

**Community Cognitive Counselor Positions
Legislative Report**

FY2023



**Chadwick S. Dotson
Director of Corrections**

November 1, 2023



Authority

This report has been prepared and submitted to fulfill the requirement of Item 399 D of the 2022 Acts of Assembly. This provision allows for the expansion of cognitive-behavioral programming statewide for Probation and Parole Offices. The provision requires the Virginia Department of Corrections (VADOC) to report on the effectiveness of the cognitive-behavioral program including but not limited to services and treatment provided, program completion rate, and recidivism rate for those individuals who participated in the program. The report shall be submitted to the Governor, the Chairs of the House Appropriations and the Senate Finance and Appropriations Committees, the Secretary of Finance, and the Director, Department of Planning and Budget by November 1, 2023.



Background

The Council of State Governments Justice Center reports that “research has demonstrated that programs that adhere to the principles of risk, need, and responsivity and use a cognitive-behavioral approach are the most effective at reducing recidivism” (Three Core Elements of Programs that Reduce Recidivism: Who, What, and How Well, 2018). Commonly referred to as “criminal thinking” in the corrections profession, addressing this issue is typically the domain of criminal justice professionals because expertise does not exist in the wider community.

Although resources existed for substance use disorder and mental health treatment within the VADOC community corrections, positions to provide cognitive-behavioral programming remained a large gap and was an unmet need for many individuals supervised on probation and/or parole. Seeking to fill this treatment gap as a means to increase public safety, in 2018 the VADOC established a pilot program in six Probation and Parole Districts across the State. The goal was to provide the pilot cognitive-behavioral programming to probation and parole supervisees (supervisees) with assessed moderate-to-high risk of recidivism who also had a high need for cognitive behavioral programming. In this way, limited resources could target the higher risk and higher needs supervisees for the best public safety outcomes. Preliminary data from the pilot collected in 2021 showed promising results: an increase in program participation rates, positive impacts of supervision success for program participants and decreases in drug use by program participants.

In 2022, these pilot program success indicators resulted in budgetary support and allowed for an expansion of the program at additional Probation and Parole Offices across the state. The VADOC’s progress in implementing cognitive-behavioral programs in community corrections is the basis for this update.

Implementation Strategies

In spite of serious hiring challenges during and post-COVID, VADOC has been successful in filling 25 of the positions. The VADOC has engaged in rigorous recruitment and retention strategies seeking to fill correctional staff. This includes utilizing social media for job notices, holding job fairs and recruitment at colleges and universities. Hiring is an ongoing top priority for the VADOC, and aggressive efforts continue.

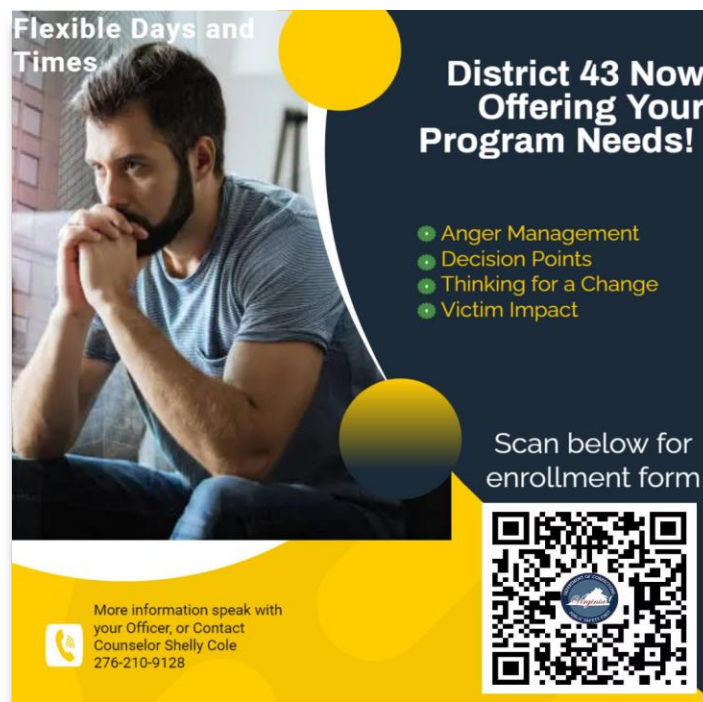
Monthly Meetings

Since the positions are located in Probation and Parole Districts across the state, low-cost methods have been used to provide training and clinical supervision to staff hired in the positions. In January of 2023, the VADOC began virtual monthly meetings to assist with onboarding of new positions, and to provide training and support for new Cognitive Counselors as well as establish best practices for implementation. These meetings continue to take place. Staff answer training questions to ensure counselors are receiving the correct instruction and facilitating the approved curricula to ensure consistency and maintain fidelity. Monthly meetings are also used to address challenging situations and solutions for issues such as:

- Finding ways to overcome barriers to program participation such as transportation and childcare.
- Using alternative meeting spaces when rooms are not available in the district offices.
- Providing hybrid approaches combining virtual and in-person group facilitation.
- Creating gender-responsive/trauma-informed approaches to programming.

