



National Institute of Corrections

EVALUATION BRIEF

EVIDENCE-BASED DECISION MAKING IN LOCAL CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEMS INITIATIVE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY¹

In 2008, the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) launched the Evidence-Based Decision-Making in Local Criminal Justice Systems (EBDM) Initiative.

For Phase I of the initiative, NIC and its consortium of partners — the Center for Effective Public Policy (CEPP), the Pretrial Justice Institute (PJI), the Justice Management Institute (JMI), and The Carey Group — developed the Framework for Evidence-Based Decision-Making in Local Criminal Justice Systems (“the Framework”). The Framework distills two decades’ worth of “what works” research (incorporating both factors associated with reoffending and strategies that reduce the likelihood of reoffending); it seeks to achieve harm reduction (NIC 2010:20).² In June 2010, NIC launched Phase II of the EBDM initiative, which was designed to facilitate collaborative, evidence-based decision-making in local criminal justice systems across the nation by drawing on and applying the findings noted in the Framework.

Partnering with a consortium of technical assistance (TA) experts led by the Center for Effective Public Policy (CEPP), NIC selected seven jurisdictions (Charlottesville/Albemarle County, VA; Eau Claire County, WI; Grant County, IN; Mesa County, CO; Milwaukee County, WI; Ramsey County, MN; and Yamhill County, OR) through a competitive process to receive targeted technical assistance to support an intensive planning process guided by the Framework’s four principles.

These four principles (NIC 2010: 25-28) are:

- 1** The professional judgment of criminal justice system decision-makers is enhanced when informed by evidence-based knowledge;
- 2** Every interaction within the criminal justice system offers an opportunity to contribute to harm reduction;
- 3** Systems achieve better outcomes when they operate collaboratively; and
- 4** The criminal justice system will continually learn and improve when professionals make decisions based on the collection, analysis, and use of data and information.

NIC selected the Urban Institute (UI) in September 2010 to evaluate the Phase II technical assistance, specifically to (1) to assess the quality, relevance, and content of the training and technical assistance provided; and (2) to examine the effect of TA on the sites' implementation readiness — i.e., the “value-added” of technical assistance to this effort. A participatory action research framework guided the evaluation, meaning that the research team worked closely with the sites, the TA providers, and NIC to monitor TA implementation and refine operations based on early and frequent feedback from the evaluation team. The overarching goal of the evaluation was to “tell the story” of EBDM planning efforts in the sites and to identify lessons learned and their implications not only for Phase III implementation but for other jurisdictions seeking to implement the Framework.

The evaluation drew on multiple sources of information including monthly discussions with the Local Initiative Coordinator (LIC) in each community and the TA coordinators to document Phase II progress, milestones, challenges, and lessons learned. UI also reviewed site documents including monthly policy team meeting agenda and notes, team charters, and other materials. Members of the evaluation team visited each EBDM community twice to observe technical assistance and training events and to interview stakeholders who were central to each site's EBDM effort. The purpose of these interviews was to discuss the progress and pace of Phase II planning, the benefits of TA provision, and site satisfaction with it. UI's EBDM stakeholder survey collected input from a broader cross-section of constituents, some less directly involved with the EBDM initiative but for whom EBDM was relevant to their work, regarding the quality and relevance of TA and the benefits (and challenges) of participation in Phase II with respect to collaboration, coordination, information-sharing, knowledge development and transfer, and support for EBDM.

This report describes the EBDM Phase II technical assistance approach and presents findings and themes from the process evaluation and outcome assessment of the technical assistance delivered to the seven sites selected under Phase II of the EBDM initiative. In doing so, we explore the effect of Phase II technical assistance on the sites' readiness for implementation and examine the broader impacts of Phase II participation for these communities. The report concludes with a discussion of implications and recommendations for future technical assistance efforts, informed by the lessons learned as part of this assessment.



EBDM

A strategy for Safer Communities

TA APPROACH AND DELIVERY

The Phase II technical assistance approach sought to facilitate both the Framework’s goals of recidivism reduction and harm reduction. This involved the adoption of well-evaluated principles and practices, while also allowing for some level of adaptation of these principles to other parts of the criminal justice system. While much of the TA approach focused on helping sites identify and prioritize areas of their system that could be improved through the use of evidence-based practices, innovation was encouraged where the research literature was less developed regarding effective recidivism reduction practices for a specific decision-making point in the legal process.

Phase II TA provision initially followed a general blueprint in each site, focused on building a solid foundation for future work and consisting of five key activities:

- 1** Monthly facilitation with the TA coordinator;
- 2** Mapping the site’s local criminal justice system;
- 3** Conducting mini-assessments and providing substantive expertise specific to locally-identified priority areas of the site’s criminal justice system;
- 4** Developing subject-specific materials including various “starter kits” designed to assist sites in their planning efforts; and
- 5** Other initiative-wide activities, including monthly cross-site LIC calls and webinars with nationally-recognized subject matter experts.



