Recommendations for Correctional Agencies' Use of Web- and Application-Based Tools to Facilitate Reentry Planning: Lessons From the Field

RTI International

2023

This brief outlines key recommendations for correctional agency administrators who are considering purchasing web- or application-based tools to facilitate reentry. The lessons described in this brief come from a National Institute of Justice (NIJ)-funded study of a web-based planning tool called Pokket. The recommendations in this brief are supported by information conveyed by correctional case managers during interviews conducted in fall 2022, as well as by reflections from the evaluation team.

Introduction

Across the country, many correctional agencies are seeking technological solutions to facilitate reentry planning and increase the likelihood of successful outcomes for people released from correctional settings. One set of tools of particular interest is web-based reentry planning applications ("apps"). Such tools have been developed to help correctional agencies work with people to promote a more successful return to their communities, taking into consideration the need for services and obstacles facing reentering citizens (AppAdvice; n.d.; BioSpace, 2019; q2i, n.d.). These tools help bridge the gap between the institution and the service providers in the community. However, successfully implementing such tools requires careful planning, as well as mitigation strategies for potential pitfalls. Several North Carolina Department of Adult Corrections (NC DAC) prisons implemented a web-based reentry planning tool, Pokket, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. This brief provides early lessons from that experience and addresses other challenging conditions facing correctional agencies, including staff shortages and turnover. We suggest actionable recommendations for correctional agencies (or individual facilities) seeking to adopt this technology for the returning citizens they serve. The brief highlights strategies for planning and deploying web- and app-based reentry planning tools—strategies based on early research findings from an NIJ-funded evaluation of Pokket as implemented in North Carolina.

> **Web- and application-based tools to facilitate reentry planning help bridge the gap between the institution and the service providers in the community. However, successfully implementing such tools requires careful planning, as well as mitigation strategies for potential pitfalls.**

THE REENTRY PLANNING STUDY
RTI INTERNATIONAL

In North Carolina, Pokket has been implemented in six prisons (one for women and five for men), with a gradual rollout for the current research project having begun in 2020. Clients are provided with a 12-month subscription that begins approximately 6 months before release. Before release, clients access Pokket on American Prison Data System (APDS) tablets provided by NC DAC, and they work with facility-based case managers to use the tool. The intention after release is for clients to access Pokket using their own network-enabled devices and to work with their community-based probation or parole officers, as well as with DAC-recommended service providers.

Our study is the first empirical evaluation of Pokket. We will conduct a process evaluation, outcome assessment, and cost-benefit analysis of Pokket as implemented in North Carolina. The recommendations in this brief are based on early process evaluation findings from the study. Outcome and cost findings are expected in late 2024.

The Pokket Tool

The Pokket web-based reentry planning tool was developed by Acivilate ⬏ in 2014 to enhance reentry programming and reduce recidivism by enabling the sharing of client-level data across reentry stakeholders and by empowering individuals to take ownership over their reentry through active planning, using a number of features designed for this purpose. Pokket is intended to be used before and after release from custody. Clients typically access it on a tablet or computer during confinement and then on their own network-enabled devices (e.g., smartphone, tablet, computer) after release. Importantly, this tool was designed to enhance (not replace) in-person reentry programming by facilitating collaboration among the various staff who work with clients (e.g., facility-based case managers, community-based supervision officers, community service providers). Grounded in principles of scaffolding, Pokket is intended to be client driven, with case managers initially providing substantial support to clients in setting and following through with reentry goals and allowing clients to gradually assume ownership over their reentry planning. In addition to goal setting (which involves creating goals and associated tasks), Pokket features a directory of community services and programs (to which clients can request referrals), a calendar with a reminder function, a secure messaging system to allow communication between service providers and clients, a check-in feature, a file storage and sharing mechanism, and a dashboard displaying progress toward reentry goals.

Grounded in principles of scaffolding, Pokket is intended to be client driven, with case managers initially providing substantial support to clients in setting and following through with reentry goals and allowing clients to gradually assume ownership over their reentry planning.

Recommendations

This section shares recommendations for the initial deployment of this technology—the time period before purchasing and deploying such tools. These recommendations are relevant for agencies during the planning and early implementation of Pokket and do not necessarily need to follow a particular sequence. As the research project matures and documents long-term Pokket use, a separate brief will share recommendations for long-term implementation and sustainability.

