# Use of Engagement Skills in Community Corrections for High-Risk Offenders

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**IN THE LAST** two years, California has seen the most fundamental change in public safety in recent history with passage of the Public Safety Realignment-Assembly Bill (AB) 109. The realignment shifted post-custody supervision of many offenders sentenced to prison from the statewide Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation parole division to county probation departments. Additionally, some offenders who previously would have served a custodial sentence in state prison now serve that time in local jail custody. Of those offenders now serving their custodial time locally, some receive a "split sentence" and leave jail under the supervision of officers employed by probation departments. Counties throughout the state vary widely, ranging from 2 percent to 94 percent, in their use of this split sentencing practice. The County of San Diego is at the state average, with approximately 24 percent of local prison sentences split between local incarceration and mandatory community supervision by probation officers.

Throughout California, probation departments have responded to the influx of over 36,000 Post Release Community Supervision (PRCS) offenders placed under their jurisdiction as a result of the legislation by creating new divisions of armed officers and preparing them to supervise a population of offenders that pose a higher risk than those traditionally seen on probation caseloads. In San Diego County, for example, 73 percent of PRCS offenders and 60 percent of those under mandatory supervision were assessed at high risk to reoffend. This compares with 28 percent of those under traditional probation supervision.

San Diego is the second largest county in the state, with over 3 million residents and 14,000 adult and 4,500 juvenile offenders under supervision. The county anticipated an increase of approximately 2,000 PRCS adult offenders as a result of realignment, a 14 percent relative increase in adults under supervision. To supervise this new population, an additional 108 positions were required—77 of them sworn officers. Because most of the case-carrying officers in the newly formed Post Release Offender (PRO) Division are required to be armed, nearly 11 percent of the officers transferred from existing armed assignments, including High Risk Probation Supervision and Gang Suppression. Many of the rest were promoted from institutional assignments, making the PRO Division their first experience as a case-carrying probation officer.

Due to the large geographic area encompassed by the county, PRO Division units are organized regionally and include specialized caseloads to more closely supervise sex offenders and those offenders released from local custody on split sentences (mandatory supervision offenders or MSOs). As of March 2013, the division actively supervised more than 2,000 offenders, including 1,798 PRCS offenders released from state prison and 225 MSOs released from local custody. Combined, 70 percent of offenders under supervision in the PRO Division pose a high risk to reoffend, 14 percent pose a medium risk, and the remaining 16 percent scored as low risk on the COMPAS risk assessment tool. In terms of the committing offense, 34 percent have committed a property offense, 40 percent a drug- or alcohol-related crime, 12 percent a crime against a person, 6 percent a weapons-related offense, and the remaining 8 percent are classified in the "other" category. A typical PRCS offender can be categorized as White (34 percent), between 25-34 years of age (33 percent), with a drug or alcohol (40 percent) or property (34 percent) committing offense type.

PRO Division caseload ratios are determined by offender type and risk level. Those released from state prison assessed as high risk are supervised on caseloads of 40:1; medium and low risk are supervised on caseloads of 65:1. Those who have received a split sentence and are in the community are supervised at 25:1. The supervision ratios are outlined in the county's mandated realignment plan that was submitted to the state. The element of the plan that is most relevant to the supervision of

offenders states that Post Release Community Offenders will be supervised using supervision and community-based intervention services that adhere to Evidence-Based principles (EBP). Specifically, the plan includes references to the balanced approach, ensuring that the role of the PRO Division officer is that of a case manager and incorporates elements designed to hold offenders accountable and to reduce recidivism through proven engagement techniques, motivational interviewing, and cognitive behavioral interventions. Other elements of the supervision plan include adherence to the risk principle, more intensive supervision of higher-risk offenders, creation of case plans that contain specific referrals to community-based treatment and intervention services, and employment of swift and sure sanctions for noncompliant behavior as well as incentives for compliant behavior.

