Probation Officer Attitudes Towards Staff Training Aimed at Reducing Rearrest

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FOR THE LAST several decades, researchers have strived to identify "what works" in reducing offender recidivism. As a result, the principles of effective intervention (PEI) were developed to help shift community corrections from a control-oriented approach towards a more evidence-based rehabilitative paradigm (Cullen & Gendreau, 2000; Gendreau, 1996). The PEI are based on the General Personality and Cognitive Social Learning (GPCSL) perspective on criminal behavior, which emphasizes the role that cognitive processes (e.g., thinking) play in both the development of the person's personality and their engagement in antisocial behaviors (Bonta & Andrews, 2017). Correctional scholars have identified 15 of these principles, including those related to strategies and tools that correctional practitioners can implement including targeted interventions, enhancement of offender motivation, and balancing rewards and sanctions (Andrews & Dowden, 2006; Gendreau et al., 2010). Undisputedly, the most notable of the PEI are the principles of risk, need, and responsivity (or RNR). These three principles outline the importance of using a validated risk assessment instrument to identify one's risk for recidivism and then targeting the individual criminogenic needs (e.g., antisocial attitude, personality, peers)

of higher risk offenders with cognitive-behavioral interventions (Bonta & Andrews, 2017). Thousands of primary studies and several meta-analyses now provide support for the PEI, which has demonstrated that greater adherence to its principles is associated with larger reductions in offender recidivism (Bonta & Andrews, 2017; Koehler et al., 2013).

Despite the appeal and promise of the PEI, researchers have often noted challenges associated with translating these principles into real-world practice (Bonta et al., 2008; Miller & Maloney, 2013; Viglione et al., 2015; Viglione, 2019). For example, research on the implementation of risk assessments has generally found that probation officers (POs) often did not consider the assessment results when making case management decisions, because they did not trust them (Krysik & LeCroy, 2002; Viglione et al., 2015), did not understand them, or did not see how they added value to their work (Viglione et al., 2015; Viglione, 2017). Prior research has also identified several organizational factors that appear to facilitate or hinder the successful implementation of evidence-based practices (EBPs). For example, this scholarship has indicated that organizations engaging in transformational leadership (e.g., motivation and inspiration),

promoting a positive climate with low conflict, and providing clear goals and missions can influence staff perceptions and attitudes towards EBPs (Aarons, 2006; Friedmann et al., 2007). Organizations providing support to staff and encouraging greater knowledge development opportunities were also more likely to witness successful EBP implementation efforts (Friedmann et al., 2007). When staff did not believe change efforts (e.g., new skills trainings) would be successful, however, they were less likely to be receptive towards them (Farrell et al., 2011; Tesluk et al., 1995).

Core Correctional Practices and Correctional Training Programs

Considering implementation challenges, experts have developed a set of core correctional practices (CCPs) that are designed to increase the effectiveness of correctional programs (Dowden & Andrews, 2004). Based on the GPCSL perspective, CCPs include eight empirically validated intervention strategies to promote positive client behavioral change. These strategies include: (1) effective use of authority, (2) anticriminal modeling, (3) effective reinforcement, (4) effective disapproval, (5) structured learning, (6) problem solving, (7) cognitive restructuring, and (8) relationship skills (Gendreau et al., 2010).

Research has found that greater adherence to the CCPs is associated with improved community supervision outcomes (e.g., reduced rates of recidivism) (Dowden & Andrews, 2004; Farringer et al., 2019; Lowenkamp et al., 2006). To assist agencies in translating the CCP research into practice, several community supervision training programs have been developed. These include the Effective Practices in Community Supervision (EPICS) (Smith et al., 2012), Staff Training Aimed at Reducing Recidivism (STARR) (Robinson et al., 2011), and the Strategic Training in Community Supervision (STICS) (Bourgon et al., 2010). Consistent across these community supervision training programs, officers are educated in the PEI and taught how to incorporate the CCPs into their routine interactions with offenders. In addition, these training programs include a coaching component, where newly trained officers are paired with a coach to provide ongoing training and support as officers attempt to implement newly learned skills in their everyday routine.

