribe policy and is not necessarily conclusive in its findings. Some of its limitations are described above.

Incentives can include "either adding something positive, such as a compliment or affirmation, or taking away an existing punishment or restriction." Traditionally probation has not focused on incentives but has used a series of sanctions to win compliance. Incentives have been perceived as "soft" and a reward for expected behavior. However, research on behavior management has clearly demonstrated incentives and sanctions are critical to changing offenders' behavior.

"Supervision, based on the principles of behavior management, moves offenders up and down the incentive/consequence ladder throughout the period of supervision." Depending on the probationer's actions, the officer uses a combination of sanctions and incentives to shape the offender's behavior. Research indicates incentives impact offender change more than sanctions; they have a longer lasting effect and reinforce positive behavior.

Research suggests a ratio of four rewards to each punishment. The rewards do not have to happen simultaneously but can be implemented over time. For example, a probationer receives a sanction for a positive UA. The PO can then praise the defendant for showing up and/or having negative UA's on the next four occasions.

Research found incentives are most effective when they are certain, swift, predictable, and proportionate.

**Certain** ~ A response should be initiated for every act, positive or negative, no matter how small. The probationer must know a consequence is immi-

nent, whether good or bad.

**Swift** ~ The sooner an incentive is given, the more effective it will be. It can be difficult for the probationer to associate the sanction or reward to the behavior, when a significant amount of time has passed.

**Predictable/Real** ~ The incentives should be similar for each probationer, and they should be explained to the probationer at the beginning of supervision. When sanctions and incentives are predictable, it allows the probationer "to weigh their behavior against the consequences before they act."

**Proportionate** ~ Incentives should be of reasonable significance in respect to the behavior rewarded.

#### Practical Applications

- √ *Use four positives for each negative.*
- √ *Address behavior, positive or negative, as soon as it is detected.*
- √ *Ensure case planning includes a discussion of potential sanctions and incentives.*
- √ *Make a list of possible incentives to have ready whenever a probationer makes progress.*
- √ *Simple complements and affirmations can be highly valued by this population, given their history of failure.*
- √ *Reward even the smallest behavior changes.*

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