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## Recommended Quality Control Standards: Washington State Research-Based Juvenile Offender Programs

### Legislative Direction

In the late 1990s, the Washington State Legislature initiated funding of “research-based” programs in the juvenile courts.<sup>1</sup> The basic idea was straightforward: taxpayers will be better off if their dollars fund programs that have been proven to be effective in achieving key policy outcomes. Washington’s effort is part of a nationwide trend to use research evidence to inform policy and program choices. The Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence at the University of Colorado refers to research-based programs as “Blueprint Programs” when they meet strict scientific standards and have sufficient documentation to permit replication.<sup>2</sup> Washington’s juvenile justice initiative is the first attempt in the nation to replicate these programs on a state-wide basis.

In 1997, the Legislature directed the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (Institute) to evaluate the research-based programs it funded.<sup>3</sup> In 2002, the Institute’s preliminary evaluation found that the programs cost-effectively reduced recidivism—but only when delivered competently. That is, the programs work only when they faithfully adhere to the original program design.<sup>4</sup> As is the case with any business, quality control matters, and Washington’s juvenile justice programs are no exception.

Based on this finding, the 2003 Legislature directed the Institute to develop adherence and outcome standards to ensure quality implementation of juvenile justice research-based programs.<sup>5</sup>

*Because model adherence and competent delivery of research-based intervention programs is critical for reducing recidivism, the Washington state institute for public policy shall develop adherence and outcome standards for measuring effectiveness of treatment programs referred to in this act. The standards shall be developed and presented to the governor and legislature no later than January 1, 2004. The standards shall include methods for measuring competent delivery of interventions as well as success factors following treatment. The standards shall include, but not be limited to hiring, training and retaining qualified providers, managing and overseeing the delivery of treatment services, and developing quality assurance measures. The department shall utilize these standards to assess program effectiveness. The courts shall also utilize these standards in determining their continued use of these alternatives. The courts shall not continue to use programs that do not comply with these standards.*

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<sup>1</sup> RCW 13.40.510

<sup>2</sup> <<http://www.colorado.edu/cspv>>

<sup>3</sup> RCW 13.40.500-540, Community Juvenile Accountability Act.

<sup>4</sup> Steve Aos, *The Juvenile Justice System in Washington State: Recommendations to Improve Cost-Effectiveness* (Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2002). The Institute’s final evaluation of the CJAA programs (Robert Barnoski, 2004, forthcoming) confirms that competent delivery produces favorable results, while incompetent delivery does not.

<sup>5</sup> ESSB 5903, Section 7, Chapter 378, Laws of 2003

This statutory direction applies to state funded research-based programs operated by the courts and the Juvenile Rehabilitation Administration (JRA). We believe, however, that the standards described in this report could be applied to other research-based programs funded by the legislature. For example, most of the concepts and procedures could be translated to areas of child welfare and prevention programs related to youth and families.

In developing this report, the Institute worked with the juvenile courts, JRA, program developers, and the state's program experts. The final recommendations were developed by the Institute.

## **Recommendation to the Legislature**

Since the late 1990s, Washington has been recognized as a leader in implementing research-based juvenile justice programs. After evaluating Washington's experiences to date, one conclusion is clear: these programs work, but with one vital qualification. When the programs do not adhere to the original design, they can fail. In fact, we found that the programs can increase the recidivism rates of participants when they are poorly delivered.

The Legislature, recognizing the importance of quality control, initiated the next phase of Washington's effort by directing the Institute to "develop adherence and outcome standards" for research-based programs. The standards in this report define the measures needed to ensure that the research-based programs produce their intended effects.

The Institute recommends the publication of annual reports describing adherence to the standards. With these reports, Washington State policymakers can review ongoing evidence describing the return on the state's investments in research-based programs to determine if they are continuing to pay off. The standards and recommended annual reporting can be implemented by direction to JRA. JRA already has the responsibility for overseeing funding and accountability of the programs.

## RECOMMENDED QUALITY CONTROL STANDARDS FOR WASHINGTON STATE JUVENILE JUSTICE PROGRAMS

The first standards address treatment services; these are followed by standards for measuring outcomes.

