

# The Benefits of Facility Character Assessment Tools: The Pennsylvania Experience

By Tammy Turner,  
Gerard W. Bryant and  
Harry E. Wilson

*Authors' note: The views expressed in this article represent those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, the U.S. Department of Justice or the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections.*

In order to maintain secure, safe and humane environments, the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections finds it essential to assess its facilities. The assessment process monitors performance of physical protection systems. In addition, weekly superintendent reports and monthly SCAN1 reports provide executive staff with timely details related to critical factors within facilities. Auditing each facility's internal departments ensures programs are maintained and operated within guidelines.

However, Secretary Jeffrey A. Beard recognized that an assessment tool that monitors the character or culture of a facility did not exist within the Pennsylvania DOC. According to Beard, "If we truly want to maintain secure, safe and humane facilities, we must look beyond the physical plant, our policies and procedures, and focus on our personnel and their interaction with the inmate population and each other. The Facility Character Profile [FCP] allows us to do so, and it has become an integral part of our operation."

## Creating the Facility Character Profile

An assessment tool that examines these aspects of a facility would offer an invaluable understanding of human relations within each prison environment. Consequently, Beard instructed Superintendent Harry E. Wilson from SCI-Cresson to chair a committee with the sole purpose of developing a tool and policy for assessment of the organizational culture of Pennsylvania's facilities. As a starting point, Wilson was provided the Institution Character Profile (1070.08), which is a program statement authored by the Federal Bureau of Prisons. A panel of 12 high-level, administrative staff members with various disciplines was assembled as the FCP committee. Upon review of the Institution Character Profile, the committee consensus was that the BOP document would be the framework of the future DOC policy and assessment tool.

The committee needed an understanding and interpretation of the program statement and contacted Gerard Bryant, regional psychology services administrator for the BOP. Numerous telephone calls between the department's FCP committee and Bryant allowed an accurate and deeper understanding of the BOP assessment tool and policy statement. Scott Dodrill, Northeast regional director, also authorized additional assistance to include Bryant's attendance at agency planning meetings, observation of a BOP Institutional Character Profile by DOC staff, and the guidance and support of Bryant at the first DOC facility assessment.

"The [DOC] is most appreciative of the support and guidance provided by Bryant and the BOP," said Executive Deputy Secretary John S. Shaffer. "Dr. Bryant spent many hours with our development team, sharing his experience and helping us to avoid potential pitfalls. We were able to build upon the BOP foundation to create a custom application that best fits our needs."

The assessment tool developed by the FCP committee mirrors the BOP's in that it uses a team of individuals whose responsibilities include site visits,

---

“If we truly want to maintain secure, safe and humane facilities, we must look beyond the physical plant, our policies and procedures, and focus on our personnel and their interaction with the inmate population and each other.”

---

observation of operations, information gathering through discussions with staff and inmates, and randomly presented surveys. There are five specific components of examination that are central to the assessment tool:

- Staff morale;
- Staff professionalism;
- Staff communication;
- Inmate morale; and
- Community relations.

Even with a solid working tool, expert references and direct observation, the development of this policy required acknowledgment of possible negative perceptions of the tool and potential points of resistance to it. Most important, the integrity of the data had to be ensured. If not introduced properly, data collection could be hampered or overshadowed by apprehension, defensiveness and fear of personal assault. Additional concerns also included issues surrounding respondent confidentiality, intentions surrounding the usage of the data and the implementation of procedural changes that might result from the final analyses of the data.

Consequently, significant emphasis during the planning stage was directed toward three major topics: identifying team members to conduct the assessments; gathering needed information; and figuring out how the information from the assessment would be shared with the facility. The FCP committee immediately identified the need to select competent, experienced staff to conduct the assessments. Staff meeting these criteria would lend authority and credibility to the process. Initially, the profile committee fulfilled the character profile team responsibilities. Subsequently, facility managers and their deputies were recruitment targets for assessment teams.

To be sure that data integrity and viability was maintained, the FCP committee had to answer several tough questions: What information was needed and why? How would it be collected? How would it be assessed? What data would be provided to the assessment team prior to assessment of a facility? What records would be needed on-site? How would these data be merged with data collected during interviews? How would confidentiality of the raw data be maintained?