Define your objectives for using the reentry planning app **1**

Secure buy-in from correctional leadership, line staff, and case managers **2**

Ensure that line staff have sufficient time to implement the tool **3**

Establish a technology infrastructure for accessing the tool before release **4**

Establish time, place, and parameters for facilitating the tool **5**

Provide initial and refresher trainings to staff and providers **6**

Establish a mechanism for accessing the reentry tool after release **7**

Define your objectives for using the reentry planning app

Before your agency purchases a reentry planning app, you and your colleagues should have a clear understanding of the tool's purpose and should agree on what your agency is hoping to gain from its implementation. Planning staff should establish clear, measurable objectives that can later be used to determine whether the agency is achieving what was intended. At this step, factor in existing reentry planning efforts and specify how the app will be integrated with (or replace) such efforts. The difference between the reentry tool and business-as-usual practices needs to be clear enough that, once the new technology is ready to be implemented, it can be easily understood by staff (and clients) who are involved in both.

One potential pitfall of tools like Pokket is that they may be underused if they duplicate reentry planning as usual or other technological applications that are already available. To mitigate this possibility, during the planning stages when your agency is determining the objectives to be accomplished with the new technology, compare the features and ease of use of the new technology under consideration to those of existing offerings. Does the new technology offer significant value added, and is it easily accessible (relative to the existing offerings)? If the new technology is implemented, this assessment can be used to clearly articulate the added value and specific features to facility-level staff and clients who will be using it.

> **Planning staff should establish clear, measurable objectives that can later be used to determine whether the agency is achieving what was intended.**
>
> **The difference between the reentry tool and business-as-usual practices needs to be clear enough that, once the new technology is ready to be implemented, it can be easily understood by staff (and clients) who are involved in both.**

Findings from the field

In our study, Pokket users access the app through APDS tablets, which offer their own suite of reentry resources in addition to the app. Among them are…

- Educational courses from Khan Academy (https://www.khanacademy.org/ ⬈)

- Employment support (e.g., a job/career search application that can help users build resumes and find jobs in their release region; messaging and file storage features)

- Substance use programming (e.g., a substance use recovery program called Breaking Free (https://www.breakingfreegroup.com/solutions-prisons ⬈)

In preliminary interviews with facility-based case managers, we learned that some of these features are perceived to overlap with Pokket, thus limiting the perceived value of Pokket and resulting in lower-than-expected use. When case managers were asked about Pokket usage

among clients, staff said that they see clients using the tablets mainly for APDS programs rather than for Pokket. One staff member noted, "APDS has resources too, so [clients] can access jobs through APDS—this is easier than Pokket."

Correctional leaders who are considering acquiring reentry planning tools like Pokket should consider overlap in features of it and existing tools and practices to anticipate obstacles to its use among practitioners and individuals who are incarcerated.

Secure buy-in from correctional leadership, line staff, and case managers   2

Securing support from correctional leadership as well as line staff and case managers who will be responsible for actually using Pokket with reentering citizens (e.g., programming staff, probation or parole officers, service providers) is critical to successful planning and implementation. Help these stakeholders to understand the value of the tool and support its deployment. If you are in leadership, involve agency heads as well as those responsible for reentry planning (or programs and services) and information technology in the planning and decision-making process. Line staff are equally important because they are directly responsible for working with clients to use the tool. Without their support for and belief in the value of Pokket, it will likely not be used as intended.

Without support for and belief in the value of Pokket, it will likely not be used as intended.

Findings from the field

In North Carolina, both leadership staff and facility-level line staff appear to have strong buy-in regarding the value of Pokket. Leadership staff were responsible for the successful deployment of Pokket across the six study facilities, which required a major investment of time and money (e.g., establishing the technological infrastructure to allow for wireless use, training staff). Case managers also demonstrate strong support for Pokket. During interviews with the evaluation team, such staff were optimistic about Pokket and excited about its use in reentry planning. One staff member observed, "The main thing that I believe [clients] look towards is job resources... and being able to message their PO [probation officer]."