The commitment outlined in the realignment plan has been reinforced with a grant from the Office of Justice Programs (OJP) in the Smart Probation category. This grant has funded the assignment of a supervising probation officer knowledgeable about EBPs to the PRO Division. This officer's sole purpose is supporting the implementation and training of the practice model outlined above with the case-carrying officers supervising high-risk offenders. The grant has also funded a six-month probation leadership academy based on the idea that EBP cannot be "added on" to probation supervision as usual but must be the result of change that begins with leading by example. The change process requires strong leadership based on both substantive knowledge and the intangible qualities that create followership. The department's experience with change over the past three years has brought home the value of specific leadership training. The department is collaborating with the Center for Criminality and Addiction Research, Training & Application (CCARTA) at the University of California San Diego and with Dr. Christopher Lowenkamp to provide this training. The leadership academy topics relate directly to departmental evidence-based strategies, including quality assurance of Integrated Behavioral Intervention Strategies (IBIS) and case management skills. In addition to the leadership academy for the directors and supervisors, all PRO Division staff have been or will be trained in IBIS.

As important as if not more important than what the officer does is how the officer does it—in other words, how the officer engages with the offender. According to Chief Probation Officer Mack Jenkins, to achieve our mission and produce the best outcomes, we must become law enforcement behaviorists; focusing not only on the crime a person has committed or the terms he or she is ordered to follow, but rather on the most effective ways to change the offender's behavior.

The engagement model in San Diego is based on the integration of two research-based techniques: motivational interviewing and brief cognitive behavioral interventions. Integrated Behavioral Intervention Strategies (IBIS) training brings motivational interviewing and cognitive behavioral skills to San Diego County probation officers as tools that allow for greater engagement with the probationer, leading to reduced recidivism. According to this training design, senior probation officers from each adult and juvenile service, as well as shift leaders from correctional institutions, are trained as coaches and mentors and then participate again with their mentees to support in-class and in vivo opportunities to practice the skills. Seniors and supervisors then provide the support for implementing the skills during interactions with offenders. The long-term support mechanisms include abbreviated training refreshers at unit meetings and regular feedback of live and recorded interactions between officers and offenders. These efforts are provided by the EBP Support Team, the Smart Probation supervisor, and coaches and mentors assigned to the operational units.

## Research Intent

With a commitment to supervise offenders in the PRO division using evidence-based practices, the department has invested in providing IBIS training and practice opportunities to line staff in addition to training senior officers to act as coaches and mentors. However, the question remains how well the IBIS model is being implemented in the PRO Division. Specifically, we wanted to know the level of integration that can be expected within a division with responsibility to maintain public safety by supervising high-risk offenders who, in the past, would have been under parole supervision or in state prison. This research is specifically designed to help community corrections agencies implement engagement-focused supervision in all types of supervision units by adapting training, coaching, and mentoring as needed to meet the needs of officers.

## Research Methods and Questions

This research relied on the use of informal focus groups to answer the research questions. Although this method does not necessarily allow findings to be generalized to all community corrections officers, all high-risk officers, or even all officers in San Diego County, the benefit of interviewing those most affected by the change to the engagement model far outweighs the methodological limitations.

Four sixty-minute focus groups were held in March 2013 in geographically diverse locations in San Diego County. Three of the four focus groups were held with a mix of deputy, senior, and supervising probation officers who are responsible for the community corrections supervision of realigned populations as part of the Post Release Offender (PRO) Division. The fourth focus group included a senior officer and deputy probation officers who are responsible for assessing state prison inmates immediately upon their arrival in the county. This program, the Community Transition Center, also drug-tests returning offenders, provides referrals to appropriate community-based services (including detoxification, inpatient drug treatment, outpatient drug treatment, and mental health services) and, if needed, provides for up to seven days of transitional housing. The last group was a debrief session with the supervising officers from throughout the division. The debrief material was used to inform the discussion of the findings and the creation of the recommendations.

