

# National Association of Probation Executives EXECUTIVE EXCHANGE

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## INFORMATION ABOUT EXECUTIVE EXCHANGE

*Executive Exchange*, the journal of the National Association of Probation Executives (NAPE), publishes articles, reports, book and periodical reviews, commentaries, and news items of interest to community corrections administrators. The contents of the articles or other materials contained in *Executive Exchange* do not reflect the endorsements, official attitudes, or positions of the Association, the Correctional Management Institute of Texas, or the George J. Beto Criminal Justice Center at Sam Houston State University unless so stated.

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## VIRGINIA EMBRACES THE CHALLENGES OF EVIDENCE BASED DECISION MAKING

by

Lester Wingrove

In 2008 the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) began the initial work on the framework of Evidence Based Decision Making (EBDM). The goal was to create guidance for justice systems that would result in improved system outcomes through collaborative partnerships, the systematic use of research, and a shared vision of desired outcomes. This framework provided a concrete method to bring partners together in a collaborative manner, encourage consensus around what the community hopes to achieve, and provide a framework for incorporating research into criminal justice decisions.

In 2010, through a competitive process, NIC selected seven local jurisdictions from six different states to receive technical assistance in an effort to test this promising concept and hopefully make criminal justice system improvements. Virginia was fortunate to have the jurisdiction of Charlottesville/Albemarle chosen as one of the initial sites. In this locality there existed the strong collaborative relationship between the Department of Corrections Probation Chief that provided felony supervision and the Administrator of the Local Probation Department which provided misdemeanor supervision. Through this long lasting and trusted relationship the foundation for system collaboration was formed. Both of these officials, Wendy Goodman and Pat Smith, were considered very credible by all of the local system stakeholders and they were persistent in creating an environment where local decision makers were willing to examine practices within their agencies and make changes that would lead to improved outcomes for the locality.

Over the next several years as this locality moved through the planning phase on to the implementation phase, positive changes began happen. The technical assistance provided by The Carey Group, The Center for Effective Public Policy, and others, created the awareness that it was necessary to challenge those practices that could be improved and to use data and research to inform the decisions around existing practices. Through the hard work of this locality the following change items were identified through the planning process and implementation is ongoing:

- Pretrial release decisions informed by an assessment instrument and staff are trained in service delivery.
- A Justice Reinvestment Initiative Grant was received to reduce reliance on jail without having an increase in crime and the proposed development of a Center for Risk Reduction, (CORR).
- The development of a web based Administrative Response to Violation Matrix that has significantly reduced technical violations and the number of probationers incarcerated at the regional jail.
- The evaluation of Domestic/Intimate Partner Violence to include the reworking of policies to maximize resources.

- A business case plan to conduct an analysis of court functioning to enhance the streamlining of court services.
- The development of a Data Integration prototype to enable multiagency communication with local legacy systems.

As other localities in Virginia watched and greatly appreciated the progress of Charlottesville/Albemarle, they were not able to replicate their work as there was no available technical assistance. To the excitement of Virginia localities, in 2014 NIC proposed the expansion of EBDM to the existing six states with the understanding that in this new planning phase the state would have to develop a State Policy Team to support change items identified in the local sites and have the organizational authority to reduce barriers that may impede the work of localities. In order to receive the technical assistance for these valuable services Virginia would have to submit an application and compete with the other states that had EBDM localities. NIC proposed to provide technical assistance for two states which would include six local sites and the State Policy Team.

In the spring of 2014 the Virginia Secretary of Public Safety and Homeland Security embraced the opportunity to expand EBDM sites and to engage high level state personnel to participate on the State Planning Team. Within several months of receiving this news from NIC, Virginia held an EBDM Summit to provide information to our localities about this opportunity and to answer questions. The Summit was a tremendous success with more than 250 in attendance. The work to prepare this event was a collaborative initiative by the Department of Corrections and the Department of Criminal Justice Services. The technical assistance providers, NIC staff, team members from other EBDM States and the Charlottesville/Albemarle Team made compelling presentations that created excitement throughout Virginia.

