Restrictive Housing Performance Measures: Real World Application

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SD DOC Performance Measures

- Number and Percent Admitted to and in Restrictive Housing
- Referral Approval Rate
- Average Length of Stay
- Rate of Violent Incidents in Restrictive Housing and General Population
- Number of Releases Directly to the Community
- Returns to Restrictive Housing
- Timeliness of Placement Determination, Hearings, Evaluations and Reviews
- On-time Progression through Level System

Despite a focus in many states on government accountability and performance, many corrections agencies are unable to produce meaningful data detailing their institutional operations and outcomes. With recent increased focus on restrictive housing, this has become an even greater concern for corrections leaders as they are called upon to explain the offender populations involved, the ways in which their policies are carried out in day-to-day operations, their efforts to monitor policy and practice changes, and progress toward their goals to reduce the use of restrictive housing.

SOUTH DAKOTA DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS – A CASE STUDY IN RESTRICTIVE HOUSING PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT

South Dakota Department of Corrections (SD DOC) began reforming its restrictive housing policies, procedures, and practices in late 2013. SD DOC, with technical assistance from the Crime and Justice Institute (CJI) funded through the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), recognized from the start that it would need to collect and report data not only to demonstrate what is being done, how well, and to what end, but also to help inform modifications to the new restrictive housing program as it was rolled out.

Performance Measures Selected

From the beginning, SD DOC and CJI set out, through performance measurement, to examine who is in restrictive housing and how this set of individuals differs from general population, demonstrate how the new restrictive housing policy and program is being implemented, track inmate progression through the program, and monitor how these offenders do upon release to a less restrictive correctional setting. A set of measures was selected that are quantifiable using existing data

In the first 8 months of rolling out its new policy and program, the **number of inmates housed in restrictive housing declined 16%.**

In the quarter before the program was implemented, there were 21 admissions to restrictive housing. **Two quarters later, SD DOC admitted just 7 inmates to Restrictive Housing.**

KEYS TO MEASURING PERFORMANCE

• Start with a small set of measures

• Carefully define the measures

• Ensure data quality

• Invest in automation

• Interpret in context

to convey relevant and important information about the new restrictive housing program, and that are aligned with program goals. In addition to monitoring progress on program goals, quality assurance was included in the measures. As part of its technical assistance, CJI developed a quality assurance process to examine the extent to which the restrictive housing policy is implemented with fidelity within the State Penitentiary. SD DOC data staff incorporated those measures that could be derived from the data management system into the performance measures report, mainly timeliness of key events required in policy:

• Determination for placement in restrictive housing (i.e., timeliness of the hearing notice, mental health assessment, multi-disciplinary staffing, review board hearing, and warden review);

• Evaluations and reviews by mental health staff and the multiple reviews by the restrictive housing manager, unit manager, and case manager that occur in the first 60 days after placement; and

• Inmate progression through the restrictive housing levels.

Automated Performance Measure Report

While it took and continues to take an investment of time by both the administration and facility staff to ensure that data entry is of sufficient quality to automate a performance measure report, it has been worth the effort. Department leadership and those within the State Penitentiary involved in the design and implementation of the new program now review that quarterly report regularly in detail to help inform program progress and modifications.

In addition to the measures above, the restrictive housing program implementation team examines monthly restrictive housing admissions and discharges and trends in certain demographics of the population. Regular review of and discussion about the data is conducted to understand factors that drive the numbers and to identify additional information that would be useful for effective management.

Importance of Context in Performance Measurement

Length of stay is up – that's bad, right?

Eight months after the pilot of SD DOC's new restrictive housing program began, the department's performance measure report showed an increase from the previous quarter in the average length of stay in restrictive housing. Upon closer examination the implementation team realized that this shift in the length of stay measure actually demonstrated a program success.

The department measures length of stay in two different ways: (1) the number of months those in restrictive housing have been in that housing status, and (2) how long offenders released from restrictive housing were in that setting. The latter measure is the one included in the quarterly performance measure report.

As it turns out, the increased length of stay was driven by the release into general population of a single inmate who had been in restrictive housing more than a decade—a statistical outlier. This individual has successfully remained in general population since his release from restrictive housing.

Why did the violent incident rate go up this quarter?
Is the program not working?

During the same reporting period as above, there was a slight increase in the rate of violent incidents in restrictive housing. Again, digging deeper into the underlying data, the implementation team found that, because the violent incident rate is calculated based on writeups for violent infractions, multiple write-ups related to one incident could appear to indicate an increase in violent incidents. The team found that one inmate had four write-ups for one episode and thus drove up the rate.

Both of the above scenarios are the result of South Dakota having a relatively small number of offenders in restrictive housing. Regardless of the size of a facility and its restrictive housing population, states will encounter many different situations that may, at first glance, appear concerning; however, when considered in context there may be more to the story. Regardless of the underlying cause of trends, responsible administration requires this kind of close monitoring and analysis.

Performance Measurement Lessons Learned

It is likely that many corrections departments will encounter challenges similar to those SD DOC faced when it began to roll out restrictive housing performance measures: poor data quality and limited resources for data system programming and report development. SD DOC has learned and continues to learn from this process and offers the following advice:

1. Start with a manageable number of measures that are feasible and important to the restrictive housing practices within your jurisdiction.

2. Carefully define your measures and be transparent about the definitions to help with interpretation of the results.

3. Always place the performance measures in context so they are interpreted correctly and in a helpful way (see examples on previous page).

4. Invest the time and resources to make the data system modifications so that restrictive housing performance measures can be automatically generated.

5. Put processes in place to ensure that the data used for the measures are reliable and up-to-date.

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Photos courtesy of Michael Winder, SD DOC Communications & Information Manager.

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