Prior evaluations have found that training in these programs has resulted in increased officer adherence to PEI and improved supervision outcomes (e.g., recidivism). Trained officers have been found to spend more time addressing offenders' criminogenic needs (Labrecque et al., 2013), were more likely to use CCPs (Labrecque & Smith, 2017; Smith et al., 2012), and supervised offenders with lower recidivism rates relative to untrained officers (Bonta et al., 2011, 2019; Hicks et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2011; 2012). Furthermore, prior research has revealed greater recidivism reductions among officers who used CCPs with greater fidelity (Latessa et al., 2013). Chadwick and colleagues (2015) conducted a meta-analysis on supervision training programs and concluded that officer training accounted for about a 14 percent reduction in offender recidivism. While this literature base has indicated the importance for training officers in the use of CCPs, this research often fails to consider staff perceptions and experiences, which can affect the success or failure of these training programs.

The few studies that have examined the experiences of officers who participated in correctional training programs report that those who engaged in training and coaching sessions often felt more confident in their understanding of the PEI and their ability to use trained skills with the offenders on their caseload (Bourgon et al., 2011; Lowenkamp et al., 2012; 2013). Lowenkamp and colleagues (2012) found officers trained in STARR had positive perceptions of the peer coaching experience and reported both an increased understanding of how to use STARR skills and likelihood they would use the skills following coaching sessions. Lowenkamp and colleagues (2013) conducted a pre/post assessment of POs who participated in a three-day training program. This study found that officers who participated in training reported decreased feelings of complacency and an increased desire to learn more (Lowenkamp et al., 2013).

This preliminary evidence suggests that participation in training programs may help improve officer perceptions and attitudes towards reform. This research, however, is also limited and there have been few investigations into staff perceptions of and attitudes towards specific community supervision officer training programs, coaches, and agency support. This line of inquiry is especially critical as POs serve as front-line policy implementers (Lipsky, 1980), and their attitudes and how they interpret policy can directly support or impede change efforts (e.g., Fulton et al., 1997; Steiner et al., 2011; Viglione, 2017). The goal of the current study was to examine the attitudes and experiences of federal probation officers trained in STARR, including PO attitudes and experience with STARR, STARR training, coaching, and perceptions of agency support.

Method

Study Site

This study took place in the United States Probation Office for the Middle District of Florida (MDFL). This district covers 35 counties across five divisional offices and two satellite offices. The district first began implementing STARR across its offices in 2017, starting with several supervisors and POs. Since then, STARR training progressed in a cohort model, with probation staff sent to training in small groups on a voluntary basis or based on recommendations from supervisors or other staff. Trained staff completed an initial three-and-a-half-day training. Following the successful completion of initial training, staff were assigned a peer coach (an advanced STARR user who completed coach-specific training) to whom they submitted monthly audiotapes of skill use for feedback and were required to attend one booster session every other month.

Data Collection

The research team developed a survey that was distributed electronically to all POs[1] (N = 96) in MDFL in November 2018 via Qualtrics (Snow & Mann, 2013). The goal of this survey was to assess staff experiences with and attitudes towards STARR, use of CCPs and evidence-based practices (EBPs), and attitudes towards the organization (e.g., climate, cynicism, leadership). The survey included both validated survey measures and measures developed by the research team to specifically measure attitudes towards STARR. The survey took approximately 20 minutes to complete. Officers were given five weeks to complete the survey, with reminders weekly for nonrespondents. Of the 96 staff members who received the survey, 90 percent completed the survey (N = 86).

Sample

Of the 86 staff who completed the survey, 60 percent (n = 52) were POs while 40 percent (n = 34) were supervisors (see Table 1). The majority were male (58 percent), white (69 percent), held a master's degree or higher (59 percent), and worked for MDFL for approximately 10 years. Of those who supervised an active caseload (n = 73), the average caseload size was 54. Approximately 53 percent (n = 46) of the sample had received STARR training at the time of the survey. Of those trained in STARR, 59 percent (n = 27) were trained users while 41 percent (n = 19) were trained coaches. (See Table 1, next page.)

Measures

Attitudes towards training. Officers who reported receiving STARR training were asked to report on three items measuring their satisfaction with STARR, measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Items included "STARR training was easy to comprehend," "I value the skills learned in STARR training," and "I felt motivated after attending STARR training." Next, respondents were asked to report their overall satisfaction with the STARR training and booster sessions. These items were both measured on the same 5-point Likert scale. We report both mean scores on these items as well as a calculation of *satisfaction*, which was created through the sum of responses coded as "agree" and "strongly agree."