Throughout the yearlong planning process, these questions were carefully answered. Specific data obtained through facility reports, assessments and other existing data collection methods were reviewed before the assessment began. More detailed and periodic data were reviewed on-site during the scheduled assessment. Pre-assessment information included data designed to provide an understanding of the uniqueness of the facility as seen through the facility narrative, personnel reports, operations inspections and overtime reports. On-site data included reports that provided an understanding of day-to-day operational issues, including labor management meeting

minutes, fire and safety reports, departmental meeting minutes, staff grievance reports, misconduct reports and inmate grievance reports.

Both the preassessment data and the on-site data were gathered and prepared by the superintendent’s assistant. More data were collected using surveys targeted at staff and inmates, respectively. Each person was randomly selected, was personally interviewed by a team member and voluntarily answered questions related to each of the five components. To ensure confidentiality, identifiers were not recorded on the survey tool or during interviews. After the data were compiled into a database, summary reports were submitted to the team. Finally, the team observed the facility through facility tours and noted qualitative information that cannot be assessed through written reports. The team then combined information from facility reports, survey results and observations to determine the rating for each of the five components.

The FCP committee’s final consideration centered on developing a consistent, fair practice for the dissemination of information gained during the data-collection process. The following questions were considered: Who should present the findings and how? How much data should be presented? Who should attend the presentation? It was determined that general findings would be presented to facility staff on the last day of the assessment, but only after the facility manager was apprised of the ratings. The FCP committee determined that due to the sensitive nature of the data, the task of sharing it with the facility manager would be assigned to the deputy secretary who maintains responsibility over the facility.

## Collecting and Analyzing Data

It is essential to deviate from the process overview at this point in order to provide the reader with a better understanding of the intricacies involved in collecting and analyzing the data. The five components take into account specific and detailed facets of facility operations. Though each component is unique, all five are closely related. This relationship is demonstrated within many component reports, in comparisons between personal observation and reported data, in interactions between team members and observed subjects, and in the notable majority of final analyses provided by the work of the FCP committee.

The staff morale component calls for the examination of particular programs, services and employee perceptions. Programs such as incentive awards and employee assistance programs are examined for quality, staff awareness, encouragement to use these resources and program accessibility. Services such as training and job resources also are reviewed for availability, accessibility, appropriateness, quality and overall employee satisfaction levels.

Staff perceptions regarding several topics are assessed and are considered a vital element of this process.

---

The overall level of staff competency is evaluated through considerations of staff training, experience and years of service, the general housekeeping condition of housing units, sanitation processes, procedures and enforcement, and inmate grievances.

---

Elements evaluated include performance appraisal processes, staffing issues/concerns, workload anxiety, safety standards and practices, security issues and concerns, and overall levels of job satisfaction. These data are cross-referenced with key data elements from other areas of the FCP for “sense-making.” That is to say, the FCP process is a holistic one that considers not only the individual components under consideration, but also how each of these components interacts and functions with the others in order to provide a comprehensive, complete analysis of each institution on many levels.

The staff professionalism component examines various services and interactions for appropriate levels of professionalism. The FCP team reviews and evaluates inmate services, including recreational programming, food services, health services, psychological assistance and mail services for appropriateness, expediency and overall levels of satisfaction. Interactions assessed throughout the facility include those between staff and inmates, problem resolution and remedies, and interactions between the facility and the public.

The overall level of staff competency is evaluated through considerations of staff training, experience and years of service, the general housekeeping condition of housing units, sanitation processes, procedures and enforcement, and inmate grievances. This includes grievance processes, expediency of grievance resolution, ease and accessibility to grievance processes, and overall levels of inmate satisfaction with the experience and resolutions provided by the grievance process.

The staff communication component focuses on information sharing and staff-inmate relations. Essentials reviewed include management accessibility and responsiveness, labor-management relations and staff-supervisor relations. Each of these elements is assessed for availability, timeliness, quality and accuracy.

Inmate morale, the most significant component of the FCP, targets inmates’ perceptions of their living environment, facility services and the manner in which they are treated by staff. The inmates’ perceptions of safety, sanitation, recreation and work opportunities are reviewed and evaluated. These perceptions speak to the overall comfort level of the inmates, and their ability to use their time constructively within the institutional environment.

