

Colorado Probation Research in Brief

Outcome Evaluation of Colorado Therapeutic Communities

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Summary/Conclusions

With a National Institute of Justice grant, the Colorado Department of Corrections evaluated two therapeutic community (TC) programs: the prison-based Crossroads to Freedom House and the community-based Peer I. These facilities are designed to treat high risk offenders with severe/long-term substance abuse. Typically the offender has experienced multiple treatment failures and has demonstrated social deficits. This study was two-pronged: a quantitative study with a relatively large sample of offenders in five different modalities, and a small qualitative case study of ten offenders. Results were limited, but they did support prior conclusions of the effectiveness of TC's with a portion of the offender population.

Limitations of Information

Although the preferred method, random sampling was not possible and the final sample size was a limiting issue for both parts of the study. Additionally, the original design included measurement of psychological assessments, but baseline data could not be collected. The project had difficulty hiring and training the needed staff, so some project design elements could not be completed.

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.

Outcomes of Two TC's in Colorado

Related literature indicates therapeutic communities (TC) are effective in reducing criminal activity and substance abuse. One factor shown to affect these reductions is treatment matching, as TC's are designed for high risk offenders with significant substance abuse histories. "Research findings have shown that treatment for offenders is optimal when the services offered properly match the needs of the client."

The study investigated the effectiveness of two of Colorado's TC's: Crossroads to Freedom House (prison-based) and Peer I (community-based). The first portion of the study was a qualitative analysis of 778 offenders. The sample was divided into five groups: 1) participated in Freedom House and transferred to Peer I after release from prison, 2) Peer I only, 3) successful completers of Freedom House, 4) unsuccessful completers of Freedom House, and 5) no TC treatment.

The analyses indicated that those with the longest duration of treatment had the best results. Similarly, the participants in Group 1, treated in both TC's, had the best outcomes, including a 79% reduction in recidivism compared to the control group one year later. Group 2 participants (Peer I only) had an 11% reduction in recidivism after one year; however, neither of these groups maintained these rates in year two measurements.

The second part of the study included case studies of two clients from each of the aforementioned five groups. The researchers explored the following variables: criminal and substance abuse history, employment/finances, housing, social support, treatment, and motivation. Researchers discovered those who were not successful tended to have

less familial support. Almost all participants knew they should find new friends, who did not abuse substances, but "they seemed to not know how to develop such friendships." Additionally, researchers found that "participants who were more internally motivated appeared to have better outcomes than participants who had more external reasons for change."

Practical Applications

- √ Treatment matching is paramount for all offenders. Ensure quality assessment and referrals based on assessed risk and need.
- √ Use MI skills to assess readiness for change. Enhance the probationer's internal motivation in preparation for treatment enrollment.
- √ Aftercare is critical for long-term behavior change, so be prepared to use offender service dollars to continue treatment and provide incentives for continuing treatment participation.
- √ Recovering substance abusers will benefit from non-abusing support systems. Maintain a list of community referrals, where probationers can meet new, pro-social friends.
- √ Identify an individual in the probationer's life (wife, mother, boss), who can provide positive support. Invite that individual to participate in the success of the probationer by attending office visits or other case plan activities.
- √ The first 60-90 days are the most tenuous. Explore and mitigate possible barriers (ie: finances, transportation, childcare) to participation with the probationer in advance of any difficulties.