

---

# Implementing an Offender Risk and Needs Assessment: An Organizational Change Process

---

---

---

---

---

*Thomas White  
Director of Operations,  
Court Support Services  
Division,  
Connecticut Judicial Branch*

---

The information shared in this article was largely unknown to me 4 years ago. However, as Connecticut embarked on the implementation of a new risk and needs assessment tool, I was forced to re-evaluate my own beliefs concerning the role and responsibility of probation services in contributing to improved public safety. Over the past few years, I have studied and implemented a number of correctional models based on different correctional principles and strategies. Whether an agency embraces restorative justice, community justice, “broken windows,” evidence-based practice, or an integrated model, I have come to believe that the first step needed to effectively change the behavior of the offenders under our supervision is to be willing to change ourselves.

Today the public is beginning to demand that a corrections agency reach beyond its jurisdiction over an offender to meet its public safety responsibility. This public expectation requires that we embrace the philosophy that offenders can change. We can no longer continue offender supervision practices that are not supported by either the existing evidence of the causes of crime or the knowledge of which correctional programs and strategies have had the greatest success in changing offender behavior. Therefore, to enhance the safety of our communities, we must adopt evidence-based principles of offender supervision and treatment, principles that have clearly been proven to reduce offender recidivism.

## **Focusing the Use of Resources**

The first, foundational principle for reducing offender recidivism is to assess offender risk and needs and to prioritize supervision and treatment resources for the higher-risk offenders. To expend our often-scarce resources on low-risk offenders does not contribute to reducing recidivism or increasing public safety. As a former warden and deputy commissioner of corrections, and presently as a probation administrator, I recognize that low-risk does not mean no-risk. In our work there is some level of risk in everything we do. But resources are not unlimited, and we know that most crime is committed by a small percentage of all offenders.

Therefore, whether we like it or not, we are in a triage business, and we exercise discretion every day at both the case and the agency level. Within the constraints imposed on us by both our internal and external stakeholders, we need to base our decisions on evidence-based practice. Assessing offender risk and needs and allocating resources accordingly are thus perhaps the most critical functions of any correctional agency.

---

---

---

---

## Starting the Process

Probation in Connecticut is a statewide, unified system operated by the judicial branch of government. There are approximately 50,000 offenders under adult probation supervision, and, at this writing, there are 280 line probation officers. (An additional 97 officers have been allocated by the legislature for this fiscal year.) In juvenile probation, there are approximately 5,000 juveniles under age 16 assigned to the 115 line juvenile probation officers.

The initial decision to embark on developing a new Risk and Needs Assessment (RNA) instrument was driven by the desire to implement a scientifically validated offender assessment tool and to develop a new probationer classification system. It soon became evident that offender RNA was not just a tool but also a process.

Connecticut began this project in April of 1999, and it took approximately 2 years before the selected assessment instruments were used in all of our adult and juvenile probation offices. Reflecting back on the experience, I believe there are five issues of critical importance:

- ◆ The use of an external consultant who knows both corrections work and the prediction of criminal behavior;
- ◆ A careful, reasoned decision about whether to use an off-the-shelf instrument or develop an in-house instrument;
- ◆ A strong focus on staff buy-in to the need for assessments as the starting point for offender change;
- ◆ The provision of training for both staff and field office supervisors; and
- ◆ The development of a comprehensive strategy for quality assurance to maintain the integrity of the system.

## Use of an External Consultant

Connecticut would not have been able to implement effectively a new RNA instrument without the assistance of an external expert. I doubt whether many probation agencies have the resources and expertise required to develop their own instrument or to select and norm an existing assessment instrument.

It is essential that an outside consultant knows the research on the prediction of criminal behavior and has experience in constructing tests and evaluating the psychometric and predictive attributes of an assessment scale. Someone who also has practical experience in probation, parole, or community corrections is highly desirable.

To implement an RNA process that moves an agency toward improved public safety requires staff to embrace a philosophy that offender change is achievable.

Therefore, an external consultant needs to understand the day-to-day activities and challenges of line staff as well as the often-conflicting political pressures confronting probation and parole administrators. Finally, clear and ongoing communication must be maintained between the consultant and agency management staff concerning the goals, activities, and progress of the project.

### **Off-the-Shelf vs. In-House Assessment Instruments**

The primary reasons Connecticut selected an existing instrument were related to time and expertise. To develop our own assessment tool would have taken a lot longer than using an existing instrument, and it would have required greater expertise and resources to conduct an assessment research and development project.

Identifying and procuring knowledgeable outside researchers, pilot testing, and validation and reliability studies that require a follow-up of offenders after they have completed probation or parole supervision are time-consuming activities.

Even within the Correctional Service of Canada, which benefits from in-house research expertise and capacity, it took approximately 3 years to develop and fully implement its Offender Intake Assessment System.

However, there may be a greater buy-in when agency staff participate in developing their own instrument, and there is often an ongoing cost to administering existing validated RNA instruments. If an agency does decide to use an existing instrument, it should develop a well thought-out selection and implementation process and conduct a cross-validation study of the selected assessment instrument.

