

# The Importance of Implementation in Corrections

By Kristin A. Bechtel

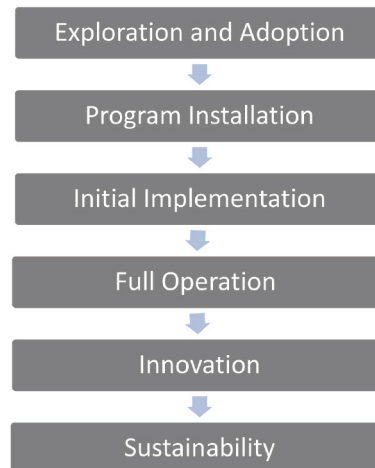
As corrections continues to address the fiscal impact of reduced budgets and increased populations, there is growing recognition for providing evidence-based programming, services and interventions to address the unique needs of offenders. The competition for funding to implement new interventions can be overwhelming and understandably, there is usually an outcome evaluation required as part of any award. While these opportunities to address offenders are beneficial to balance targeting offender needs and provide supplemental funding, problems with implementation may arise. Without a structured implementation plan and process, outcome evaluations may not be reliable and efforts toward replication may pose additional difficulties. Given these concerns, a discussion on the importance of implementation is warranted.

## Implementation Stages

There are six stages that represent the process of implementation.<sup>1</sup> The stages each have their own unique activities, and the length of time spent in each stage varies, which is important to consider when implementing anything new since interventions or programming would not be fully operational in six months or even a year. Figure 1 describes Fixsen and colleagues' process of implementation.<sup>2</sup>

Exploration suggests that the following characteristics be considered to determine if an intervention is appropriate: identifying the targeted population and their needs, determining what community resources are already available, assessing the community willingness for collaboration and identifying evidence-based program characteristics to serve this

Figure 1.



population. For adoption to occur there should be compatibility between these characteristics and the culture to support new interventions and the implementation process, otherwise the innovation is determined inappropriate and should not be adopted. Program installation involves a variety of tasks such as the hiring and training of staff, establishing policy and procedure, providing a communication framework, addressing initial and ongoing funding resources, community preparation and referral processes, and the establishment of data collection efforts that should focus on both process and outcome measures.<sup>3</sup>

The next stages of implementation include initial implementation and full operation. Initial implementation processes are meant to address change and focus on fidelity. Identifying and managing change should minimize programmatic drift, increase staff understanding and support, and promote adherence to the model. Activities to support fidelity include developing a structured format for implementing the program model,

identifying process measures and examining data to evaluate implementation. These efforts are beneficial to address initial drift and to avoid the likelihood that the program will stop at this stage. The full operation stage is recognized when all areas of the program model are in place. For new programming, this would involve a fully trained staff, caseload sizes being met, all groups and activities being conducted, demonstration of a community referral process and collaboration with external partners, and well-developed and practiced supervision and internal quality assurance mechanisms including data reporting practices. Fixsen et al., suggests that this step can take anywhere from two to four years. Recognition of this time period by funding sources, key stakeholders, administration and staff is critical for cultural support.

The final stages of implementation are innovation and sustainability. Innovation occurs after the program characteristics associated with participant success are empirically identified. Innovation is not the rationale for failing to implement the program as designed. This stage requires identifying if there are similar program models or targeted populations served with a differing modality, dosage, content or structure that has been shown to have an effective impact which ultimately encourages opportunities for the ongoing development of evidence-based practices. Finally, sustainability occurs after the full operation step is recognized and the program is introduced to both internal and external factors that could potentially elicit change or drift from the model. Examples of this would include changes to funding resources, staff turnover and changes in community or political support. Sustainability suggests that even with these various

influences, there is a core foundation to the program model that continually survives despite these expected and unexpected fluctuations, according to Fixsen et al.

## Addressing the Paradigm Shift

Rigorous outcome evaluations that demonstrate a reduction in recidivism certainly make the adoption of new practices very enticing to the field. Administrators and key stakeholders can readily lend support to interventions that result in decreased recidivism. However, these findings in one site do not necessarily translate into similar results when implemented in a different location. There are several reasons as to why this may happen. First, offender characteristics such as demographics, offense type, risk and criminogenic needs may differ. Second, the staff delivering the intervention will be unique and it is possible that there may be differences with their training and the fidelity monitoring. Third, new sites often have their own specific operational requirements and policies that require modifications to the new program, service or intervention. Finally, the culture varies from site to site as line staff, supervisors and administration adapt to any new interventions as either a welcome change or just another passing fad.

Perhaps the most cumbersome task surrounding implementation requires a paradigm shift. If implementation can take up to four years before an intervention or program is considered fully operational and the standard outcome evaluation typically requires a one-year follow-up period to measure recidivism, what organizational support needs to be in place? What are the barriers for implementation?

There are several potential opportunities for moving toward an organizational structure that is supportive of proper implementation processes:

### ***Focus on fidelity.***

- Have a planned structure in place for supervision and evaluation;
- Communicate this structure to all employees, seek their input, and make adjustments accordingly; and
- Identify clear, practical, and rigorous process and outcome measures.

### ***Data collection and ongoing analysis.***

- Be certain to integrate data collection and all necessary measures into the work structure;
- Make all personnel responsible for consistent and correct data collection;
- Avoid duplication of effort with data recording and entry;
- Conduct analysis for process measures and fidelity monitoring and report findings to all staff; and
- Make modifications for improvement based on the data, not solely anecdotal or political influence.

### ***Preparation for the program and outcome evaluations.***

- Consider the research design and decide if it is possible to conduct a randomized experiment, or if a quasi-experimental design suffice;
- Determine if the necessary data is in place to conduct an outcome evaluation and if there is a comparison or control group that can be identified;
- Identify an external researcher to conduct the evaluations or review the findings in order to monitor objectivity;
- Communicate with staff prior to any program evaluation what the process will include and address any concerns; and
- Strategically select and plan which modifications to implement after receiving recommendations for improvement. Include staff in the planning

process and prioritize programmatic changes as some may not be operationally practical.

While these recommendations are certainly not exhaustive, addressing culture from the beginning of implementation through sustainability and adopting a supportive organizational framework to support fidelity is essential. Communication about the implementation process will be necessary for reliable outcome evaluation and replication of evidence-based practices.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Fixsen, D.L., S.F. Naoom, K.A. Blase, R.M. Friedman and F. Wallace. 2005. *Implementation research: A synthesis of the literature*. Tampa, Fla.: University of South Florida, Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute, The National Implementation Research Network.

<sup>2</sup>The stages of implementation figure is representative of the process described by Fixsen et al., 2005.

<sup>3</sup>Fixsen, D.L., S.F. Naoom, K.A. Blase, R.M. Friedman and F. Wallace. 2005. *Implementation research: A synthesis of the literature*. Tampa, Fla.: University of South Florida, Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute, The National Implementation Research Network.

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