Services specifically reviewed in this context include food, health, psychological, mail and commissary services. These are examined and evaluated for accessibility, responsiveness and, particularly, perceptions of overall quality. A critical detail of this component is how staff treat inmates. This can be observed in one-on-one staff-inmate interactions, the manner in which inmates are apprised of pertinent and relevant information, the dissemination of information regarding the implementation of the disciplinary process, the clarity and availability of procedures

surrounding visitation, and the transparency and accessibility of information regarding the release preparation program. Data compiled through observations of these situations effectively demonstrate levels of respect between staff and inmates, the fairness of inmate treatment and the responsiveness of staff to inmate needs.

Finally, the community relations component demonstrates the commitment of the facility to be seen as a “good citizen” within the community in which it is geographically located, as well as within the larger social community that surrounds the ideals of rehabilitation and correction. Specific topics for review include recruitment of staff, institutional reputation and community-relations activities. Specific details examined include levels of local and regional recruitment and the perceptions of local, state and national agencies that work directly with the facility. Also considered are the number of activities wherein the facility interacts directly with the community, volunteers and contractors.

The examination of particular programs, services and perceptions of all components includes previsit documentation, on-site documentation, personal observation and staff survey results. At times these tools are closely aligned with one another. At other times the documentation for review varies widely from the FCP team’s observations. This is not to say that incongruence between data sets are malicious or the result of faulty research methods. Rather, it is to display to the reader that differences within data gathering, analysis and presentation can and do occur during this process. The occurrence of this phenomenon varies between institutions as well as between components within an institution. This is one of many challenges the FCP team faces in the completion of the institution review process.

## Testing the Process

The planning portion of developing this tool was completed in mid-June 2004. The subsequent policy draft was submitted to executive staff, and approval to test the process in a small facility was granted. Robert Shannon, superintendent at the State Correctional Institution (SCI) at Frackville, volunteered his site to pilot the program. The assessment team was graciously accepted, the facility was hospitable and the review was conducted without incident. At the end of the week, a meeting was held with the SCI-Frackville administrative staff and department heads so that FCP team members could present the overall findings. The FCP validated the many positive aspects of SCI-Frackville and presented only a few minor operational changes to enhance existing strengths. The committee believed that the process had facilitated a joint examination of the services provided at SCI-Frackville. Barry Johnson, superintendent at SCI-Pine Grove observed,

“Executive staff and SCI-Frackville administrative staff formed a mutual plan to supplement services and change the delivery system of some services, thereby providing overall improvement to the operation of the facility.”

## The Outcome and Benefits of FCP

Initial concerns with negative perceptions and possible resistance have subsided. As with most changes, the introduction of the tool to facility managers in the early stages of the process, and the involvement of a large number of credible staff from varied backgrounds has helped alleviate the anticipated issues. The process has demonstrated data integrity, respondent confidentiality and the use of collected information for the betterment of the institution. The FCP committee has successfully developed a sound and useful assessment tool that will allow for constant improvement and consistent operations, and will help to ensure the DOC continues to operate secure, safe and humane facilities.

An additional benefit of the process, initially unrealized, is the ability to use the FCP process as a grooming tool for high-level administrative staff. The process creates opportunities for exposure to facilities featuring a variety of security levels, physical plant layouts, staff cultures and operations.

Because of the value of the assessment tool and secondarily, training opportunities, the DOC recently conducted its second and final FCP pilot at SCI-Camp Hill in January 2005. This FCP marked the conclusion of the FCP commit-

tee and the beginning of a standard tool used throughout Pennsylvania’s prisons. To date, 10 institutions have had the opportunity to discover their own unique character and culture. The venture has been successful in revealing the positive aspects of each facility and promoting continual improvement. According to Superintendent Barry Johnson, current FCP Chair, “The Pennsylvania Department of Corrections remains committed to the FCP and is currently developing a plan to streamline portions of the process.”

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>The State Corrections Analysis Network (SCAN) is a monthly report in which Pennsylvania prison facility managers submit to the DOC Central Office a broad snapshot of several data elements for each facility. This snapshot creates a pattern or baseline and represents the normal climate for each facility. These data are reviewed monthly to identify patterns or variations from the monthly norms for each facility.

---

*Tammy Turner is an institutional business manager at SCI-Cambridge Springs. Gerard W. Bryant, Ph.D., has been a regional psychology services administrator with the Federal Bureau of Prisons for the past 10 years. Harry E. Wilson is the superintendent of SCI-Fayette. The authors would like to thank Stephen Bosanac, a doctoral candidate and fellow in the sociology program at York University in Toronto, for editing this article prior to submission.*