### **Implementation and Staff Buy-In**

Implementing an RNA process as the first step toward reducing offender recidivism, and a corresponding commitment to offender change, require a paradigm shift for many probation officers. This shift will necessitate individual and agency self-reflection and self-adjustment. It may also necessitate a change in organizational culture that, for some staff, in some agencies, has supported a “them versus us” approach to their work. Such change will not occur easily and will require persistence, patience, and leadership.

The most difficult challenge for Connecticut was not in selecting a new RNA instrument but in managing the operational transition from existing procedures to evidence-based practice. The simple truth is that staff

#### **Connecticut’s Performance Requirements for an Assessment Instrument**

- ◆ Be reliable and valid (possess internal reliability, inter-rater reliability, predictive validity, and dynamic validity).
- ◆ Generate information that is clinically relevant.
- ◆ Feel comfortable to staff using it.
- ◆ Provide data to administration that is useful for formulating resource allocations, performance assessments, and population trends.
- ◆ Prescribe levels of supervision and treatment: services and intensity.
- ◆ Be supportable by other system actors (judges, district attorneys, police departments, treatment providers, etc.).
- ◆ Provide a foundation for the pre-sentence interview and assessment.
- ◆ Give line officers a product they actually want, through a process that optimizes their experience and skills.
- ◆ Render minimal threats to line officers’ decision-making autonomy.
- ◆ Be available in an automated format capable of generating tailored reports.

---

---

---

---

want to know not just the “what” but also the “why,” and they are more likely to support decisions that they have participated in making.

Our agency adopted the following strategies to increase staff support for the RNA project:

- ◆ We established a project oversight committee with field supervisors and line staff representation.
- ◆ We used staff to pilot and select the preferred assessment instrument based on agreed-upon performance requirements.
- ◆ We selected field staff (including supervisors and line staff) to conduct training in the new assessment process.
- ◆ The executive management team conducted line staff information sessions as part of a strategy to increase staff acceptance and support of the new assessment tools.

Even so, for many staff, these efforts were not sufficient to obtain their buy-in. Major obstacles to obtaining stronger staff support have been:

- ◆ The increased time to complete the assessment instruments;
- ◆ Increased accountability for staff to respond proactively to the results of the assessments;
- ◆ The corresponding shift from a containment model of supervision to a behavior change model;
- ◆ The new skills required by line officers to support this model; and
- ◆ The lack of agency-specific evidence and experience of how this model correlates with increased public safety through a reduction in recidivism.

A greater emphasis on establishing training and reinforcement systems that foster the values and attitudes supportive of offender change was, and still is, required.

### **Staff Training**

To train all probation staff, we selected as trainers the probation supervisors and line staff who participated in the initial assessment pilot and had practical experience in using the new assessment protocols. These selected individuals were intensively trained for 5 days on teaching the new assessment instruments, as well as in Motivational Interviewing.

No matter how reliable and valid an interview driven assessment instrument is, it is ultimately only as good as the individual who is administering it. Although most RNA instruments do not require specialized expertise to complete, staff should be trained in Motivational Interviewing. Motivational Interviewing is an evidence-based model that uses communication techniques and strategies that can reduce defensiveness of clients, obtain better-quality information, and assist the client in resolving ambivalence toward changing harmful behaviors.

Field office supervisors must also support an RNA instrument and process if it is going to be successful, because field supervisors remain the most significant force in shaping the behavior of the staff they manage. Without their support, no new initiative or change effort can be successfully implemented and sustained. Therefore, we trained all field supervisors in the new RNA instruments and Motivational Interviewing before line probation officers were trained. All probation staff participated in a 3-day training program before using the new assessment instruments.

### **Quality Assurance**

Where evidence-based treatment interventions have failed to show reductions in offender recidivism, the reasons can often be linked to breakdowns in the assessment process and in adherence to the risk and need principles. There often is also a lack of quality assurance to ensure the fidelity of the treatment interventions. The most serious mistake any agency can make when introducing an RNA instrument is to ignore the importance of maintaining the assessment process.

In Connecticut, we took several steps to maintain the integrity of the system and promote quality assurance.

- ◆ **Appointing full-time quality assurance staff coaches.** After training in-house trainers, we appointed five field staff from the group to work full time in our Center for Best Practices as quality assurance coaches for our RNA instruments and Motivational Interviewing. When all probation staff completed their assessment training, they were required to conduct a minimum of nine assessments and send them to the assigned coaches. The coaches reviewed each assessment to determine if there were any scoring errors and gave the staff person individual feedback on the results. Individual staff error rates were calculated, and staff were required to continue to send assessments for review until their error rate was at an acceptable level.
- ◆ **Automating the assessment instruments.** Within the first year after the new assessment process was implemented, we obtained authorization to automate the assessment instruments for our use in Connecticut. The advantage of automated assessment instruments is that they can be programmed to improve internal consistency and to calculate the total score and sub-scores, as well as to provide summary profiles to assist staff in interpretation and application. In addition, assessment results can be analyzed at the office and individual officer level for uniformity. Aggregate statewide results can also

---

---

---

---

---

provide a gap analysis to determine the need for additional or different treatment resources.

