
An Ounce of Prevention: Proactive Community Supervision Reduces Violation Behavior

*Gonna change my way of thinking,
Make myself a different set of rules.
Gonna change my way of thinking,
Make myself a different set of rules.
Gonna put my good foot forward,
And stop being influenced by fools.
—Bob Dylan*

The problem with designing policies and programs intended to respond to probation and parole violations is that the violation—technical, new offense, or both—has already occurred. The harm to a victim and/or a community, as well as a behavioral setback for the supervisee, has occurred. Accordingly, the Maryland Division of Parole and Probation is working on a redesign of supervision practices that is intended to reduce both the frequency of violations and the number of violators. It is based on the conviction that the supervision process itself can be an effective intervention for improving supervisees' productivity and reducing the likelihood that they will violate the conditions of release.

Maryland's new Proactive Community Supervision (PCS) strategy has a behavioral management component, designed to create a social learning environment where the emphasis is on supervisees becoming law-abiding, productive, and responsible during the supervision period. The social learning environment uses research-based behavioral management strategies to work with supervisees in: 1) identifying realistic and pertinent behavioral goals, and 2) implementing strategies for supervisees to achieve these goals. This process is designed to engage supervisees in the supervision process and increase their commitment to and ownership of the goals. Supervisees tailor the supervision period to their own personal needs and goals while also satisfying the public safety purposes of supervision.

We began using the PCS strategy in the Mondawmin office in January 2002, and three other offices came on board in July 2002. An evaluation component was in place at launch. The first year report found that those supervised under the PCS strategy had a 20% technical violation rate, as compared to 29% for those supervised under the standard contact-driven supervision model ($p < .01$). The rearrest rate was 32% for supervisees in PCS and 41% for those under traditional supervision during a 1-year period ($p < .01$) (Taxman, Yancey, & Bilanin, 2006). Even though there were increased expectations for supervisees, the results confirm that behaviorally appropriate targets can result in improved supervisee outcomes.

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Prevention Efforts in PCS

PCS has several key components that directly influence supervisees' success during supervision. These components support the premise that effective supervision requires case plans to be responsive to the criminogenic needs that propel supervisees toward criminal activity. A tailored case plan lays out the steps that guide supervisees in developing pro-social attitudes, values, and behaviors.

The four key programmatic features are:

- 1) Using a standardized tool to assess the criminal characteristics (dynamic risk factors) that are susceptible to change;
- 2) Engaging supervisees in a behavioral contract that marries their desires and goals to appropriate services that address specific criminogenic traits;
- 3) Emphasizing achievement of behavioral goals via positive and negative reinforcers that will assist the supervisee in achieving these goals; and
- 4) Maintaining an environment in which supervisees can take incremental steps that allow them to grow and evolve from each scenario and to learn from missteps or small relapses.

These featured activities need to occur in a supervision environment where respect for supervisees is demonstrated, and the ground rules for supervision are clearly communicated.

PCS changes the character of criminal supervision. Contacts with supervisees are focused on better understanding supervisees and what drives their criminal behavior. The goal is not to “catch supervisees doing bad things.” Rather, contacts are opportunities for supervisees to show incremental steps toward responsible behavior.

This redefinition changes the nature of the interactions during supervision contacts and provides a consistent context for all contacts. The result is that supervisees are more likely to make strides in meeting supervision requirements and mandates and are less likely to violate them. Unlike contact-driven models where increased contacts lead to more violations and to probation/parole agent/officer frustration, these contacts are focused on productive gains. The “ounce of prevention,” then, is knowing how to use the supervision contact effectively to achieve better outcomes with supervisees and to reduce technical violations.