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[1] Only post-release supervision officers were included in this study.

Attitudes towards coaches. For trained officers who reported currently having an assigned coach, we asked a series of seven questions regarding their perceptions of and experiences with their coach (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). These items included "My coach is available when I need help," My coach helped me improve my use of STARR," "My coach provides valuable feedback," I do not trust my coach's feedback," "I am comfortable asking my coach a question," and "My coach provides feedback in a timely manner."

Agency support. All trained officers were asked whether they believed MDFL had policies in place to support their use of STARR (1 = no, 2 = somewhat, 3 = yes).

Overall experience. All officers trained in STARR were asked to report their overall experience. This item was measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = very poor to 5 = very good).

Qualitative assessment of STARR perceptions. Last, we asked both trained and untrained officers an open-ended question regarding their perceptions of STARR. We separated data based on training status, reporting qualitative perceptions of STARR for trained versus untrained officers.

Analytic Plan

Data was exported from Qualtrics and into SPSS version 26 (2019). A series of descriptive analyses were conducted to examine staff attitudes and experiences with STARR. The qualitative data was uploaded in Atlas.ti for qualitative data management and analysis (Muhr, 1991). In Atlas.it, the first two authors coded the data using a line-by-line coding strategy, followed by iterative thematic coding to develop and identify common themes across officer perceptions of STARR (Rudes & Portillo, 2012).

Results

Overall, trained officers reported positive perceptions regarding STARR training (see Table 2). Approximately 83 percent of the sample reported that STARR training was easy to comprehend and 72 percent reported they valued the skills they learned in training. Less than half of officers reported they felt more motivated at work after receiving STARR training. With regards to overall perceptions of STARR training, approximately 74 percent of trained officers were satisfied, while about 64 percent were satisfied with booster trainings. However, less

TABLE 1
Survey Sample Characteristics (N = 86)

Variable	% (n)	M	SD	Min	Max
Position					
USPO	60.4% (52)				
Supervisor (Sr. USPO)	39.5% (34)				
STARR					
Trained PO	53.4% (46)				
Untrained PO	46.5% (40)				
STARR Role					
User	31.4% (27)				
Coach	22.1% (19)				
Gender					
Male	58.1% (50)				
Female	41.9% (36)				
Race/Ethnicity					
White	68.6% (59)				
Nonwhite	25.6% (22)				
Education					
Bachelor's degree	39.5% (34)				
Master's degree or above	58.5% (48)				
Caseload		54.3	54.3	30.0	350
Age		41.5	7.6	29.0	56
Tenure		9.9	7.4	0.3	27

Note: PO = Probation Officer

TABLE 2.
Trained Officer Perceptions of STARR Training, Coaches, and Agency Support

Item	M	SD	Min	Max	% Satisfied (n)
Training (n=42)					
STARR training was easy to comprehend	4.1	1.5	0	5	83.4% (35)
I value the skills I learned in STARR training	3.8	1.5	0	5	71.5% (30)
I need more STARR booster trainings	2.4	1.5	0	5	23.8% (10)
After STARR training, I felt more motivated at work	3.1	1.4	0	5	37.5% (15)
I am satisfied with STARR training	3.9	1.5	0	5	73.8% (31)
I am satisfied with STARR booster training	3.6	1.6	0	5	64.3% (27)
Coach (n=40)					
My coach provides helpful feedback	3.9	1.6	0	5	71.8% (28)
My coach provides feedback in a timely manner	3.5	1.7	0	5	57.5% (23)
I feel comfortable asking my coach a question about STARR	4.0	1.6	0	5	75.0% (30)
I do not trust the feedback provided by my coach	1.3	1.0	0	5	5.0% (2)
The feedback my coach provides is valuable	4.0	1.5	0	5	77.5% (31)
My coach helped me improve my use of STARR skills	3.9	1.3	0	5	68.5% (26)
My coach is available to assist me when I need help	4.0	1.3	0	5	62.8% (26)
Agency Support (n=37)	2.6	0.6	1	3	91.9% (34)
Overall experience with STARR (n=42)	3.5	1.3	0	5	64.3% (27)

than one-quarter reported they needed more booster training sessions.