### I. Standards for Treatment Services

An oversight committee is the primary vehicle for ensuring competent service delivery. The committee is to include experts for each program under the committee's management, as well as representatives of the organizations responsible for funding and management decisions. Since these quality control standards affect programs run by the courts and Juvenile Rehabilitation Administration (JRA), it is the responsibility of the juvenile courts and the JRA to determine if one oversight committee is needed or whether two separate committees are advisable.

**A. Managing and Overseeing Program Delivery:** The following practices are necessary for delivering research-based programs:

- The management of each program includes the involvement of a statewide program specialist and, as needed, program trainers and regional program specialists. These individuals are responsible for ensuring that each program's principles are followed and the service is competently delivered. Specialists will visit program sites to consult with staff and assist with program delivery problems.
- The program specialist is responsible for developing a quality control manual that describes the specific standards for the hiring, training, and retention of qualified providers, and the management and oversight of delivery of treatment services. The oversight committee reviews and approves the manual.
- A representative of each service provider organization attends regularly held workshops, scheduled by the program specialist, to review and clarify program best practices. For programs operating in locations across the state, regional workshops may be necessary.
- Each person providing a program is assessed at least annually by a program specialist. The reviews include direct observation, or video/audio recording of service delivery, and a review of the program environment. The specialist uses the structured assessment instrument specifically designed for each program. These instruments, developed under the guidance of the oversight committee, measure detailed aspects of competent program delivery. The instruments will inform the providers about their performance and provide specific areas for improvement, if needed. The responses to each assessment item are recorded in a database by the program specialist conducting the review. Each person's service delivery is assessed as (a) highly competent, (b) competent, or (c) not competent. The specialist reviews the results with the service providers and court management.
- The program specialist conducts site reviews at least annually to assess the environment supporting the research-based programs. An instrument, developed under the guidance of the oversight committee, is used to assess the environmental support for the research-based programs. The instrument includes information concerning staff training, the assessment process, program participant assignment, staff engagement and motivation of the youth and family, staff reinforcement of the program principles, and support of these efforts by court management. Each program environment is assessed as (a) highly adequate, (b) adequate, or (c) not adequate. The specialist reviews the results with the court management.
- Every two years, the validity of the program provider and environmental assessments are empirically verified under the guidance of the oversight committee.
- The statewide specialist takes corrective action when a site is not competently delivering the program. The statewide specialist notifies the oversight committee of all corrective actions.
- The oversight committee discontinues funding of any program when the corrective actions of the statewide specialist have failed to bring the program into compliance with these standards.
- The oversight committee sponsors an annual refresher training workshop for providers.

**B. Selecting, Training, and Retaining Qualified Providers:** following are personnel practices necessary to facilitate the selection and retention of qualified individuals capable of competently delivering treatment services.

- Each program position has a written job description that includes duties, responsibilities, minimum qualifications, and any special requirements.
- A job announcement is used to advertise and recruit candidates for an open position.
- All applicants are screened to ensure they meet the minimum position qualifications.
- The applicant's interview team includes a program specialist who assesses the candidate's qualifications.
- Explicit selection criteria are used to determine the best person for the position.
- The candidate is selected for the position on a six-month probationary basis with the understanding that the probationary period will determine if the applicant has the necessary knowledge and skills.
- Initial training and feedback are provided so the applicant can acquire necessary experience and demonstrate acceptable knowledge and skills during the probationary period. The initial training includes a written test or interview that assesses the applicant's knowledge.
- At the end of the probationary period, the applicant's skills are reviewed using the assessment instrument designed to measure competent program delivery.
- Only persons demonstrating competent delivery of the treatment service are retained after the probation period ends.
- The program specialist maintains a database of persons who have been selected and trained. The database includes written test scores and an initial assessment of the person's skills in delivering the program. This initial assessment is identical to the ongoing adherence assessments described above. This initial assessment forms the baseline for monitoring the provider's skill development.
- Each statewide program specialist maintains a quality assurance manual that documents the process for meeting these standards.

## II. Standards for Measuring Outcomes

These standards define annual outcome measures that assess whether a research-based program is continuing to achieve its anticipated effectiveness.