Maryland’s Business Process Underscoring PCS

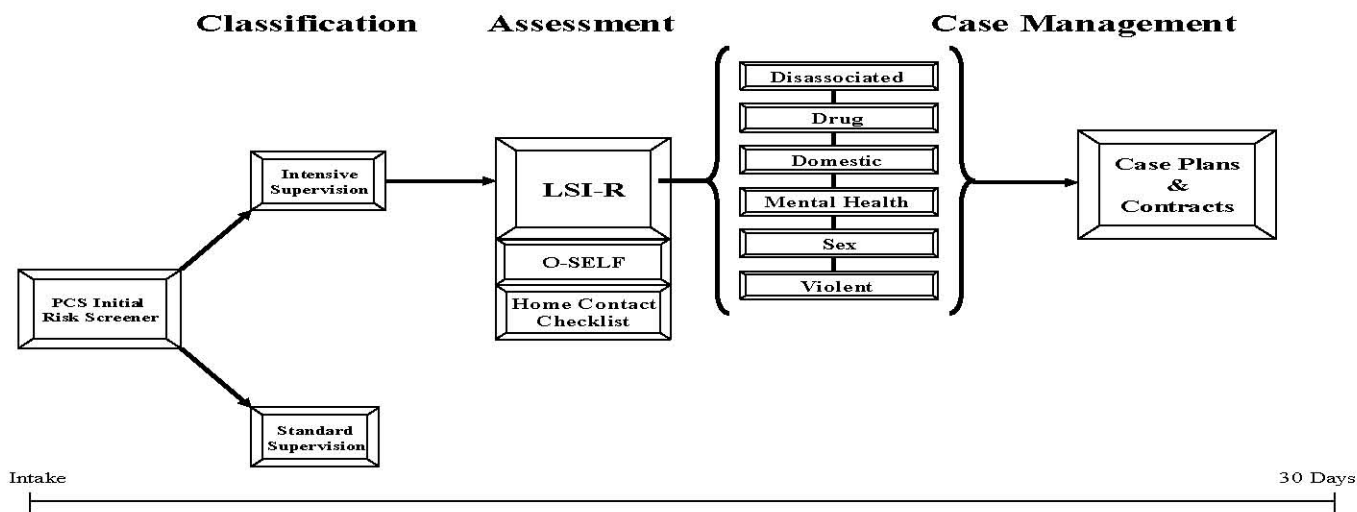
The PCS process is depicted in Figure 1, page 33. The process begins with using a standardized tool to identify the criminogenic needs of the supervisee. The instrument allows highly trained probation/parole agents to assess these factors and then work on a process to help supervisees learn new skills to manage their

behavior. The key is a case plan that is responsive to the criminogenic traits identified in the assessment process through:

- ◆ The assessment tool;
- ◆ Objective information about the home environment;
- ◆ Criminal history;
- ◆ Supervisee self-identified interest areas; and
- ◆ Drug test results.

The case plan is essentially a behavioral contract that includes the treatment, education, and control services needed to help supervisees become law-abiding, productive, and responsible. The emphasis is on desistance from criminal behavior.

**Figure 1.
PCS Model of Supervision: Defining a Case Plan**



The agent’s role incorporates a behavioral manager approach, in which the agent works with the supervisee to clarify the factors that influence the supervisee’s continued involvement in crime and criminal behavior and to develop steps to counteract these criminogenic factors. The agent monitors progress on the action plan and works jointly with the supervisee to:

- 1) Revise the action plan to address issues that are precursors to further involvement in criminal behavior (such as substance abuse, mental health issues, or violence); and
- 2) Develop pro-social networks in the community.

The behavioral manager role blends the law enforcement and social work skills that are needed in protecting the public (Taxman, Shepardson, & Byrne, 2004). The agent uses the supervision process specifically to:

- ◆ Assist the supervisee in learning about the triggers (e.g., people, places, or situations) that affect involvement in criminal behavior;
- ◆ Create incentives and sanctions to shape supervisee behaviors; and
- ◆ Communicate in a timely fashion the progress the supervisee has made.

A key component of the PCS approach is the use of typologies to guide agents in developing case plans that promote the supervisee’s desistance from crime. Table 1 lists the seven main typologies seen in our caseloads. Each type of supervisee has different emphases in the supervision plan because of the unique factors affecting his/her criminal behavior. The expectation is that the treatment and control services in the case plan will be specific for each supervisee, but they will be selected to achieve certain agreed-on goals.

