

MONTGOMERY COUNTY COURTS BUILDING

41 N. PERRY ST.

Courtesy Montgomery County Adult Probation

Montgomery County Common Pleas Court Building

Implementing Online Training:

The Experience of the Montgomery County Department of Probation

By Diane Geiman

The Montgomery County Division of Criminal Justice Services in Dayton, Ohio, has been accredited by the American Correctional Association and the Commission on Accreditation for Corrections since 1987. As an integral part of the division, the Adult Probation Department (ADP), supervises approximately 6,000 adult (18 and older) clients a year, including those in a residential, 24-hours per-day drug intervention program. The department decided to implement online training through the Corrections Online Training Collaborative (COTC) last year because it is “cost-effective, time-effective and resource-effective,” said James Dare, deputy court administrator.

The ADP has created a blended training program, combining both live and online training. Probation officers and security officers, as well as supervisors and managers, receive training on a quarterly basis. Staff are assigned mandatory online courses and have the opportunity to take elective courses. Upon successful course completion, they can print a certificate. Staff can also work around their schedules to complete training and those who have been on leave for a period of time can catch up on training when they return to work. The ADP has received positive comments from staff, who have found the courses to be challenging and interactive. The court, Dare says, “loves” the program because online training provides better accountability through testing, which usually does not happen with live training.

The Organizational Option

Montgomery County selected the organizational option for its online training. This option includes access to the Elevate™ learning management system and access to more than 100 online courses, including new courses when they are launched. The American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) defines a learning management system, commonly called an LMS, as “a software application that automates the administration, tracking and reporting of training.”¹ Created and managed by Essential Learning, ACA’s co-founding partner of COTC, Elevate™ is a robust LMS that offers unique, flexible management tools for correctional agencies and facilities. Key features of Montgomery County’s system include:

Hierarchy. This tool enables agencies to organize the learning site to conform to their organizational structure and fit their needs. The agency’s logo can be added to the site. Elevate™ can be set up to identify separate locations, departments and even multiple sites. Because the system is permission-based, an agency can determine who has access to each level. Essential Learning created the hierarchy for Montgomery County based on its specifications and needs.

Curriculum development and assignment. Agencies can select courses to develop a curriculum and assign staff based on their job title, department, hire date or other customized level determined by the agency. Montgomery County has selected courses for its probation and security officers. Completing an assigned curriculum is mandatory. Officers have access to their training records, which identifies the particular courses that need to be completed. Agencies that choose to do so may add live training to a curriculum and track it along with online courses. They also can create career paths for staff to help them prepare for a new position or promotion.

Training notifications and alerts. Staff and supervisors can receive notifications and alerts about assigned training. For example, selected supervisors in Montgomery County receive alerts that provide information about each student. Dare says that alerts help them “understand who is meeting the training requirements and who is not.” He explains, “Staff must complete assignments by a specific date. About two or three weeks [depending on their requirements or needs] before the deadline, we start getting notifications on who has completed the assignments and who has not completed the training.” For those who have not completed their courses, Dare says that they use the opportunity to provide coaching. Staff also receive notifications about their deadlines, reminders about completing the training and notifications that deadlines have passed. Staff receive color-based alerts within their training records so that they can easily identify which courses have been completed, looming deadlines and, if necessary, passed deadlines.

Customized reports. The system offers a suite of reports that can be customized to meet an agency’s needs. Examples include completions of individual courses, completions of online and live trainings, such as attendance at an agency workshop or one of ACA’s conferences, completions of a curriculum, number of training hours completed and customized evaluations of the training (other types of evaluations can be developed as well). Montgomery County

uses the system to track both its online and classroom training. They create reports by individuals, teams and departments. Outside training, including conferences, is included within the reports.

The reports also provide detailed documentation of compliance with ACA standards. David Taylor, supervisor with the Montgomery County Adult Probation Department and the executive director of the Correctional Accreditation Managers Association, believes that the APD will be able to meet the training requirements of ACA standards because of the online training. His message to accredited facilities is: “As with any accreditation manager, anything that makes it easier for me to meet standards and document compliance — I’m all in favor of it.”

Implementation

As with all aspects of COTC, the implementation process is personalized. An agency is guided through the streamlined process by an implementation manager. The process starts with a virtual “kick-off” meeting where the agency and the manager develop a project plan, which includes goals, milestones and deadlines. The system is then customized for the agency. The average implementation time is two to three months, depending on each agency’s needs.

Training for the user-friendly system is broken down into phases. Dare explained Montgomery County’s positive experience with the implementation process:

COTC staff would be available to us through [virtual meetings]. They would see what we were looking at, and we would see what they were looking at. We were able get questions answered directly. It wasn’t like somebody telling you something and you had to run somewhere and try to figure it out. You were able to see it and take the time to go through each step and learn how do the things. Staff were always friendly, they were available, and they answered all of our questions. The meetings were very productive.

Conclusion

Essential Learning, along with ACA, manages the technology, including hosting, maintenance and upgrades, and continues to provide personalized, need-based customer service. Correctional agencies can follow in the footsteps of Montgomery County and implement a blended learning program that offers the benefits of both live and online training. As Dare pointed out, online training is “cost-effective, time-effective and resource-effective.”

ENDNOTE

¹ Ellis, Ryan K. 2009. A field guide to learning management systems. *Learning Circuits*, American Society for Training & Development. www.astd.org

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