

THE IMPROVEMENT OPPORTUNITY FACTOR

by Allen R. Beck, Ph.D.

What makes the difference between a correctional agency that merely computerizes offender records and one that uses computerization to make great strides in improving offender supervision? The answer lies in how correctional agencies use the planning for technology as an opportunity to improve thinking and practices of offender management. The excitement about implementing a new computer information system or upgrading an old one frequently obscures the fact that inefficient supervision and management practices are being automated.

Putting the improvement opportunity factor to work starts with examining such things as the following:

- An objective, well-defined risk and needs assessment coupled with a calendaring system -- The difference between a "working" offender management system and an automated but "passive file folder" is the ability to assign supervision and treatment levels and actively apply that information. This ability can improve the consistency of how daily supervision of offenders is performed. For example, community supervision officers can schedule their daily client contacts through a calendaring system. Once risk and treatment levels are established, calendaring can automatically set follow-up events.
- Categorical, as well as narrative, format for case status information -- Given the human tendency to place people into categories and to describe progress in gradations, the advent of automation should challenge managers to reexamine how to communicate more succinctly about common events and milestones in the supervision of offenders. Treatment goals, for example, can be categorized into whether the objective is to eliminate (eliminate the problem), reduce (reduce the frequency of a problem), learn (learn new skills), remove (remove the offender from the situation), etc. In addition, other aspects such as progress at various status check dates and the impact of referrals can be graded in categories. The process of categorizing information forces staff who supervise offenders to more clearly define judgments and to strive for a wider consensus about critical aspects in offender supervision.
- Comprehensive procedures for tracking and collecting fines, fees, and restitution -- One of the greatest failures of computerized case management is the omission of system for tracking the collection of fines, fees, and restitution. This observation is reflective of philosophical differences about the role of community supervision officers or just a failure to consider the tasks and responsibilities that would be expected by the justice system. Regardless of the genesis of this problem, communities throughout the country are struggling with the problem of collecting fines, fees, and restitution. In some states, insurance companies are even considering supporting development of software that will facilitate collection. By improving collection practices, insurance companies could reduce the amount paid out for property losses through crime. In addition, greater efficiency in collection of fines and fees can benefit local corrections agencies and the courts. The mechanics of computerizing these features are not particularly complex. Such computerization should include automatic generation of collection letters and forms, as well as payment scheduling and tracking.
- Active support for staff management -- Frequently offender case management systems are designed without adequately addressing the information needs of staff managers and administrators. The capability to generate on-demand and periodic reports on staff activities should be included as a new feature in a new or upgraded case management information system. For example, the improvement of productivity usually calls for a workload

analysis. This requires more than just a summarization of the number of cases assigned to staff. Information about supervision time requirements and the mix of types of cases are important to an adequate analysis. Without that information one person's caseload looks like another. One of the goals of productivity analysis is to balance workload. The benefits of such analyses also pay off when tracking caseload increases, requesting new staff positions, and developing responses to work overload.

- Support of forecasting -- Frequently, information analysts are asked to provide data that can be used in forecasting caseload growth and related assessments of how changes in offender flows would affect staffing and budgetary requirements. Of the design of computer information systems narrowly focus on case management and omit either collecting or saving the types of information that will be needed in forecasting. Data fields, for example, are sometimes designed as "write over" so that new data replaces old data, as a result historical records of key forecasting elements may not be maintained. Another limitation common to forecasting is the failure in planning to fully examine the types of issues that are likely to be subject to forecasting. This failure results in bypassing the opportunity to collect data on an ongoing basis.

These five considerations provide a starting point for rethinking the role of computerization in community supervision of offenders. During the 1960's and '70s, technology literature often addressed an anticipated synergistic interaction between humans and computers. After the mid-1980's this concept was not frequently mentioned. Experience in reviewing and downloading information from numerous correctional computer systems suggests to this writer that an important opportunity is presented when considering to upgrade or implement a new information system. This is an opportunity to examine ways of improving how we think and conduct the business of offender supervision.

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