Attitudes towards coaches were similarly positive. Of those officers with an assigned coach at the time of the survey, more than three quarters reported their coach's feedback was valuable and the vast majority were comfortable asking their coach a STARR-related question, felt their coach provided helpful feedback, and believed their coach helped them improve their use of STARR. Only 5 percent of respondents reported they did not trust the feedback their coach provided. Most officers reported that their coach was available to assist them when they needed help and felt their coach provided feedback in a timely manner.

Trained officers largely felt MDFL had policies in place to support their use of STARR. Approximately 92 percent reported the agency either had policies in place or "somewhat" had policies in place to support STARR. About 64 percent of trained officers reported being satisfied with their overall experience with STARR.

Four main themes emerged during analysis of the qualitative survey data relating to both facilitators and potential barriers to STARR implementation.

Benefits of STARR. First, trained officers ($n = 52$) perceived several benefits of STARR. These officers tended to share the belief that STARR was a great training program for newly hired officers and for those who were not yet comfortable having meaningful conversations with offenders on supervision. Trained officers discussed how use of STARR skills impacted their caseloads in positive ways. More specifically, they noted the STARR training program provided guidance for purposeful, intentional contacts. That is, they felt more prepared to discuss specific ways offenders on their caseloads may change the way they think and behave, and it helped to keep them on track to address the issues most important for individual success. Officers also mentioned the use of skills helped them to avoid long debates and aimless conversations. PO Donaldson[2] explained, "I think STARR is excellent for new officers and officers who are not comfortable in meaningful conversations with persons under supervision." PO Eaton shared a similar perception:

STARR makes my job more fulfilling regardless of what the actual outcomes may be because it has allowed me to create better relationships and more trust with those I supervise, as well as their families. This alone may help in the reduction of recidivism, as people are more likely to be forthcoming about issues or problems they are having.

Barriers to Implementation. Trained officers also noted several potential barriers to successful implementation. First, trained officers argued that STARR was not a "new" program. They perceived it to be similar to other cognitive-based trainings they had received in the past, just with a different name. Many felt the STARR skills were no different than the ones they already possessed and that those officers who communicated well have always been doing STARR, it just now has a label. Some officers reported that those who need STARR training to teach them how to communicate should likely not be a PO at all. Alternatively, there were several officers who believed STARR would not be a lasting program or expectation across the district. These officers argued that new initiatives were introduced frequently, and they did not believe this program would be maintained long-term. The following fieldnotes highlight these findings:

Before learning STARR, I had several other cognitive based trainings in how to effectively engage with offenders (BITS [Brief Intervention ToolS], MRT [Moral Reconation Therapy]). STARR is the same thing, with a different name.

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I believe that I have been using forms of STARR throughout my career, so my motivation has remained the same before and after. STARR is just an easier way to plan and deliver information in a measurable way.

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I have not seen the buy-in from other officers, and since no more officers are being sent for training, most of the ones who have been trained are starting to think that STARR is on its way out.

Some officers questioned the scientific

evidence surrounding STARR and were concerned that the use of STARR would not result in recidivism reductions. These individuals noted that either they had personally not seen any change in the behaviors or thinking of offenders they have attempted STARR with, or they had not read any research that reported successful outcomes. Additionally, they noted that STARR may be beneficial in addressing specific situations (e.g., noncompliance), but ultimately, they did not believe it would result in reduced reoffending. There was an additional concern that some of the STARR skills were more effective than others and that not all offenders on their caseload would respond to STARR skills positively. An additional noted challenge was a lack of comfort using STARR skills. Several officers argued the program was too structured and scripted and they felt unnatural and robotic when they attempted the skills. Other officers reported they were not comfortable using the skills with higher risk offenders, as these individuals were often less open to engaging in these types of interactions and their lower risk and moderate risk cases were often more open to change. This finding is illustrated below:

STARR provides some tools to address certain situations and it takes away any personal tone. However, I don't believe that it [STARR] will actually reduce recidivism.

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STARR is a very structured, scripted approach to supervision, and many officers are not comfortable with it. The offenders I have used skills on to address noncompliance have all ended up in court, so I have not seen any changes in their behavior or thinking. I'm not really sure if it's helping or not.