The focus groups were facilitated by probation staff at the director level, accompanied and assisted by either a sworn or support staff at the supervisor level. The focus group proceedings were recorded using a process note procedure. The notes were analyzed for themes; the findings, which are organized by theme, are presented below. The discussion and conclusion are the result of consultation among the authors. Although the research design called for a discussion of the themes with the division supervisors and director, this did not happen due to scheduling difficulties.

In all, 27 deputy probation officers, 5 senior probation officers, and 5 supervising probation officers were included in the four focus groups and the debrief session. As stated above, many of the more seasoned officers (approximately 11 percent) had been transferred from armed positions, including the gang suppression unit and high-risk adult probation supervision. For 8 percent of officers, the PRO Division was the first

assignment they held with the department, while 31 percent of officers had primarily institutional experience, including 1 of the supervising officers. This bears repeating, as it speaks to the limited exposure of these officers to evidence-based and balanced-approach casework in their past assignments.

Approximately 42 percent of the DPOs had been through classroom IBIS training. Although not all of the officers who participated in the focus groups had attended the formal training, they were asked to participate based on the fact that the IBIS information is seeping into the workplace in other ways than the in-class training. For example, all work sites have IBIS posters that remind staff of the key elements of the model, and supervisors are encouraged to discuss the model components at unit meetings.

***Informed Consent:*** Officers were invited to attend the focus group introductory meetings by a supervising probation officer associated with the division. Once at the meeting, officers were provided with a full description of the purposes of the research, an overview of the methods, and the questions that would be asked. All officers were assured that their answers would only be reported in the aggregate and that there were no ramifications to not participating in the focus groups. Each officer was asked if he or she would like to participate and each officer verbally acknowledged having understood the information and assented to continue with the research.

*Research Questions*: The following questions were asked in the focus groups:

1. How did the IBIS training impact you as an officer?
2. How are you using the IBIS skills during office visits? and
3. How are you using IBIS skills during field visits?

The questions were asked several times during the discussion to ensure that each officer had a chance to express his or her opinions. Responses were encouraged from officers who tended not to participate proactively in the conversation, although no officers were required to respond and not all officers responded to all of the questions.

## Findings

### *How Did the Training Impact You?*

When asked how the training impacted them, many of the officers responded by offering feedback on the training itself. The next two paragraphs summarize that feedback. Many officers felt that the training, which lasts three days, was too long. For those who participated in three days as a coach and then an additional three days as a mentor with their mentees, the feeling was doubled. Many respondents stated that there was too much theoretical and background information and they would have preferred more time spent on hands-on practice of the skills. Officers reported that while they were able to practice the skills in the classroom, the practice did not translate well to their work environments. This was particularly true of officers assigned to work in an institution at the time they participated in the trainings.

### *It Wasn't the Right Time*

The timing of the training (which included preparation for the training and where the officer was assigned at the time of the training) was an important theme emerging from this question. Participation in the training immediately upon being hired was disconcerting to some new officers who had not yet mastered the basics of the job yet were asked to spend three days in training for a skill that to them seemed out of context. Another issue was participating in IBIS training while assigned to work in an institution. Officers in this situation reported that the application of the skills in the institutions seemed limited. Further, they reported that it was unrealistic for them to be trained in these skills in an environment in which there was little expectation that they could be used, and then to be expected to have retained the information and skills perhaps 18 months later when promoted or transferred to a case-carrying position.

### *We Already Do That!*

Many officers expressed statements such as: "We already do that" or "They just gave a new name to skill we already had." Some officers linked the training to skills or training they had acquired in previous employment, including as a social worker, in the military, or as a treatment provider. For many more, however, the "we already do that" was more of a linking to the skills that they already use as a probation officer.