Through these meetings, Cognitive Counselors share resources, best practices for success and program management strategies. Several staff have traveled to observe best practices in other districts. To recruit more participants, Cognitive Counselors have used creative ways of advertising the availability of new programming in the districts. Brochures were developed for placement in district lobbies that describe the programs offered. Posters and QR codes were created to encourage supervisees to ask for specific programs to meet their needs.

Below is an example from Tazewell Probation and Parole:

A brochure for District 43 with a dark blue background and yellow accents. It features a photo of a man in a blue shirt looking thoughtful. The text includes "Flexible Days and Times", "District 43 Now Offering Your Program Needs!", a list of programs (Anger Management, Decision Points, Thinking for a Change, Victim Impact), a QR code for enrollment, and contact information for Counselor Shelly Cole.

Flexible Days and Times

District 43 Now Offering Your Program Needs!

- Anger Management
- Decision Points
- Thinking for a Change
- Victim Impact

Scan below for enrollment form

More information speak with your Officer, or Contact Counselor Shelly Cole 276-210-9128



Training Development

In February of 2023 VADOC designed a distinct training pathway for Cognitive Counselors requiring specific coursework to orient new employees to the organization and the new role. Training includes skill attainment and knowledge in program facilitation, trauma-informed care, Community Corrections Program Module training, Motivating Change, and Peer Support Advisor Training. In addition, new Cognitive Counselors receive training in Effective Practices in Communication Strategies (EPICS), the core intervention used by probation officers with supervisees, and an overview of the COMPAS Risk and Needs Assessment instrument so they can identify and address supervisee needs. Cognitive Counselors complete a menu of performance-based facilitation trainings to ensure curriculum is followed with fidelity.

Programming

Cognitive Counselors provide standard curriculum that is evidence-based/evidence informed to reduce recidivism. Program referrals are made by Probation Officers based on each supervisee's assessed recidivism risk, which indicates the intensive level of programming required. If the level of risk is determined to be moderate-high or high, the supervisee's needs for specific programming is also assessed and the Cognitive Counselor matches the individual with the needed programming.

Below are the approved cognitive-behavioral coursework/group offerings:





Coaching for Success

To implement programming with fidelity, the VADOC invested in the use of a coaching model to ensure program success. The VADOC provided a total of 29 individual coaching sessions with Cognitive Counselors and 11 group observations (both virtual and in-person) since implementation. After the group observations, one-on-one coaching is provided to strengthen staff skills. The use of Quality Assurance Program Assessments designed by the VADOC Research Unit provide a structured approach for program observations and constructive feedback.

Outcomes

The program has been implemented for less than one year and mature data on participation and recidivism is not yet available. The VADOC Research Unit is developing a framework for analysis of outcomes related to program success factors for the Cognitive Counselors. In the future, continued tracking will be able to provide more data on outcomes and trends.

The very preliminary outcomes reported here are promising. In comparing a 2022 cohort of program participants from January to June of 2022 with program participants from January to June of 2023, the following are indicators of positive program performance:

- Participation numbers in cognitive-behavioral programming more than doubled and completion numbers for cognitive-behavioral programming increased by 67% during January to June of 2023.
- Total program completion rate for cognitive behavioral programming is 63% for the first six months of implementation of the cognitive counselor positions (January to June 2023).
- Programming is successfully targeting the intended population of moderate-to-high risk. The 72% in 2022 using the original positions and 73% in 2023 with the additional positions align with previous national research which used 75% moderate-to-high risk as a target for group participant recidivism risk profile (*Lowenkamp, Pealer, Smith, Latessa, Federal Probation, 2006*)
- Program completions may correlate with reductions in drug use. In the 2022 cohort studied, those who completed cognitive-behavioral programs had a 22% lower positive drug test rate than non-completers. This indicates program completions may have a positive impact on drug testing outcomes. 2023 cohort findings are not available as of the writing of this report but continue to be tracked and will be available once data matures.
- Program completion may have a beneficial impact on subsequent rearrest rates as well based on the 2022 cohort. In that cohort, 14.3% of those who did not complete a program were rearrested within 3 months, compared to only 3.2% of program completers. As this is initial data only with small sample sizes, the VADOC will continue to track rearrest rates for 2022 and 2023 and document as the data matures.



Conclusion

Cognitive Counselors are a key strategy in providing programming for individuals under VADOC probation or parole in the community. Data, though very preliminary, is promising. The VADOC has prioritized supporting the positions and has invested time, staffing, and training in staff to ensure successful program implementation. Positive results are shown in the increased access, participation, and completion in cognitive-behavioral programming for supervisees. Cognitive Counselors have become valuable and contributing members of Probation/Parole Districts across the state. Progress demonstrates that the positions are meeting targeted needs and that they are a key strategy to creating public safety by providing supervisees with skills to reduce recidivism and repeat crimes and create lasting public safety for Virginia communities.