You Get What You Measure: Compstat for Community Corrections

Key Questions for Policy Makers and Practitioners

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**Does the community corrections agency have a system to both measure and manage performance?**

✔️ Most public agencies today generate some type of report that tracks their work. But often the reports come only once a year, list activities rather than outcomes, and are quickly forgotten. Community corrections agencies play a central role in fighting crime and addiction, and should have advanced systems to measure and manage movement toward those goals. This includes frequent monitoring of the progress that individual managers are making toward key agency objectives, and incentives for managers and staff to improve their performance.

**What indicators are being measured?**

✔️ The performance indicators that are being tracked should reflect the agency’s mission and the community’s priorities. Key indicators include recidivism (separating arrests for new crimes and violations of the conditions of supervision), employment rates, drug test failure rates, rates at which victim restitution and other financial obligations are being collected, and the speed or on-time completion of certain critical tasks, such as pre-sentence reports due to the court and quick imposition of sanctions following detection of violations. Agencies must prioritize a few core measures and perhaps look at others periodically; a large number of measures dilutes focus.

**How frequently are the performance indicators updated and shared with agency managers?**

✔️ Performance reports should be generated at least once per month. Less frequent reports permit too much time to pass before resources can be redeployed to address emerging situations or patterns, and allow managers to argue that the numbers are outdated and fail to reflect current practice.
Whose progress is being monitored?

Agency-wide measures are important for assessing overall performance, but to really incentivize employees, statistics must reach down through regional offices to districts, office chiefs and front-line supervisors. These top and middle levels of management must be on board with the performance system before agencies begin to track individual probation or parole officers’ caseloads, but that ultimately is ideal. There is no substitute for data about the performance of individuals when it comes to rewarding and improving progress.

Does the agency conduct “live audits” of performance?

Any performance feedback that department headquarters can give to the field is helpful in motivating the operating units to improve their outcomes. But giving managers an opportunity to gather together in a room to present their progress on the indicators to agency leadership and their peers can provide significant additional incentive. Agencies may be doing performance management in a number of effective ways, but it is hard to argue they are doing “Compstat” without these live audits. Top managers should ensure that Compstat-like meetings strike the right balance between praise for achievements and critique of areas in need of improvement.

Is the agency’s personnel evaluation system in sync with the performance indicators?

The sharing of comparative performance data across the agency is a powerful incentive for managers to produce results. But progress toward key indicators must also be incorporated formally into job descriptions and personnel evaluation criteria.

How can policy makers help enhance a community corrections performance system?

Community corrections agencies tend to lag behind other public sector organizations in the sophistication of their information technology and data systems. Some probation officers still don’t even have computers. Fully loaded laptops aren’t vital to a Compstat program – the New York Police Department began Compstat with pre-Windows computers – but an advanced data network that officers can use to track their caseloads would be a major advance. Perhaps the biggest boost can come from focusing on the work of these agencies, and asking agency leaders the same questions they are asking their staffs: “What can you do to keep more offenders crime- and drug-free?”