KEY FINDINGS AND OBSERVATIONS

Evaluation results offer ample evidence that Phase II training and technical assistance enhanced site capacity in critical areas (i.e., strengthened collaboration, increased EBDM and system knowledge, increased support for EBDM principles and practices, identified change targets, and facilitated strategic planning) essential for successful implementation. Furthermore, stakeholders generally rated the TA positively, giving it high marks on relevance, quality, responsiveness, and utility. *Selected observations include:*

- ▶ Stakeholders unequivocally identified the TA coordinators as the essential component of Phase II assistance. Simply stated, stakeholders across the seven EBDM sites identified the aid of their respective TA coordinator as the single element that they could not have done without.
- ▶ Universally, stakeholders involved in the mapping process identified this effort as one of the most important activities in Phase II; the value of not only having a visual portrait of case flow in the criminal justice system, but also having a better understanding of other agencies’ policies and practices made the work in Phase II worthwhile.
- ▶ Stakeholders viewed the system-wide “EBDM awareness” training sessions as beneficial to building local expertise and to engaging agency staff from across the criminal justice system. All sites, however, recognized that this training activity had to be one of many efforts to educate staff on EBDM principles and the implementation of changes throughout the criminal justice system.
- ▶ Other TA activities, such as logic model development and scorecard development, were more difficult for the sites to engage in; stakeholders reportedly had a harder time seeing how these activities fit into the “big picture” perhaps, in part, because many sites did not engage in these activities until toward the end (April–June) of Phase II. Stakeholders also reported that webinars, while informative, were less helpful in readying the sites for implementation.

- The sites identified various Phase II components that proved to be challenging, including the truncated timeline and enormous time commitment required of policy team and working group members. Many stakeholders estimated spending the equivalent of one day a week on EBDM in addition to their full time positions.

In addition to soliciting regular input from EBDM participants on Phase II TA activities, the Urban Institute surveyed a broader cross-section of EBDM stakeholders twice during the initiative — once shortly after Phase II TA began and again after Phase II concluded but prior to Phase III site selection. The survey measured stakeholder perceptions regarding the benefits of TA and the initiative, collaboration and coordination, knowledge development, and support for EBDM and EBDM principles. Cross-wave analyses of survey data indicate that all sites registered marked improvement in a number of critical areas including stakeholder engagement, coordination among criminal justice leaders, and support for and knowledge of evidence-based decision-making. Sites' attitudes towards agency collaboration and coordination among criminal justice agencies did not consistently improve, but overall remained positive; many were already quite high at the first survey administration. More stakeholders also identified key pre-implementation activities, including data collection and analysis and community engagement, as current priorities at Wave 2 of the survey. Additionally, all sites reported seeing more benefits from TA and from Phase II participation over the course of the initiative.

During on-site interviews, stakeholders reiterated that the structure of the initiative (both in terms of the LIC and policy team leader positions) was crucial to keeping the team on task and on time, as well as engaging other stakeholder groups in EBDM. Though TA coordinators were helpful in reaching out to reluctant participants, this proved to be particularly challenging for law enforcement and prosecutors. These groups were more skeptical of evidence-based principles, particularly when they thought that the initiative was too focused on offender outcomes and did not emphasize the importance of effectively balancing the interests of the criminal justice system and the community (specifically victims).

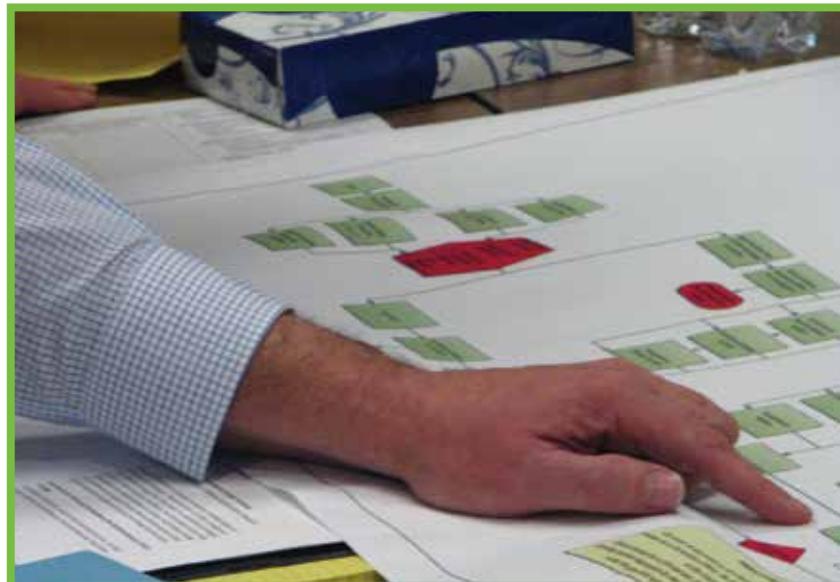
While the stakeholders consulted for this evaluation reported a number of benefits from the TA and participation in the initiative, they also identified a number of challenges in the planning phase and identified specific areas for improvement.