**A. Recidivism:** The ultimate outcome measure for juvenile offender programs is recidivism. The recidivism measures follow the definition developed at the direction of the Legislature.<sup>6</sup>

- Recidivism for the juvenile justice system is the commission of an offense after placement in the community that results in a conviction, deferred sentence, deferred prosecution, deferred disposition, or a diversion agreement as defined by Washington State statute for misdemeanors, gross misdemeanors, and felonies. A minimum of 18 months of follow-up time is necessary to reasonably measure juvenile recidivism events. An additional 12 months are necessary to allow for the criminal justice system to process these events. Juvenile offenders prosecuted in adult criminal court and juvenile offenders who turn 18 years old before the end of the follow-up period are tracked into the adult criminal justice system.
- Each research-based program has undergone a rigorous outcome evaluation. These studies provide "benchmarks," or expectations, of what the recidivism rate should be if a program is working.<sup>7</sup> However, it is essential to know if the program outcomes continue to meet expectations, and this knowledge must be available on a yearly basis. Fortunately, it is possible to estimate expected outcomes, based on these evaluations, for youth who received the program in a given year. These calculations adjust for differences in key characteristics between these youth and the youth in the initial evaluation study. For example, if more females received the intervention during 2002 than in the original study, this factor is taken into account by these calculations.

<sup>6</sup> *Standards for Improving Research Effectiveness in Adult and Juvenile Justice* (Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy, December 1997).

<sup>7</sup> Evaluation results for recidivism have been produced by the Institute for the following CJAA programs: Functional Family Therapy, Aggression Replacement Training, and Coordination of Services. In addition, the Institute has produced recidivism outcome studies for the following JRA programs: Dialectic Behavior Therapy, Mentoring, and Family Integrated Treatment.

- The expected outcomes are compared with the actual outcomes each year. An actual outcome that is equal to or better than the expected outcome indicates the program is continuing to work. If the actual outcome is below expectation, the program would appear not to be working. This technique avoids the necessity of forming comparison groups each year. Over time, the trend line of the expected and actual outcomes will show how well the program is working. The accuracy of the outcome estimation calculations are reviewed annually by the oversight committee.

**B. Program Completion:** The completion rate of youth assigned to the program is a key measure. High completion rates indicate that the courts and JRA are able to motivate and keep the youth engaged in the treatment process. Low completion rates indicate wasted resources.


- The juvenile court maintains the assessment database that identifies youth eligible for the research-based programs.
- The program providers maintain a database of youth in their program. The database includes the date the youth was assigned to the provider, the date service delivery started, a record of service contacts, the date the youth completed or was terminated from the program, and, if terminated, the reason for non-completion.
- The program completion rate is the percentage of youth initially assigned to the program who completed it. A 75 percent completion rate for each program is the standard.

**C. Interim Outcomes:** A major strength of research-based programs is the focus on improving specific risk and protective factors associated with particular outcomes. For example, Functional Family Therapy aims to reduce family risk factors and increase family protective factors. Theoretically, the ability of a program to change these factors is what makes it successful; these measures provide feedback on whether the program participants have changed as expected.

- The juvenile courts and JRA developed similar assessments that are specifically designed to measure changes in the dynamic risk and protective factors.<sup>8</sup>
- The risk and protective factors are assessed before the youth is placed in the program and again when the youth either completes or terminates the program.
- The Institute has identified the dynamic risk and protective factors associated with the current research-based programs that are to be measured. Monitoring these interim outcomes provides immediate information on program performance.
- Programs that positively influence the identified factors of interest should have better outcomes than those not able to do so. Showing an association between positive changes in those factors targeted by a program and, subsequently, successful program outcomes is a necessary condition to show that the program is working.

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<sup>8</sup> See the *Washington State Juvenile Court Assessment Manual* for the juvenile courts at [www.wsipp.wa.gov](http://www.wsipp.wa.gov). JRA initially implemented the Intensive Parole Supervision Assessment, which is comparable to the juvenile court assessment. JRA is currently revising its data collection to comprehensively measure risk and protective factors and other behaviors.



*Washington State  
Institute for Public Policy*

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