

Research Model Provides Objective Data for Pennsylvania Corrections

By Mary Branham Dusenberry

Pennsylvania corrections officials wanted to know if the drug treatment programs in state prisons were working.

So they teamed up with Wayne Welsh of Temple University to find out. The results: The state's therapeutic communities, which then operated at seven facilities, were successful. So successful, in fact, that the state added 20 more such programs.

"Right now, we're in a position where we'll have a therapeutic community in every institution," said Kathy Gnull, deputy secretary for re-entry and specialized programs in the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections. "That's a direct result of the research findings that showed we were making a marked difference in terms of outcomes.

"Had it not been for that study, I don't know that we would be in a position where we could have requested expansion," she said.

It was that empirical evidence that showed the need for program expansion. The research was considered even more objective because it came from an independent researcher, Gnull said.

The way Pennsylvania's corrections department handles research ensures extra objectivity, according to Gary Zajac, chief of research and evaluation for the department.

"When an agency evaluates its own programs, it can be open to criticism that it was trying to make its own program look good," said Zajac. "By working with an external partner, particularly when that partner is independently funded by a third party, that promotes the credibility of the research because

that partner is not beholden to us for money.

"They've got the expertise and objectivity to come in and basically tell it to us like it is."

The state's **Program Evaluation Research System**—one of eight national winners of a CSG Innovations Award—brings together university-based researchers and third-party funders to conduct studies needed by the corrections department, according to Zajac. Pennsylvania, unlike many states, has a fairly large research staff, but it still can't conduct all the evaluations the department needs.

Here's how it works: The department identifies its needs for program evaluation, then identifies an outside expert to conduct the evaluation. After forming a research partnership, the department works with that partner to develop an evaluation plan. The research partner applies for a grant from a third-party funder to conduct the evaluation. The department typically uses the results to make decisions about the program.

For some, like the drug treatment program, the department's work is lauded and the program is expanded. Others, such as a long-distance dads program for inmates, are discontinued after researchers determined the program was ineffective.

Research at state agencies isn't new, but this strategy is very different than the traditional formula. Under that formula, researchers submit a proposal and ask for support from the corrections department, Welsh, of Temple, said. The proposal is then submitted for funding, and if funding is obtained, researchers ask the department for access to subjects.

"Typically, that kind of for-



mat addresses the needs of the researchers much more than the needs of departments," Welsh said. "In the more traditional model, the department really has little say in what kind of research needs to get done and what kinds of studies get done."

Working cooperatively from the beginning, the needs of both the researchers and departments are met. "I think it benefits both parties because we do research that is relevant," Welsh said. "If it's relevant to the department, it's probably relevant to other researchers and professionals who work in the field as well."

And the department gets information on its programs to determine how best to spend its state allocations.

"In these tougher and tougher economic times, it becomes more and more important to be able to justify your budget expenditures and requests based on hard evidence," Gnull said.

"Government is about making choices," she said. If you want to be in the mix to have your needs funded, you have to have hard evidence that they work."

Zajac and Gnull said the research model used in Pennsylvania could be easily replicated across departments and in other states. But, Zajac said, it's important to make sure the agency is open to the research and making changes.

"There isn't any reason that most agencies can't do it," he said. "The real thing is wanting to do it."

FAST FACTS

- Pennsylvania's research model—Program Evaluation Research System—provides external expertise at little cost to the state agency.
- Findings from evaluations conducted through the program influence program planning, policymaking and decision-making.
- The program received nearly \$3 million in research money from third-party funders, and several new grants are being prepared.