Because this understanding was so prevalent, we provide some of the most common examples. One of these is effective use of approval, one of the core correctional practices that involves identifying the inappropriate behavior and telling the probationer that the officer disapproves of the action; asking the probationer to identify the short-term consequences of the behavior; asking the probationer to identify long-term consequences of the action; asking the probationer to identify and discuss the prosocial alternatives to the unacceptable behavior; and contracting with the probationer to use prosocial alternatives in the future. Effective use of approval was often characterized by the officers as positive reinforcement. Statements such as, "I always tell the offenders when they are doing good job" were used to show that effective use of approval was a skill already widely in use.

In the same vein, most officers felt that they had always used effective use of disapproval. Statements like, "I don't hesitate to tell offenders when they have done something wrong" and "Arrest is the ultimate use of disproval" show how they overlaid the training onto existing activities. Finally, most of the officers who responded this way also felt they already had role clarification as a skill in their tool box. They thought of role clarification as going over terms and conditions of supervision and ensuring that offenders knew the rights and responsibilities of the officers. Some officers characterized this as using the IBIS skills informally rather formally. Many officers used phrases such as, "I don't use them by name," "I do them verbally rather than using the worksheets," and "I will use some of them but the ones that require a formal procedure are not realistic" to show that they use IBIS skills in an informal versus formal way.

On the other hand, some officers reported that a focus on thinking errors using the formal IBIS tools during interactions was important and useful. One officer specifically mentioned that using the RACE skills helped to focus the offender and the interaction in a positive way. The RACE skills are 1) Recognizing high-risk influences that tempt the offender, 2) Avoiding high-risk influences whenever possible, 3) Coping with high-risk influences responsibly, and 4) Evaluating progress after each encounter in which Recognizing, Avoiding, and Coping were used.

A related theme was that the IBIS skills improved their communication in general and the motivational interviewing skills helped them specifically to gather information in a more organized fashion. Comments grouped into this theme were generally prefaced with a statement that the respondent was an experienced interviewer but that the skills, when used in interviewing, produced more information—and that information came from a different point of view. The most positive statement in this area came from

an officer who noted that the information collected through the interview process was now not so cut and dried; rather, he could see the relationship of the information to the lives that had been affected by the offender, including the life of the offender himself. This was seen as a positive reason for the training to be supported by the department. Officers specifically mentioned that the IBIS skills help the officer understand more about the offender's needs and bring a new view of speaking to youth in institutions.

Some officers were very clear about the benefits of using the skills. For these officers, having the tools to go beyond what offenders reported as their actions and decisions to the underlying thinking errors was seen as very helpful. The ability to point out to an offender where and when thinking errors were occurring was seen as positive. At least two of the officers specifically pointed out that the behavioral analysis chart helped both officers and offenders see what led to the current situation. Officers also reported that this tool made it easier for offenders to see the link between choices and behavior. For another officer, using the skills helped him focus on one or two of the most important items per visit.

The use of skills, however, was at times seen as a double-edged sword. While some officers acknowledged that the skills worked; others saw this as a problem. For example, an officer specifically identified reflections as a good way to get offenders to open up and provide information, but at the same time the officer felt caught in a bind of having to then "cut off" the offender from "spending 10 minutes telling the officer about his mother."

### *Great Training But...*

Many of the officers observed that the IBIS skills were a positive set of skills to use with offenders but that the officer was not the right one to use them. Some officers felt that these skills were best left to treatment providers, residential substance abuse treatment, or juvenile officers. Others identified systemic barriers to implementing the skills, including high caseloads and the related lack of time; this led to many comments that the skills were too time consuming. More than one officer mentioned that, despite directions to the contrary, an offender had admitted to a new crime while undergoing the behavioral analysis. This was a fairly widespread concern and one that was cited as a reason why case-carrying officers should not utilize these skills.

One officer saw the value in the skills but felt that the results would not be apparent in the time frame of the officer's responsibility, and therefore it was better left to someone who would have a longer-term relationship with the offender. Another stated that it was difficult to hold an offender accountable while at the same time trying to motivate the offender to change. Finally, while one of the officers who participated in the focus group stated that she was open to the use of the skills, she felt that many other officers were closed-minded and that this was a barrier to implementation.