Table 1. Goals of Supervision Plan

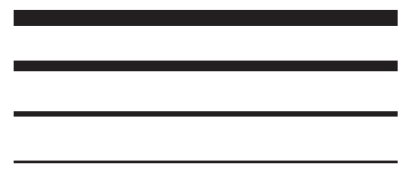
Type of Supervisee	Emphasis of Supervision Plan
Disassociated	Develop pro-social social support network
Drug-involved Addict	Achieve abstinence from illicit drug use
Drug-involved Entrepreneur	Obtain pro-social employment
Violent	Address violent tendencies
Domestic Violent	Control power and control issues
Mental Health	Address mental health issues
Sex Offender	Control sexual deviance behaviors

Employing a Preventative Model to Reduce Violations

As part of the PCS strategy, several key tenets exist about the case plan, which can result in effective management of the supervisee in the community to prevent violations. Essentially, these tenets are:

- ◆ The case plan should be developed with the supervisee;
- ◆ The plan should focus on behavioral goals;
- ◆ A supervisee should not be held accountable for more than three behavioral goals at any one time; and
- ◆ The case plan must be adjustable based on the situation and progress of the supervisee.

These tenets subscribe to the overall goal of PCS by focusing on the supervision period as a time to teach supervisees needed social and personal management skills.



Supervisee interests and needs. The first step in the prevention of violations is to tailor the case plan to the specific needs of the supervisee. Above, we described the process for developing the case plan, including the need to acquire objective information about the supervisee. Figure 1 also illustrates that there is a process to ascertain the supervisee’s areas of interest. We do this through the O-SELF, or Offender Self-Assessment tool, shown below.

In the O-SELF, supervisees are asked to indicate their interest in 10 areas and to choose which ones they want to emphasize during the supervision period. This step is critical because the questions are designed to place the burden on supervisees to identify their needs and interests. In many ways, this self-definition process is empowering, and it should be acknowledged and honored.

MARYLAND O-SELF

Issue:	Is This a Problem For You?		Are You Interested in Improving...? (Circle)										What Can You Do to Improve the Situation?
			Not at all									Very	
Physical Health	Yes	No	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Family Life	Yes	No	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Relationships (Friends)	Yes	No	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Education	Yes	No	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Employment	Yes	No	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Religious Involvement	Yes	No	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Drug Abuse	Yes	No	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Alcohol Abuse	Yes	No	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Criminal Behavior	Yes	No	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	

Our evaluations have found that supervisees tend to express interest, first, in employment and education issues, then in family and parenting issues, and then in their own mental and physical health. Last on the list is criminal behavior and substance use. This suggests that to engage the supervisee in becoming a productive citizen, more attention might be given to developing the supervisee's capacity to contribute to society. The case plan then reflects interests and needs that the supervisee understands, and it provides a focus on behavioral objectives.

Incremental, behavioral goals. Many case plans focus on long-term, large-scale goals for supervisees ("do not use drugs," "get a job," and so on). However, a PCS case plan focuses on behavioral goals—goals that require supervisees to take steps to improve their situation. The goals are described in terms of small, incremental gains that supervisees can reasonably achieve. For example, if a supervisee believes that her boss does not like her, then the case plan should address this concern. The supervisee can identify some reasons why the boss may have a negative impression (e.g., the supervisee often gets to work late, takes too many breaks, or waits to be told to do everything). The process of identifying the reasons for the boss's negativity and ways to remedy those issues (e.g., leave earlier for work, take public transportation instead of waiting for an unreliable friend to show up, or reduce smoking to diminish the number of breaks) arrives at a behavioral goal that is focused on improving the supervisee's situation and helping him/her develop the skills to manage similar situations appropriately.

Behavioral goals turn the case plan into a dynamic road map that must be monitored on a regular basis to gauge supervisees' progress. As supervisees achieve their goals, new ones can be established. An important tenet is that supervisees should not have more than three behavioral goals (and other conditions such as fines, fees, or reporting to a probation/parole agent) at any time. The behavioral goals can be structured in such a manner that the supervisee begins working on targeted goals that are relevant to him, thus easing the way to accomplish the mandated conditions. And, if the supervisee achieves these behavioral goals, then other supervision requirements can be reduced (reporting to the probation/parole agent, some drug testing, etc.) based on the supervisee's accomplishments.

Keeping it real. A focus on behavioral objectives that intertwines supervisees' interests, needs, and conditions of release turns the case plan into an action plan that is specific to each supervisee. It also removes what supervisees may perceive as useless and burdensome demands. The attention is on concrete goals that supervisees can recognize as beneficial. If the case planning and review process is done through a dialogue, the result is a plan that is meaningful to supervisees. The environment must allow supervisees to talk freely about their difficulties in achieving the behavioral goals, and it must help them learn to solve problems. Under PCS, this is done in an environment where it is okay to try and fail, and where the criminal justice system actors learn to distinguish between lapses that are public safety threats and those that are a natural part of resocialization/habilitation.

