

Colorado Probation Research in Brief

Contingency Management: Foundations and Principles

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Summary/Conclusions

This Brief is based on an unpublished book chapter written by four experts in the field of contingency management. The collaborative work is an overview of the basic principles of using contingency management in the treatment of substance abusing patients. The material covers seven specific principles that should be addressed in programs using a contingency management system. The information is based on a number of studies that explored the use of reinforcements and punishments in the treatment of a variety of addictions.

Limitations of Information

The information in the source document is the result of a number of studies on the use of contingency management on addictive behavior. According to other studies (see RIB on Incentives), contingency management has been successfully used with the criminal justice population. Several Colorado drug courts are using a form of contingency management to encourage behavior change in offenders. Additionally, incentives can be successfully used to reinforce behavior change for probationers, regardless of their substance abuse status. It is recommended the reader use DPS memorandum 07-07, when developing a contingency management program.

Caveat: The information presented here is intended to summarize and inform readers of research and information relevant to probation work. It can provide a framework for carrying out the business of probation as well as suggestions for practical application of the material. While it may, in some instances, lead to further exploration and result in future decisions, it is not intended to prescribe policy and is not necessarily conclusive in its findings.

Contingency Management

Contingencies “can be divided into two types—reinforcers and punishments. The goal of reinforcement is to increase the occurrence of a behavior.” Positive reinforcement is much more powerful than punishment, particularly with substance abusers. The authors cite a variety of research to explain seven basic principles of contingency management (CM).

When using CM to modify behavior, the following seven principles should be considered:

1. Target behavior: This is the change you want to see in the probationer. Some target behaviors, such as abstinence, may require achieving intermediate goals like consistent treatment attendance or consistent negative drug tests.

2. Choice of target population: There may be obstacles (e.g. financial) to offering incentives to all probationers, so choose those who will benefit most.

3. Choice of reinforcer: Use incentives that are meaningful to the probationer.

4. Incentive magnitude: Silverman, et al. found the number of subsequent negative drug tests increased, when the size of the incentive increased. Similarly, Petry et al. found that individuals who received significantly smaller incentives did no better than those receiving no incentives.

5. Frequency of incentive distributions: When considering how often to reward behavior, Kirby et al. advise frequent rewards in the beginning and then taper down as behavior changes.

6. Timing of incentive: Researchers agree that the reward should follow the behavior as soon as possible.

7. Duration of intervention: Many studies conclude that longer term change requires the use of CM for more than three months. During the period of using CM, Kirby et al. recommend a gradual decrease in the size and frequency of rewards, as the client starts to exhibit the target behavior. It is critical to assist the probationer in finding internal or naturally occurring reinforcers, so they have ongoing motivation for lasting change.

Practical Applications

- √ In conjunction with your management team, review DPS memorandum 07-07 to develop a list of possible rewards of varying worth: http://Judicialnet/prob/Memorandums_directives_policy/DPS-07-07-Incentives%20memo.doc.
- √ Review the previous Research in Brief on Incentives: <http://judicialnet/prob/ResearchinBriefs/RIBIncentives.pdf>
- √ Have an “encourage chart” in the probationer’s file, which charts the number of negative UA’s. At predetermined intervals (e.g. ten negative drug tests), reward the probationer with an incentive.
- √ For unmotivated probationers, reward even the smallest behavior changes in the beginning.
- √ Address positive behavior change immediately. For example, use instant drug testing kits and reward probationers on the spot.
- √ Explore what is important to your probationers, so you are utilizing rewards that are important to them, not necessarily of value to you.