- ◆ **Establishing a critique process for Motivational Interviewing and offender contact.** Research suggests that it is not the *quantity* of contacts between probation and parole officers and the offenders they supervise but, rather, the *quality* of the contact that is likely to facilitate offender change and reduce recidivism. Therefore, field supervisors need to focus on the purpose, activities, and quality of the interactions between their officers and the offenders. With this in mind, we are implementing a Contact Quality Critique process at both the time of assessment and during ongoing supervision. Field supervisors are required by policy to conduct monthly individual meetings with each officer they supervise to provide coaching and performance feedback. At a minimum of once every 6 months, supervisors must observe an assessment or supervision meeting between the officer and an offender and complete a written critique of the content of the interaction as well as the officer's Motivational Interviewing skills. Immediate feedback is provided, and further discussion takes place at the monthly staff supervision conference.
  
- ◆ **Providing assessment booster training.** In addition to feedback and reinforcement by supervisors, it is important to provide staff with periodic booster training in the assessment process. This year as part of the annual in-service training for probation officers, we are conducting an assessment booster. A Motivational Interviewing booster will be conducted during 2005. This training will be provided by the full-time quality assurance coaches and will give them an opportunity to determine individual probation officers' knowledge and skills and enable them to follow up with additional coaching when needed.
  
- ◆ **Conducting research and evaluation.** We have established a contract with an external consultant to complete a 3-year evaluation of the implementation of the selected assessment instruments and evidence-based practice. This project will determine the scale reliability and predictive validity of these instruments in relation to the Connecticut probation population.

### **Our Ongoing Commitment**

Implementing an RNA instrument and process is not an easy or quick undertaking. In Connecticut's adult and juvenile probation system, it has been nearly 4 years since we began this project. In changing operational business practices, we have met with resistance at all levels of the agency. However, this project is an essential first step towards achieving a goal of enhanced public safety through reductions in offender recidivism. Even if these reductions are only modest, when they are translated into a decrease in crime and in victim suffering, there is no ethical option other than to move in this direction. ■

---

**For more information:**  
Thomas F. White  
Director of Operations  
Court Support Services  
Division  
Connecticut Judicial Branch  
936 Silas Deane Highway  
Wethersfield, Connecticut  
06109  
(860) 721-2110  
Thomas.White@jud.state.ct.us

## **Risk/Needs Assessment Implementation in a Nutshell—**

Connecticut's Court Support Services Division followed a series of chronological steps in implementing the new RNA process. These steps were not always pre-planned or known to us when we started, and they may not necessarily be appropriate for other probation or parole agencies interested in implementing an RNA tool and process.

1. Selected an external consultant to facilitate and assist in the process.
2. Established a project oversight group comprised of both management and line staff.
3. Decided to use an existing assessment instrument rather than developing one "in-house."
4. Developed desired performance criteria for selecting a new assessment instrument. (See box, page 44).
5. Selected four adult and four juvenile assessment instruments to pilot test.
6. Trained a total of 60 probation officers for 5 days in administering the selected instruments and in Motivational Interviewing.
7. Directed the trained staff to administer each instrument over a 10-week period, resulting in assessments of approximately 1,000 offenders.
8. Collected and reviewed each completed assessment (as well as audiotapes of the assessment sessions) for errors and provided written feedback to each probation officer.
9. Conducted pertinent clinical, reliability, and offender profiling analysis on each instrument that was being tested.
10. Asked the pilot probation officers to complete surveys on their perceptions of how each of the instruments performed in relation to the performance criterion that had been established.
11. Conducted a 1-day meeting with all pilot probation officers, shared results of analysis and surveys, and had the officers identify the assessment instruments they preferred. Officers preferred the Level of Service Inventory–Revised (LSI-R) and the Adult Substance Use Survey (ASUS) in adult probation, and the Juvenile Assessment Generic (JAG) and the Substance Use Survey (SUS) in juvenile probation.
12. Reviewed pilot results with oversight group and the agency's Executive Director and selected the LSI-R/ASUS and JAG/SUS as the agency's standard adult and juvenile probation assessment protocols.
13. Conducted an adult probation workload study using the LSI-R/ASUS protocol and tracked the probationer supervision activities of a representative sample of probation officers.
14. Normed and calibrated the LSI-R and JAG to a Connecticut probationer sample population and established "cut points" to configure Connecticut's probationer classification system.
15. Completed the workload analysis and identified staff shortages based on the new classification system.
16. Identified staff to be trained as trainers in the new assessment instruments and in Motivational Interviewing.
17. Established written agency policy on probationer assessment/classification and standards of supervision.
18. Trained probation supervisors and line officers in selected assessment instruments and in Motivational Interviewing.
19. Established a quality assurance protocol for the new RNA process.
20. Pursued additional tasks that are still under way:
  - Conducting regular RNA booster training.
  - Completing treatment services gap analysis.
  - Designing and implementing an automated probationer Case Plan to support the alignment of the assessment results with treatment services and supervision practices (in pilot phase at this writing).