

Colorado Probation Research in Brief

Adding positive reinforcement in justice settings: Acceptability and feasibility

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Key Words: Contingency Management; Incentives, Behavior Change;

Summary/Conclusions

The present study examines the attitudes, thoughts, and beliefs of professionals involved with the implementation of contingency management (CM) programs in five U.S. Federal Probation locations. Researchers provided training and established committees tasked with implementing an incentive based CM program. Through the process researchers collected data. The five sites experienced similar issues with the concept of and distribution of incentives, behavioral contracting, and designing CM point systems. Full compliance in each system resulted in a number of different outcomes.

Limitations of Information

The scope of the study was limited to Federal probation offices, which may differ politically and organizationally from Colorado Probation Departments. The five sites contained in the study may not be representative of other community correction organizations. It is unclear if organizations who participated were supported by outside stakeholders in integrating contingency management principles.

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.

Considerations in Contingency Management

CM principles involve encouraging continued pro-social behavior through the use of incentives while attempting to desist antisocial behavior. Researchers assisted five U.S. Federal Probation locations implement incentive based CM programs. After a short training, each site's leadership and staff created a framework for CM to be delivered in their programs. Data was collected through surveys, observation, training, coaching, technical assistance and other forms of feedback. Analyzing the data, researchers narrowed the scope of the study to three common barriers of implementing CM principles in criminal justice settings .

The first barrier was the concept and use of incentives. Professionals struggled with the use of the word reward versus incentive. Other locations had difficulty with the concept of providing material goods to individuals under supervision. There was trouble with teams agreeing on incentives that were motivating to the probationer (e.g. movie tickets) but deemed pro-social.

Establishing a behavioral contract was the second barrier to a CM system. Officers felt like contracting with individuals would be additional work. Officers were concerned they would have to write reports as well as meet with probationers to establish contracts. Another smaller concern for officers was that the system eliminated the officers' ability to be flexible.

The third barrier was designing a consistent point system. The point systems were often overwhelming in scope. Some point systems were built for drug courts, but failed to recognize drug abstinence. Time to the first incentive for a compliant client ranged from a week to four months depending on the point system structure. Such discrepancies continued through program termination.

Practical Applications

- ✓ At the start of supervision, educate the probationer on the use of incentives and sanctions in probation.
- ✓ Educate stakeholders when beginning to implement incentive based behavior change programs.
- ✓ Consider having a discussion with probationers about what kind of incentives would be meaningful.
- ✓ Attempt to focus on behavior change in a limited number of highest priority criminogenic needs.
- ✓ Use case plans to focus probationers on steps they can complete and receive incentives for to encourage continued pro-social behaviors.
- ✓ Look for pro-social behaviors to reinforce and incentivize.
- ✓ Deliver incentives and sanctions for targeted behaviors as swiftly as possible.
- ✓ Collaborate with treatment providers to target similar behaviors.
- ✓ If available, utilize the Strategies for Behavior Change program to deliver fair and consistent incentives and sanctions.