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I understand that STARR should be utilized more on the higher risk cases but in my experience, the higher risk cases are less open to participation in the skill. I have found it more useful with the low/moderate and moderate cases, of which are more open to change or are teetering on the edge of antisocial behavior.

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[2] All names are pseudonyms to protect participant confidentiality.

Implementation Challenges. Trained officers reported several specific implementation challenges. First, several officers noted the challenge of coordinating with their assigned coach (or user) when they were located within a different office. This made coordinating schedules more challenging and removed the ability to meet face to face to discuss feedback or problem-solve in real-time situations. Officers also argued there was a lack of accountability. For example, some respondents described that users would not always provide audio recorded skills for coaches to review, and coaches would not always provide feedback in a timely manner. Officer Jacobsen described this challenge:

> Many officers do not follow all of the STARR protocols. This is a function of them not doing what they are supposed to do, for example users not providing recordings to their coach for feedback and coaches not providing feedback to users. Accountability has been very frustrating. This sends the wrong message to those who are trained and do what they are supposed to do and those who are not trained yet.

Other respondents echoed this challenge, noting that there was no process in place to encourage or even require officers to engage in these key components of the STARR process (submission of audiotapes and provision of feedback).

Perceptions of Untrained Officers. Untrained officers shared some similar positive perceptions of STARR. The main perceived benefit was that STARR provided officers with a tool to communicate with offenders more effectively. They believed that use of skills could help make supervision a positive experience as it teaches officers to communicate in a non-confrontational manner. Untrained officers also argued STARR provided multiple avenues for officers to intervene in attempts to reduce client recidivism. Additionally, untrained officers argued that STARR was beneficial for offenders on supervision. They believed it encouraged officers to focus on each offender's specific needs while also encouraging them to recognize and think about their behaviors.

> STARR is a way to communicate more effectively with those on supervision to discuss items that can make the term of supervision a positive experience.

STARR is an additional tool used to assist with client's success. It provides additional avenues of approach and response for the officer to use in assisting clients and reduce their recidivism.

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I like that STARR provides guidance for purposeful driven contacts with the persons under supervision. I believe having intentional contact with our cases is vital to helping them try to succeed and change the way they think and behave.

Untrained officers also reported several negative perceptions of STARR. First, they reported hesitations about audio recording their interactions with clients. They believed this would be counterproductive to building rapport. Untrained officers also shared the belief that use of STARR would not result in recidivism reductions, believing that those who are trained in STARR have seen little difference in their violation rates and that it may be a waste of their time. Additionally, untrained officers argued that STARR was "no different than motivational interviewing" and did not perceive it as a new program. They also worried that use of the skills would be awkward, unnatural, and too scripted. Lastly, untrained officers believed that participating in STARR would require a great deal of time commitment. They argued that they already had difficulty completing their required tasks, and worried about adding additional responsibilities on their plate. The following excerpts from fieldnotes demonstrate these findings.

> I have heard that the communication techniques utilized are effective and can enhance an officer's skill. However, most people I have spoken with do not agree with the practice of video/audio recordings with persons on supervision. As an experienced officer it feels counterproductive in building good rapport with individuals to ask to record conversations for training purposes.

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The skills supported by the STARR training are useful but due to the overly regimented time commitment the

officers/users are having difficulty completing the required tasks.

These examples highlight that although untrained officers appear to view the potential of STARR to improve communication with clients, several barriers exist that might impede their ability to use STARR skills according to practice. Officers perceived similarity of STARR training with other agency efforts and training might present an especially difficult challenge for correctional agencies to manage during implementation efforts.

Discussion

The current study examined PO attitudes toward and perceptions of the STARR community supervision officer training program. Overall, survey results suggested that trained POs reported positive perceptions of STARR training. A majority of trained officers perceived STARR skills as useful in managing their caseloads. They also recognized the important role coaches played in providing feedback and helping support fellow officers in their understanding and application of skills. However, our analyses also indicated that among trained officers, less than half reported they felt more motivated at work after participating in the training.