However, staff identified some recommendations to increase Pokket's utility. These included preloading more community-based service providers into Pokket (allowing clients to return results when they search for such services and better plan for reentry) and increasing

use of Pokket by community corrections staff (i.e., probation and parole officers). One staff member explained, "The prison system and probation system are two separate entities. One thing I wish to get is the community corrections more involved in the Pokket Program.... If the POs do not have access to Pokket then it's basically a moot point." Note that at the time of this interview, very few Pokket users had approached release. However, the sentiment does suggest the need for ensuring that all providers involved in supporting the client use Pokket—which is, in fact, the intended manner of use.

Ensure that line staff have sufficient time to implement the tool

3

One of the biggest obstacles to implementing reentry planning technology is correctional officer and case manager bandwidth. Staffing shortages—many of which predated the COVID pandemic and were exacerbated by it—and staff turnover are significant threats to the likelihood that technology will be used. Although technological solutions such as apps and tablets are often perceived to be labor-saving devices, they are not purely user driven. Staff at correctional facilities are needed to manage user credentials (e.g., assign account names and manage passwords), manage the distribution of devices on which Pokket will be used (e.g., check out tablets), teach clients how to use Pokket, and use it themselves for the clients they serve. These tasks require substantial staff time and training.

Staffing shortages—many of which predated the COVID pandemic and were exacerbated by it—and staff turnover are significant threats to the likelihood that technology will be used.

Findings from the field

As in many states, NC DAC facilities have faced and continue to grapple with staffing shortages and high rates of staff turnover. Therefore, the limited time for facility-based staff (particularly case managers and those acting as Pokket account administrators) to use Pokket and facilitate its use among reentering citizens has resulted in lower-than-expected use of Pokket among study participants. For both wireless connectivity and security purposes, facilities in the North Carolina study require that tablets be used in specific, shared spaces. Therefore, if staff are unavailable to assist in tablet use, neither the tablets nor applications such as Pokket can be accessed and used by clients. Facility staff interviewed in one facility summarized this problem: "From my observation, [clients] are not able to use [Pokket].... They are not able to access the tablets themselves. They have to have staff with them. If we don't have staff available, then it's hard to facilitate that for them."

Establish a technology infrastructure for accessing the tool before release

4

If your agency is considering web- or app-based tools for reentry planning, make sure that you and your colleagues fully understand the technological requirements for the tool being considered. We suggest that you involve information technology staff in the early planning.

What is the technology infrastructure in the correctional facilities where the tool will be used before release? That is a critical question for implementation.

In many correctional facilities, devices are shared among the target population to conserve costs. When deciding how many devices to purchase (or, for existing devices, to allocate to this purpose), factor in the population size, desired amount of time to be spent working with the reentry planning tool, and other uses of the device to come up with reasonable assumptions for an appropriate client-to-device ratio.

> **If your agency is considering web- or app-based tools for reentry planning, make sure that you and your colleagues fully understand the technological requirements for the tool being considered.**

Common technical requirements include the following

1. Network-enabled devices, such as tablets, laptops, or desktops, to use the reentry planning app
2. Charging stations for network-enabled devices
3. Licenses for the reentry software
4. Network access through a cellular or Wi-Fi network to allow clients to access web-based content and use software features that require internet
5. Digital security to ensure that clients' personal information is protected and the facility's network is secured against cyber breaches

Findings from the field

Pokket is a cloud-based service. In North Carolina, for the target population to be able to use Pokket on the APDS tablets, the reentry units of focus had to be hardwired for Wi-Fi broadband. The agency determined that common areas in each reentry unit would be targeted for this purpose and undertook the infrastructure work needed to accomplish the task. Once it was complete, the APDS tablets were purchased and set up to allow access only to a secure network. This process has worked well in North Carolina and is generally considered to be cost-effective and secure. However, it

allows the devices to be used only in the specific locations where internet access is possible. Alternative models that can be considered in other states are having tablets access the internet via the mobile phone network (4G or 5G) or having clients access the website using desktop computers wired for internet access that are sometimes available in correctional education settings.

Establish time, place, and parameters for facilitating the tool 5

For clients to get as much use as possible out of the reentry app, it is important for agencies to identify a detailed approach for how they will facilitate use of the tool. Identify where in the facility clients will be using the devices (as noted in the step to establish the technology infrastructure) and determine whether any time limitations associated with this location will restrict clients' use. Clients who have extremely limited time to use the reentry app will not be able to take full advantage of its offerings. Some features, such as messaging functions, are particularly dependent on regular access. To maximize clients' time with the tool, consider allowing them to access the devices in their cells or in staffed common areas.