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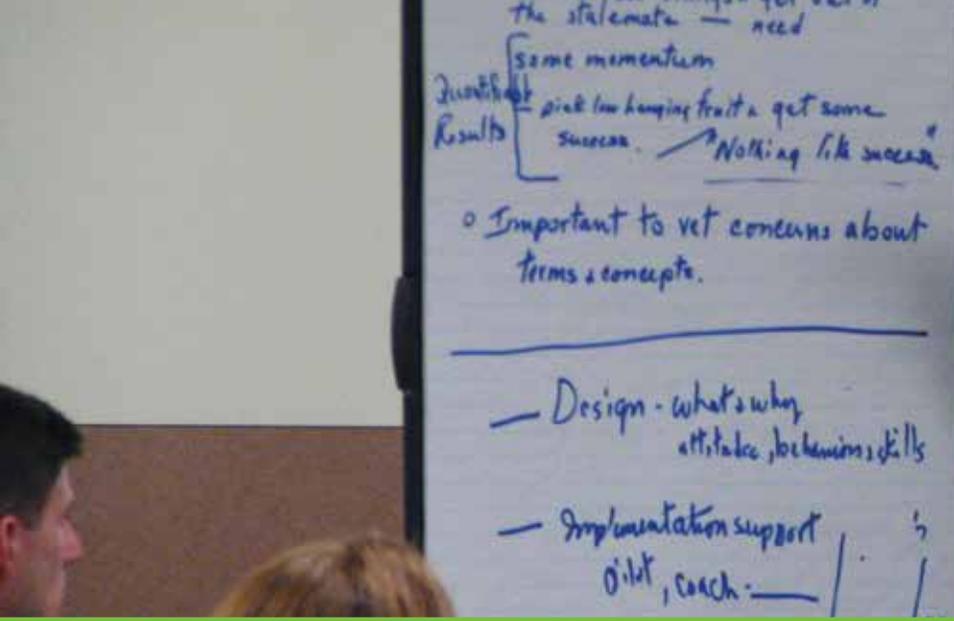


Stakeholder feedback and the results of the survey support the following recommendations for future planning efforts and technical assistance provision:

- ▶ **Increase emphasis on data collection and performance measurement in Phase II.** Although the sites and TA providers all recognized the importance of data analysis for their EBDM work, relatively little analysis was conducted during Phase II due in part to limited site capacity, resources, and time for analysis.³ They also identified data collection and analysis as a critical gap going forward into implementation: for sites to have set performance measures on their scorecards without having any baseline data was a challenge (and may have led to implementation plans that do not have appropriate outcomes or are not realistic). More emphasis in Phase II on measurement and data collection and analysis would have been beneficial.
- ▶ **Make research more accessible.** TA coordinators went to great lengths to make the research underlying the “evidence-base” available to stakeholders for their review (i.e., TA coordinators provided the sites with research articles and reports, as well as webinars with subject matter experts). While appreciated, some stakeholders found the research literature challenging to digest and recommended that TA providers translate and summarize the research findings into practitioner-friendly language to make it more accessible for those who actively seek out the research, as well as those who would like to but do not have the time to read entire articles or reports.
- ▶ **Prioritize agency staff engagement in Phase II.** Each EBDM site made a strategic decision about when and how (at what level) to engage agency staff in Phase II. The decision to engage staff often provoked difficult conversations, yet stakeholders in the sites that chose to engage staff in Phase II indicated that doing so put them in a better position to implement their EBDM plans in Phase III. Conversely, sites that did not engage their agency staff in Phase II reported more concerns about sustainability of the EBDM initiative. This suggests that staff engagement should be emphasized as a component in future planning efforts, as opposed to waiting until implementation. Stakeholders in all sites reported that more EBDM training—both cross-system and discipline-specific training—would be beneficial in Phase III.



Mapping the site's criminal justice system was a critical first step for all sites in their EBDM work. The centrality of the system mapping exercise to Phase II planning cannot be overstated: It facilitated a common understanding of the site's local criminal justice system among a diverse stakeholder group, raised awareness of the potential gaps in EBDM locally, and drew on local data to examine local decision making and policy.



“TA coordinators maintained close contact with sites’ Local Initiative Coordinator and other key stakeholders via email and frequent teleconferences as well as monthly site visits (typically two days in length) designed to facilitate technical assistance delivery and planning and troubleshoot emerging issues.”