Qualitative data offer insight into officer attitudes towards the implementation process, highlighting several barriers and potential explanations for why officers in this study might have felt less motivated after participating in STARR training. Consistent with survey findings, trained and untrained officers perceived STARR as a beneficial skillset that helped guide and structure conversations with the individuals they supervised. Officers believed STARR provided a navigational road map to engage in more positive interactions and meaningful conversations with offenders on their caseload. This is a positive finding, given that prior research has illustrated a major goal of officer training programs is to encourage POs to take on the role of a "change agent" (Bourgon et al., 2012). Furthermore, it supports prior research that officers who engage in training might be likely to focus on rehabilitative efforts and goals (Fulton et al., 1997).

However, both trained and untrained officers were doubtful about the effectiveness of STARR in reducing offender recidivism. In fact, analyses suggested that some officers viewed STARR as no different than any other

cognitive-based training they previously received. These findings are consistent with prior literature demonstrating that organizational reform can be challenging and even impeded if staff are less likely to believe in the success of the change effort (Farrell et al., 2011; Tesluk et al., 1995). If POs do not see the value that STARR adds, then achieving officer buy-in might be especially challenging for supervision agencies and can potentially hinder overall effectiveness of the training programs. Additional results suggest this might be compounded by challenges in meeting with coaches, receiving feedback about skill use, or accountability of trained officers.

Additionally, trained POs identified hesitancy in using STARR skills with higher risk offenders, noting these individuals may be resistant to the application of the skills and to change more generally. While this is not surprising given previous work in this area (e.g., Viglione, 2017), these findings reiterate the need to further develop trainings and opportunities to practice skills for particularly challenging situations.

Policy Implications

Findings from the current study can inform several strategies to help support implementation efforts moving forward. First, supervision agencies should develop specific strategies to incorporate mid-level managers into the implementation and change process (Kras et al., 2017). This would take the stress of accountability away from coaches and onto supervisors, who can then work in conjunction with users and coaches to support STARR skill use. Previous research has consistently highlighted the key role leadership plays in supporting change efforts (Aarons, 2006; Friedmann et al., 2007). Ensuring that mid-level managers are well-versed in STARR can set them up to communicate positively about the training program and its value while empowering them to play an active role in the reinforcement and accountability process.

Second, this study identified several areas that should be addressed in training efforts, including an emphasis on the scientific evidence supporting the use of STARR and similar training programs. Agencies must make the value added by the program very clear (Lin, 2000), especially given the time requirements associated with participation. Agencies should also emphasize a discussion of reasonable expectations. That is, even when officers implement best practices and

STARR skills, they will still experience failures (Butts, 2012). Openly communicating about reasonable expectations may help officers reconcile their use of STARR skills and their experiences. Additionally, officers may need to be given more opportunities to practice and role-play particularly challenging situations. Agencies may consider asking trained officers about their most difficult cases when they would be reluctant to use a STARR skill in order to develop training exercises.

Limitations

While the current study provides several key data regarding staff perceptions and attitudes towards STARR training, implementation processes, and perceptions of agency support, it is not without limitations. First, this study relied on data from a single federal probation district located in one state. Thus, the findings presented here may not generalize to other federal probation agencies located in different jurisdictions or having a different organizational structure. Nonetheless, study findings are consistent with implementation research concerning the challenges that supervision agencies and line-level officers experience when using and translating PEI into practice. Second, this study assessed POs' attitudinal evaluations towards STARR training and implementation processes. Future research should seek to examine how and to what extent officers' perceptions of STARR and of training curriculums more generally influence their use of STARR skills and the effects on supervision outcomes (e.g., recidivism). In part, it is important to understand whether officers with negative perceptions towards STARR are less likely to use skills with fidelity, and what impact their skill usage may have on recidivism.

Conclusion

The current study provided an examination of attitudes and perceptions of federal POs towards STARR training and implementation processes. The findings of this study identified several important barriers that might prevent officers from adhering to the PEI or using the CCPs with the offenders they supervise. This study suggests the majority of officers hold positive perceptions of STARR, which is an encouraging finding given the proliferation of this training model across the federal system. While we also identified implementation challenges, these provide a starting point for updating implementation efforts. By identifying possible barriers to reform, agencies can

then implement practices to help officers in their training and continued use of best practices. In the case of the district studied here, the MDFL was able to use the results from the current study to inform their implementation planning for the next three to five years. This type of data-driven approach is encouraged as it sets agencies up to better support their staff during implementation efforts and succeed overall.

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