Location is not the only factor that influences the time clients can spend with the tool. Client schedules (e.g., programming, court appearances, medical appointments) will also play an important role. If major, regular conflicts are evident (e.g., individuals on work release are not able to use the technology during designated times), consider allowing flexible access to devices and reentry tools for these individuals. Furthermore, whether devices are shared among clients (and, if so, what the client-to-device ratio is) will also affect the time that each client can spend working with the tool. Other factors that may influence clients' access to reentry planning tools or other technology are agency policies outlining responses to disciplinary infractions (e.g., whether access to technology is revoked) and transfer policies that might interrupt a client's access to technology, particularly if someone is transferred to a facility not offering the technology.

Finally, available staff time for facilitating access to the devices and the reentry tool directly affects the time clients can spend with the tool. Staff time is a significant driver of client time with the tool, as staff are typically responsible for checking in devices, keeping them charged, cleaning them, monitoring use, training clients on the tool, troubleshooting technological problems, and working on the staff and service provider aspects of the client's reentry planning. Consider whether any of these responsibilities could be delegated to other individuals, such as peer leaders in roles of responsibility (e.g., those participating in a peer mentoring program, in particular prison jobs that might allow for this level of responsibility).

To maximize clients' time with the tool, consider allowing them to access the devices in their cells or in staffed common areas.

Available staff time for facilitating access to the devices and the reentry tool directly affects the time clients can spend with the tool.

Findings from the field

In the Pokket study in North Carolina, tablets are stored in common areas where staff check tablets in and out for clients to use. The scheduled time for clients to access tablets varies among the study facilities. Some allow clients to use the tablets on specific days of the week and during specific time frames (e.g., 4 days per week during a 1-hour time frame). Others technically have no time limits on tablet usage.

Time limitations for tablet usage not only limit participants' ability to use the Pokket tool and other tablet applications, but they also prevent case managers from being able to provide real-time feedback through Pokket's messaging feature. One case manager noted, "Once a week they are on tablets, [so] they won't see the message for a week." In such cases, it is faster for staff and clients to communicate verbally or in writing than by the messaging feature on Pokket.

Provide initial and refresher trainings to staff and providers

6

In addition to being used by clients directly, reentry tools like Pokket are intended to be used by case managers, probation officers, and service providers who work with that client. These providers must be fully trained on how to use the tool. Arrange high-quality initial trainings for all staff who support any clients with access to the technology, along with refresher trainings to keep staff up to date with how to make the most of the tool. Refresher trainings are also critical if there are substantial lulls or periods of time where staff are not continuously using the tool, to reestablish staff proficiency in the technology. Given the high turnover among corrections professionals, agencies likely need to plan for regular training sessions on the technology—both full and refresher trainings.

Case managers, probation officers, and service providers must be fully trained on how to use the tool.

Findings from the field

In the North Carolina study, staff generally found that the initial trainings on Pokket were easy to reference, straightforward, and helpful. Staff also emphasized that the refresher trainings provided after periods of facilities being on lockdown (due to COVID outbreaks) were useful because they reinforced their knowledge and use of the tool when operations resumed.

For the Pokket trainings, Acivilate (the developer of Pokket) leads trainees in a hands-on and interactive training environment with up

to 10 attendees in each session, either in person or virtually (e.g., via videoconferencing). Trainees walk through the Pokket app, exploring each feature and each user role (e.g., client, case manager, account administrator) and complete applicable exercises to practice using the tool and see what the tool looks like from the perspective of each role. Acivilate distributes training exercises in advance of the trainings and encourages participants to take notes. Staff are also provided with contact information for technical support as they use Pokket. Account managers receive additional training on assigning and managing user credentials.

In the past year, NC DAC implemented a train-the-trainer model in which key staff from the department planned, scheduled, and facilitated the Pokket trainings and refresher trainings to staff members, rather than relying on Acivilate.