### *Offender's Point of View and Motivation Level*

Some of the officers' comments related predominantly to how they believed these skills were impacting the offender. For example, one comment reflected a commonly held belief was that while the skills are valuable for officers, they will only affect those offenders who choose to be affected by them. Related comments came from officers who felt that only those offenders who were tired of going to jail would be open to change. Also, an officer mentioned the perception that an offender's motivation to change was the highest immediately after being released from custody and then declined over time. An officer expressed it this way: "Some will get it, no surprise that most won't get it~many of them (offenders) stopped developing at 12 (years old)." Other officers acknowledged that the offender was motivated to change by what happened in the office visit, but felt the motivation did not persist once the offender left the office; the following comment represents this viewpoint: "the department's changes have good intentions but the outcomes will not change." Mental illness in offenders was also seen as a barrier to engagement.

One officer suspected that offenders will have increased respect for officers who consistently communicate using the IBIS methods. According to another officer, one of her offenders noticed that the IBIS techniques being used were similar to those the offender experienced in treatment and commented that this is a change for offenders, as they, "are not used to being asked to think, they are used to being told what to do."

### *Using IBIS Skills in the Field*

All of the findings up to this point were in response to the first two research questions: "How did the training impact you?" and "How are you using the IBIS skills during office visits?" This last section, however, examines responses to the third research question: "How are you using the IBIS skills during home visits?" The responses to this question were very different from the answers to the first two, because they were not directly about the IBIS skills. Instead, they were about the difficulty that officers experienced in using engagement skills because of the perceived conflict of such skills with officer safety. Some officers felt that the skills undermined their authority and their role, especially during home visits.

All of the officers who conduct field visits in offenders' homes focused on the need for constant awareness of their surroundings and of those in the home. Their standard operating procedure for home visits is to handcuff the offender in the home until the home is "cleared." Comments such as these epitomize officer responses to this question: "IBIS does not work with an offender in handcuffs" and "Anytime we show up at an offender's home uninvited, sometimes with up to ten personnel, the tension level goes up, it is difficult to put IBIS skills into those situations."

Some further probing, elicited some positives. Officers did verbalize that incorporating some of the IBIS skills into the home visit could potentially turn a negative experience into a more positive one. The IBIS skills were also seen as a way to increase family buy-in, which officers saw as important. In addition, officers saw use of the IBIS skills as a way to reinforce the idea of a respectful interchange and help them to maintain their professional demeanor during the home visit. Interestingly, one group of officers expressed that often the most open period of a home visit was once an offender was placed under arrest and was in the back of the probation vehicle being transported to jail. There was consensus that this period of time could be used for engagement and that IBIS skills, at least verbal ones, could be used during this time.

## Discussion and Recommendations

Based on the findings outlined above, we have developed the following recommendations that we believe will help our department and others to bridge the gap between training and implementation of an engagement model. Each recommendation will be followed by a discussion of how it was arrived at.

### *In-Office Support*

The training model that has been implemented requires officers to audiotape themselves using the skills in the office. Coaches review the audiotapes and provide feedback. While we believe that the tapes are a useful training tool, the responses in the focus groups suggest that they are not enough. Therefore our first recommendation is to provide additional in-office support for officers in the first four weeks following training. The support will include ensuring that all officers who are trained meet with their in-office coach within the first week after the training. This engagement will ensure that the officer has a chance to debrief the training and get answers to any questions that were not answered in the training.

Second, based on feedback and observation, we recommend a focus on ensuring that written materials are available in each office. Coaches will be responsible for verifying that staff have their training manual at their desk and will also provide a newly developed desk reference developed by our EBP operational support team. These materials provide a "quick start" guide to the steps of the cognitive behavioral and motivational interviewing skills, as well as information about stages of change. In addition, the coach will set up direct observation time with each staff to offer the practical advice on when and how the skills can be incorporated into office visits.