This distinction is important because it places the agent in the position of trying to help supervisees learn from their mistakes, but also of setting the boundaries of tolerable mistakes. For instance, a supervisee who has work-related objectives but tests positive for marijuana may be sanctioned in the community, as contrasted with a similar supervisee with work-related objectives who is arrested for burglary. The difference is that a response to the positive drug test can be included in the next set of behavioral goals, whereas a new criminal offense requires a very different response.

The Agent's Role in Supervision

Maryland's PCS process yields a case plan that serves multiple purposes for supervisees. It includes key information that is part of the prevention process, including graphs depicting the results from the LSI-R (Level of Service Inventory-Revised) and the O-SELF (the self-assessment tool that supervisees complete to indicate their areas of interest). These graphs are visual tools to remind supervisees of the areas in which they have weaknesses as well as the areas they are interested in pursuing during their period of supervision. The case plan also includes the conditions of supervision, the typology, and the agreed-upon responsibilities for supervisees. By going over the case plan components, agents work with supervisees to help them understand the issues that affect their involvement with the criminal justice system and the expectations of supervision.

A key component of PCS case plans is that parole/probation agents perform specific activities to support the special conditions of supervisees. That is, for each responsibility assigned to a supervisee, her agent has a complementary responsibility designed to help her make progress toward meeting the goal. By declaring these responsibilities, agents are indicating to supervisees that they are invested in them successfully completing supervision.

In the PCS evaluation, we found that the average agent had more than three specific responsibilities at one time for each supervisee. Essentially, these responsibilities define the activities of the agent in supervising the case. The move is away from face-to-face contacts that do not have a specified goal and toward specific activities that support the efforts of supervisees.

For example, for a disassociated supervisee who has agreed to obtain and work with a mentor, the agent would be responsible for helping him/her develop a positive relationship with the mentor. This might involve role-playing with the supervisee a variety of likely interactions (e.g., selecting a mentor, learning how to ask for assistance, or showing appreciation for the work of the mentor). For a mental health supervisee, the agent might be responsible for reinforcing the importance of medication and/or treatment programs, for helping the supervisee to become self-sufficient, or for helping him/her learn to deal with the problems associated with having a mental health issue. The agent has a defined role in helping supervisees take the steps needed to achieve the goals of their supervision plans. In addition, by actively helping supervisees achieve key objectives, agents demonstrate their confidence in their supervisees' ability to be successful.

Supervision As an Intervention

PCS is designed to be an intervention that reshapes how probation/parole agents work with supervisees as part of their main business process—contacts. The crux of a PCS intervention is the agent’s role as a behavioral manager who helps supervisees in: 1) learning about their own behavior, 2) understanding the links between their behavior and their involvement with the criminal justice system, and 3) crafting responses to their behavior. Thus, the agent is helping supervisees learn new skills to manage their behavior. The intervention is, then, a series of brief, pivotal interactions with supervisees. According to Agent Senior Walter Nolley,

Our requests for revocations should be based on conduct that signals a public safety risk and not because parolees or probationers have failed to do every single thing we have requested or directed. We must not think of ourselves as authority figures who have been disrespected or devalued by supervisees’ failure to do everything we instruct them to do. Lives cannot be rebuilt based on intimidation. Community supervision needs to be a continuum of learning and adoption of acceptable forms of conduct.

The PCS strategy has shown that the agent-supervisee contact can be reshaped. Reshaped, contacts provide a mechanism to thwart the behaviors that generate technical violations, based on supervisee-crafted action steps to tackle their own problem behaviors. Problem behaviors are “worked on” during the supervision period. Many of the efforts to address technical violators focus on the importance of swift and certain responses. PCS provides the structure to prevent many violations and to respond appropriately when a violation does occur.

The key question is whether the supervision environment allows supervisees to participate in the process and to address the behaviors that need attention. Can we safely and effectively restructure the supervision environment and process in a way that respects the role supervisees must play in their own change process? Can we invite them to be on the stage with us, re-writing the last act of the play instead of seating them in the audience, forcing them to repeatedly watch Act One/Scene One, and then sanctioning them for heckling the actors? If we are going to reduce the frequency of violations and the number of violators, it appears that we need more authors and actors. ■

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