Establish a mechanism for accessing the reentry tool after release

7

Successful reentry involves both pre- and post-release support, ideally with continuity among service providers who support the client's transition (Jonson & Cullen, 2015; Visher et al., 2017). If reentry planning tools are intended to be used before and after release, pay careful attention during the planning stages to develop protocols that ensure this continuity. Leaders in both institutional and community corrections will need to specify the roles of staff who will be involved, outline how the tool will be accessed by clients, ensure that everyone who is intended to work with the client throughout their transition are trained in the technology, and develop protocols that outline the procedures to be followed to support the client throughout reentry planning.

One of the most complex issues to resolve is establishing mechanisms for community-based staff (e.g., probation and parole officers, service providers) to work with clients on the reentry tool while clients are still incarcerated. Community-based staff need a way to gain access to, or be notified by facility staff about, clients who are using the tool before release to ensure an adequate continuum of care. Establishing standard operating procedures to provide this access is critical.

A second complex issue is ensuring that clients have access to the tool after they are released. Before release, clients typically access reentry tools through facility-owned tablets or computers. Because clients are rarely allowed to take such devices with them upon release, a new mechanism for post-release access to the tool must be identified.

One of the most complex issues to resolve is establishing mechanisms for community-based staff (e.g., probation and parole officers, service providers) to work with clients on the reentry tool while they are still incarcerated.

A second complex issue is ensuring that clients have access to the tool after they are released.

Agencies should thoughtfully devise a strategy for continued access to the reentry tool after release (e.g., connect clients with low-cost smartphones preloaded with the app, locate public computers that can be used to access the app). Clearly convey the strategy both to clients and to staff who work with them.

Findings from the field

For the North Carolina study, Pokket was intended to be used by clients for 12 months—6 months before release and 6 months after release. To facilitate the use of Pokket after release, all probation officers who have clients assigned to use Pokket (including the reentry probation officer, who works with the client before release, and the community probation officer, who works with the client after release) are to participate in a training on Pokket before their client's official release. Reentry probation officers are responsible for notifying community probation officers about the upcoming release of Pokket clients (i.e., probationers on their caseload who have Pokket accounts) so that they know to be trained in Pokket and to have their Pokket account created and ready for use. Once the client is released, the study protocol specifies that the client's assigned probation officer will facilitate the use of Pokket by assisting the client in downloading the application on a personal network-enabled device and logging into Pokket.

Although we have not been able to verify whether these protocols are being followed among the limited number of released Pokket users, some facility staff have expressed concerns about clients having access to reliable internet, an network-enabled device, or both after release. One staff member said, "When [a client is] released, they don't have cell phones in prison. They need to be able to upload Pokket on their cell phone. Not sure if that is happening. It would be a waste of a resource... that should be addressed through community corrections." As mentioned earlier, because the APDS tablets do not follow Pokket clients after release, reentry probation officers play a critical role in helping clients identify options for accessing Pokket after release.

Concluding Thoughts

Returning citizens face multiple barriers during the reentry process. Web-based reentry planning apps, such as Pokket, are intended to empower individuals to take ownership over their reentry planning and to be a case management tool for correctional staff to improve transitional planning, communication, and service provider connections with their clients. Correctional agencies that are considering adoption of reentry web applications can learn from North Carolina's study on Pokket and possibly avoid some potential pitfalls. Careful planning and attention to foreseeable challenges in deploying technology to facilitate reentry planning in correctional settings will increase the odds of successful use for both agencies and clients.

References

AppAdvice. (n.d.) PARCA by Q2i llc. https://appadvice.com/app/parca/1527588592

BioSpace. (2019, November 20). RTI International partners with North Carolina Department of Public Safety to evaluate effectiveness of web-based re-entry planning tool, Pokket. https://www.biospace.com/article/releases/rti-international-partners-with-north-carolina-department-of-public-safety-to-evaluate-effectiveness-of-web-based-re-entry-planning-tool-pokket-/

Jonson, C. L., & Cullen, F. T. (2015). Prisoner reentry programs. *Crime and Justice, 44*(1), 517–575. https://doi.org/10.1086/681554

q2i. (n.d.) Probation and Reentry Coach Application (PARCA). https://q2i.com/parca/

Visher, C. A., Lattimore, P. K., Barrick, K., & Tueller, S. (2017). Evaluating the long-term effects of prisoner reentry services on recidivism: What types of services matter? *Justice Quarterly, 34*(1), 136–165. https://doi.org/10.1080/07418825.2015.1115539