Because supervising officers are a crucial part of the sustained use of IBIS, the last component of ongoing IBIS support will be training and support for supervisors. While most supervisors have completed two 8-hour IBIS overview classes, the EBP operational support team will ensure supervisors' continued engagement through regular in-service training of IBIS skills in unit meetings and feedback on observed and recorded officer and offender interactions.

### *Be the Change We Want to See*

This recommendation is fundamentally a re-imaging of the role of the community corrections officers from a traditional model of compliance monitoring and "waiting to fail" the offender to one of a proactive change manager, a "behaviorist." This recommendation requires change and support at the top and through all of the ranks. More specifically, it requires that the language of change be incorporated into all communication, from training to the writing of policy and procedure to informal communication in meetings, memos, and emails. This recommendation also incorporates the idea of a formal communication from the agency head to all officers upon promotion to supervisor. The communication could combine a message of congratulations with clear and specific information about the role of a supervisor in an agency that has made a commitment to the engagement model.

This does not require a complete U-turn from our original direction, but rather a conscious building on what we have while incorporating change. Coaches and the support team can begin to use the idea that officers have parts of the skills already integrated into their tool kit to support the use of the full IBIS skills. For example, many officers cited examples of positive affirmations when describing their effective use of approval. While the elements of positive affirmation are inherent in the skill, there is more to this skill than that. Coaches need to communicate how to build upon the skills that officers are already using and are comfortable with.

Understanding the perspective of the staff will allow coaches to start where the officer is and acknowledge that the first elements of the skill are already in use. Then building on that, coaches may be more successful in showing the officer how to utilize all the steps of the skill.

### *After the Flash*

Building on findings above, including the findings that 1) offenders are often more motivated immediately upon release, 2) an arrest or flash incarceration can be an effective sanction (use of disapproval), and 3) officers often feel unsure of when to use the IBIS skills, we recommend more formal guidelines for the use of IBIS skills. While this may prove to be a short-lived necessity, we feel that it is important to 1) create an environment where officers understand the value of the skills and when they have the most impact and 2) ensure that new officers who come into case-carrying assignments will be trained in the use of the IBIS skills in a consistent way.

The first place that IBIS skills should be used is during the initial appointments between the offender and the officer. These meetings are a perfect setting for the use of role clarification and effective use of approval. As the appointments move into case planning, motivational interviewing skills and acknowledgement of stages of change are vital to move these appointments from compliance visits to opportunities for engagement.

The second place that all officers should be using IBIS skills is during the mandatory office appointment that offenders must attend after a flash incarceration. Cognitive behavioral skills such as effective use of disapproval and role clarification can reinforce the use of a flash incarceration as the response to a noncompliant event.

### *Managing Motivation*

One of the tenets of offender change is that motivation is a variable state and that offenders, like the rest of us, are always somewhere on the continuum of motivation. The finding that officers still at times see motivation as a static factor—one that is either present or absent—suggests a need to build into the coach-officer interaction a specific conversation about an offender's stage of change. To facilitate this, the "quick start" guides mentioned above will incorporate specific information about stages of change adapted from the National Institute of Corrections materials.

Once the stage of change is identified, the coach can then offer input about which of the tools from the IBIS tool kit may be appropriate. This will encourage officers to see that offenders at all stages of change and levels of motivation can be helped by these tools.

## Conclusion

This qualitative look at the implementation of IBIS was very helpful to our Evidence Based Practices Operational Support team as well as the supervising officer assigned to assist our newest division to incorporate the use of the IBIS skills into their everyday work. The findings and recommendations will guide us as we move to full implementation of the engagement model. Our hope is that they will also be useful to jurisdictions across the country and beyond who are facing similar road bumps on their journey.