► **Focus initiative on challenges related to the adversarial nature of the criminal justice system.** Many stakeholders reported that the adversarial nature of the criminal justice system (if I win, you lose; if you lose, I win), particularly between prosecutors and defense attorneys, posed challenges in Phase II and would likely continue to do so in Phase III. Whether these groups stay engaged in the initiative and implement their components of the EBDM work plan with fidelity remains to be seen. While this challenge was a reflection of implementing EBDM in the real world criminal justice system, additional TA and education may be necessary to reinforce the potential EBDM “win-win” themes for these stakeholders and the constituencies they serve.

► **Extend timeline for Phase II.** The vast majority of EBDM stakeholders identified the condensed Phase II timeline as a critical challenge and one that placed a tremendous burden on key stakeholders and their staff. While the timeline was helpful in moving the initiative forward and keeping stakeholders focused, some suggested that it came at a cost in terms of planning (some desired more time to prepare and plan before meetings) and preparedness (i.e., stakeholders reported that receipt of the of EBDM materials, including the Starter Kits, earlier in the process would have allowed more time for review and discussion the application of the information with their colleagues or TA provider). Planning and implementation efforts should carefully weigh the potential benefits and costs for stakeholders and the overall initiative when settling on a timeline.

► **Provide more structured opportunities for peer learning.** At various points during the planning phase, different stakeholder groups expressed a desire for more peer-to-peer learning opportunities. Though the competitive nature of Phase II may have limited communication between sites, those stakeholders who attended the cross-site meetings found them to be extremely helpful for peer learning (and for team bonding) and wished that there had been more than two opportunities to interact with their counterparts during the initiative. Cross-site meetings and other structured events permitted stakeholders to make this interaction a priority; while stakeholders acknowledged that they could have initiated contact with their peers during the initiative, there were often more pressing priorities competing for their time and attention.

- **Encourage participation from less involved participants.** Each site had different approaches to engaging stakeholders outside of the criminal justice system, particularly victim advocates and community representatives.⁴ Specifically, some chose not to reach out to these groups in Phase II, while others actively sought to involve them. Likewise, each site actively worked to engage key criminal justice stakeholders from across the system. Some stakeholders outside the criminal justice sphere resisted further involvement because they viewed the EBDM initiative or the Framework as too focused on offender outcomes and recidivism (as opposed to other system objectives); other stakeholders within the criminal justice system struggled with the broader harm reduction goals that the Framework identified. Future efforts to replicate EBDM planning and implementation should work to more clearly outline the components of the Framework and EBDM that are most relevant to specific stakeholders in order to facilitate greater engagement.
- **Use policy team leadership position to engage other stakeholders.** There were benefits and potential drawbacks to having specific policy team members in leadership positions and/or serving as the coordinator for the initiative. In some sites, the LIC and policy team chair were based in the same agency, which meant that that agency tended either to drive the initiative or to assume the majority of the Phase II work; this arrangement could run the risk of functionally excluding other key stakeholders from decision-making or important EBDM work. Alternatively, some stakeholders reported that it was beneficial to have someone less knowledgeable about EBDM as chair of the policy team. Doing so not only allowed the policy team to “grow together” in the knowledge of EBDM but often produced an enthusiastic champion of EBDM that helped bring other stakeholders along in the effort particularly those in the same sphere as the policy team chair. This configuration reportedly resulted in greater buy in and broader knowledge development.

ENDNOTES

¹Urban Institute’s assessment work in the sites spanned a 16-month period between October 2010 and February 2012 and informed the development and content of this report as submitted to NIC in June 2012.

²Harm reduction is defined in the Framework as “decreases in the ill effects of crime experienced broadly by communities (e.g., resources allocated to the justice system that could otherwise be directed to alternative public priorities, unsafe streets, abandoned businesses, etc.) by victims (e.g., fear of reprisal or revictimization, financial losses, etc.), by citizens (e.g., lack of confidence in community protection efforts, generalized fears of victimization, etc.), by families of offenders (e.g., loss of wages by a family member who is justice-system involved, inability of incarcerated fathers/mothers to fulfill their parenting roles, etc.), and by offenders themselves (e.g., homelessness, unemployment, etc.).

³The sites tackled this gap in different ways. Albemarle County/Charlottesville partnered on a grant to fund a system analyst, and tapped the University of Virginia’s capstone program for assistance with data collection and analysis. Similarly, Grant County engaged a local university professor in the Phase II efforts as a policy team member and drew on his research and evaluation expertise to assist with performance measurement, as well as other aspects of Phase II planning while Mesa County’s TA coordinator reached out to university faculty with evaluation expertise.

⁴This engagement is an important part of the Framework, and will be important for sites with implementation plans that require some type of community or victim involvement.

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