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The Texas Risk Assessment System: a new direction in supervision planning

In January of this year, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice completed the agency-wide implementation of a new risk assessment tool designed to help community supervision, prison, reentry and aftercare professionals create custom case management programs for individual offenders. The Texas Risk Assessment System or TRAS (“tee-rass”) interprets an offender’s criminal history along with their criminogenic needs, allowing criminal justice professionals to devise the most efficient case plans possible, enabling the agency to carefully allocate supervision resources and, in turn, reduce offender recidivism rates and increase public safety.

Almost ten years ago, the leadership of TDCJ’s Community Justice Assistance Division started searching for an alternative to the useful but less comprehensive assessment tool the division had been using for nearly 30 years. In 2006, an assessment committee was created, under the direction of co-chairs Carey Welebob of CJAD and Dr. Teresa May, then of the Dallas County Community Supervision and Corrections Department, to search for a new assessment tool. Several



were considered, but major changes would have to be made to adapt them for use with Texas’ offender population demographic. In 2008, Welebob attended a conference where Dr. Ed Latessa of the University of Cincinnati described a new assessment instrument called the Ohio Risk Assessment System. It included most of the criteria sought by the Texas committee, but Ohio had only tested the instrument on thirteen hundred offender volunteers. The committee recommended a statewide validation of the instrument at various CSCDs to determine how the assessment tool could be made viable in Texas. This validation study began in late 2010 and eventu-

ally tested nearly seven thousand felony and misdemeanor probation offenders. “We had researchers from a couple of universities tell us that they were really blown away by how rigorous our study was,” said Welebob, who had since taken over duties as CJAD director.

While the assessment tool was being validated, the agency was also considering the benefits of a system-wide assessment instrument. With the probation system moving toward implementation of the TRAS, that assessment instrument was naturally the focal point of discussion. The capabilities TRAS offered for case management made the instrument equally useful for parole supervision, and the related incarceration and reentry components made TRAS a logical choice for adoption throughout TDCJ. It wasn’t long after the agency had decided on the TRAS instrument that the Texas Sunset Advisory Commission recommended the agency implement “a system-wide risk and needs assessment for use in managing offenders on probation, parole and in prison.” Subsequent to the Sunset recommendation, Senate Bill 213 by Senator John Whitmire was enacted which required the Texas De-

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partment of Criminal Justice to implement a standardized instrument by 2015.

The TRAS is divided into felony and misdemeanor sections, comprising a series of questions about the offender's education, family, job history, social support and substance abuse, along with a new section on criminogenic categories such as criminal attitudes and behavioral patterns. Prior to the assessment, the criminal justice professional examines an offender's criminal history as well as collateral sources of information, such as family members, to corroborate the offender's answers.

TRAS first identifies low-risk offenders using a "screener" before conducting a full assessment. "The first step in the process is to screen out the low-risk individuals," said Dr. Teresa May, now director of the Harris County CSCD. During the instrument's validation process, it was found that among offenders deemed low-risk and tracked for more than a year, one in ten reoffended. "So would you put your resources on ten people, just to try to get the one? It makes no sense," continued Dr. May. Low scorers are placed

on a low-risk caseload and are monitored, but not over-supervised or put into programs that they don't need.

The next step is to conduct the full assessment for those who did not screen out as low-risk. The full assessment tells the criminal justice professional which risks the offender is likely to face and how to change behaviors and target resources to best meet the needs of the individual. Are they getting enough social support? Are they associating with criminals? At this point, the tool becomes more of a risk management/risk reduction plan instead of a risk assessment, and moves onto the last step: recommendations on how to supervise, address needs, reduce risk and get the offender back on track.

If the offender leaves probation for prison, the assessment history follows that person through the criminal justice system, and is reassessed as needed. In prison, the assessment plays a role in the prioritization of offender programming through the offender's Individualized Treatment Plan. The TRAS also has a reentry supplemental tool designed to help receiving parole officers and

reentry case managers plan for the person's community needs. "I think it's an essential tool," said April Zamora, Director of TDCJ's Reentry and Integration Division. "We scan it into the Offender Information Management System so that (parole employees) are aware of all the work that's been done and by doing that, not only is the person released into the community aware of the resources that are out there, but the case manager knows what critical areas still need to be worked on."

TRAS has separate cutoff scores for male and female offenders, matching supervision style, well-researched interventions, treatments, services, programs and resources to the individual, as opposed to a one-size-fits-all approach. This innovative assessment tool allows TDCJ to fulfill its mission to successfully reintegrate offenders into society by using the best case plans possible to efficiently allocate agency and community resources. "It comes down to, 'Who am I spending my resources on?'" said Marty Martin, Director of Special Projects for CJAD. "To impact public safety, your resources should be spent on the offenders who need them most, not those who need them least." ●