In the fall of 2014 following a competitive application process, Virginia was chosen to participate in EBDM expansion along with Wisconsin and Indiana. NIC decided to expand the states to participate in Phase V to three and to reduce the level of technical assistance to have the necessary funding for this initiative.

Virginia had a number of very competitive localities interested in participating in the EBDM process and after a very thorough review the following local sites were chosen:

1. City of Norfolk
2. City of Richmond
3. Chesterfield County/City of Colonial Heights
4. City of Petersburg
5. Prince William, Manassas and Manassas Park
6. Staunton, Augusta and Waynesboro

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Each local site has a Local Policy Team that includes judges, prosecutors, defense bar, police, sheriff, jail administrators, victims groups, treatment personnel, city/county government, pretrial services, local corrections and others. The goal is to have the individuals in the room who have the authority to make decisions about the local criminal justice system.

In addition to the six local teams, Virginia has a State Policy Team that includes high level personnel who represent each of the decision points in the state system. The goal of this team is to have the responsible individual at the table that can make decisions about the state wide system.

The local sites and the State Policy Team quickly learned that the collaborative work necessary to change systems is extremely challenging, even when strong relationships exist. It became apparent that when stakeholders within a system spoke regularly, they rarely spoke about processes and decisions within their systems. These conversations do not naturally occur without building a shared understanding and willingness to look at oneself. Obviously, trust among team members is essential.

The roadmap developed by NIC and the expert technical assistance was essential for the development of sound and productive teams. Each local team and the State Policy Team began the process by developing shared vision, a purpose for meeting, a charter, group rules and an understanding of collaboration. Although some of the group processes necessary to understand a common purpose are not always warmly received by some team members, they are necessary to form a true collaborative team.

The next step in the roadmap required each of our teams to map our systems and to identify each of the process and decision points within the system. This was very cumbersome and exhausting work but each team was able to identify points in the system where obvious gaps existed. Without this process, it is unlikely that our system would have been revealed with clarity. Once gaps were identified, baseline data, where available, was gathered to provide more detail around the scope of the perceived gap.

The system mapping work enabled each of the local teams and the State Policy Team to identify many potential action items that needed to be addressed. Most teams identified twenty to thirty potential action items. Some of the gaps were small and local team members were able to address them with a quick change in policy and practice. Most of the others were large in magnitude so each team had to develop agreed upon criteria and make the tough decision to choose three or four items to work on. Although many team members wanted to choose a large number of items to address, we recognized that the goal was to develop strategic action plans to implement these change targets and we had to be realistic.

Once the items were selected each team created subcommittees that included outside subject matter specialists, to gather data and to develop plans for implementation.

Virginia is now almost a year into our EBDM work and all teams are deeply immersed in our selected change items. The work of our teams has exceeded all of our expectations and we are quite certain that significant changes will be made in the criminal justice system in Virginia. Like the Charlottesville/Albemarle team that preceded us, each of our seven teams has a clear understanding of their system and a shared vision for change.

Some of the change items of our local teams are:

- The financial Impact of Fines and Costs
- Pretrial diversion for low risk offenders
- Improving responses to mental health defendants
- Improving responses to domestic violence victims
- A review of the use of assessment tools at each decision point
- Probation violation responses
- Educating the public and other criminal justice partners on EBDM
- Assessing inmates in local jails and providing sound re-entry services
- Program fidelity
- Data sharing

The State Policy Team has chosen the following change items:

- A review of validated risk assessments at each decision point in our system
- Data and information sharing
- Responses to probation violations

Virginia fully intends to pursue additional assistance from NIC as we move towards the implementation phase of this process. We have assembled very strong teams who have a deep understanding of collaboration, shared vision and a desire to improve systems by using data and evidence based knowledge to make informed decisions. The work ahead of us is very challenging and will not come easy; however the potential rewards of improving our system are enormous.

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