

Lessons Learned From SVORI:

Program Director Perspectives On Implementing Reentry Programming

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Authors' Note: This project is supported by grant numbers 2003-RE-CX-K101 and 2004-RE-CX-0002, awarded by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. Points of view in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

More than 600,000 inmates are released from U.S. prisons each year, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics. The majority of these men and women have low levels of education and employment skills, as well as substance abuse and mental health problems. These challenges, coupled with their criminal records, often preclude successful reentry into their communities upon release. In fact, within three years of release more than two-thirds of former inmates are rearrested, nearly half are convicted of a new crime and more than half are reincarcerated either on new charges or for violations of parole conditions, BJS reports. With the largest number of men and women in American history currently behind bars, the United States faces an even larger increase of former inmates returning to its communities. If the "revolving door" to prison is to be closed, efforts are needed to help inmates successfully transition from prison to the community.

The Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative

In an effort to reduce recidivism rates and to improve other outcomes for released inmates, the federal government funded the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative (SVORI), which is a collaborative federal effort established in 2003 to improve outcomes for adult and juvenile inmates returning to their communities. The initiative seeks to help states better use their correctional resources to address outcomes along criminal justice, employment, education, health and housing dimensions. Funded by the U.S. departments of Justice, Labor, Education, Housing and Urban Development, and Health and Human Services, SVORI is an unprecedented national response to the challenges of inmate reentry.

In 2003, SVORI grants were awarded to 69 grantees in the 50 states, the District of Columbia and the U.S. Virgin Islands. These sites developed 89 programs targeting adult

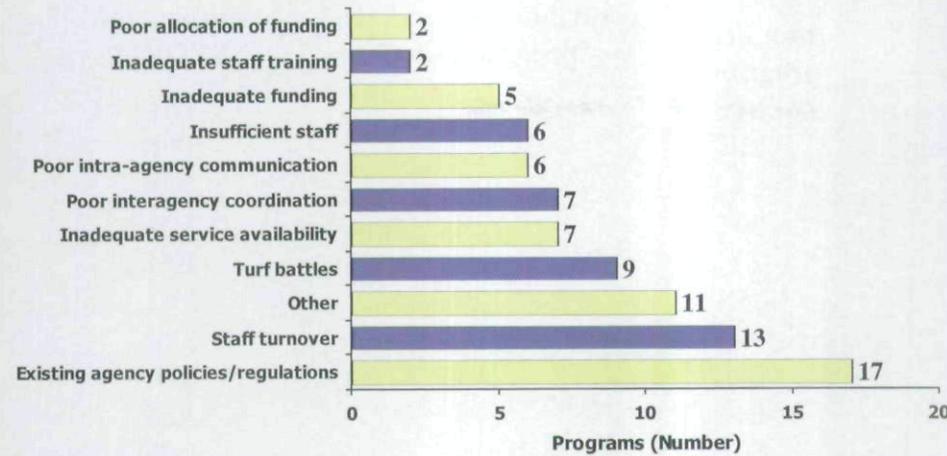
and juvenile correctional populations. SVORI funding supported the creation of a three-phase continuum of services that begins in prison, focuses on reentry preparation just prior to release and in the early months out of prison, and continues for a year or more as people take on more productive and independent roles in the community. A fully implemented SVORI program incorporates assessment, services and programming for individuals while they are incarcerated, under supervision in the community and once released from supervision. While SVORI programs share the common goals of improving outcomes across various dimensions and improving service coordination and systems collaboration, the programs differ in their approach and implementation.

The National Institute of Justice funded RTI International and the Urban Institute to conduct a five-year evaluation of the SVORI programs. The goal of the evaluation is to determine whether the programs have accomplished the overall purpose of increasing public safety by reducing recidivism among the populations served by the programs and determining the relative costs and benefits of the programs. The evaluation includes an impact evaluation, a cost-benefit component, and an implementation assessment.

The overall objective of the impact evaluation is to assess the effectiveness of SVORI by comparing key outcomes (employment, housing, family and community involvement, mental and physical health, substance use, and criminality) between those who participate in SVORI programs and comparable individuals not participating in SVORI. This evaluation component is based on a longitudinal study of more than 2,500 adult males, adult females and juvenile males scheduled to be released from prison in 16 states.¹ The cost component of the evaluation is being conducted in a subset of the evaluation sites and is described in detail in a 2006 report.²

The objectives of the implementation assessment are to characterize all 89 SVORI programs and address the extent to which these programs increase access to services and

Figure 1. Top Barriers to Implementation



promote system change. The primary sources of data for the implementation assessment are three surveys mailed to the SVORI program directors. Data from these surveys characterize the individual programs, providing information on the target population(s), program elements, timing of programs and services, agencies participating in SVORI, and the degree of coordination among agencies.

The following sections describe preliminary findings from the implementation assessment and is based primarily on the final program director survey, which focused on lessons learned and sustainability.

Becoming Operational

The SVORI programs were generally successful at program implementation, although they experienced several barriers to implementation. Most SVORI grantees received full federal funding in 2003, although the specific funding schedule varied across sites. As of spring 2005, 74 percent of the program directors classified their programs as fully operational. By spring 2006, this number had reached 93 percent. Although not all programs considered themselves fully operational, they all reported having enrolled at least one participant by spring 2006.

Implementation of SVORI programming appears to have been a priority for the grantee agencies. The majority of programs (82 percent) indicated that the top administrators at the SVORI grantee agency (typically the department of corrections or department of juvenile justice) set implementation goals for their program. In all but one of these programs, the grantee agency reportedly monitored progress toward these goals.

Most SVORI programs delivered services both prior to and after release from incarceration,

although more than half of the program directors (59 percent) indicated that the post-release phase was more difficult to implement than the pre-release phase. The program directors identified a number of specific challenges to program implementation, with the most significant of these shown in Figure 1. Clearly, the biggest challenge identified by program directors was existing agency regulations or policies that made reentry programming difficult to deliver.³ Staff turnover, which was the second most cited implementation barrier, appeared to be pervasive even at the program leadership level; about half of the SVORI programs (48 percent) reported having experienced program director turnover. Interestingly, the implementation barriers experienced by adult and juvenile programs were similar.

Meeting Enrollment Targets

Most SVORI programs established enrollment targets for the number of participants to be served by their programs. Three-quarters of the program directors indicated that the SVORI grantee agency established an enrollment target for the program and all but two of these programs indicated that the grantee agency monitored progress toward this goal. However, enrolling a sufficient number of program participants was a challenge for SVORI grantees. As of spring 2006, more than one-third of SVORI programs (41 percent) had enrolled 100 or fewer participants throughout the entire duration of their program (the median total enrollment was 137 among adult programs and 102 among juvenile programs). When asked how their enrollment numbers compared with their original projections, 44 percent of program directors (50 percent for adult pro-

Figure 2. Top Barriers to Enrollment

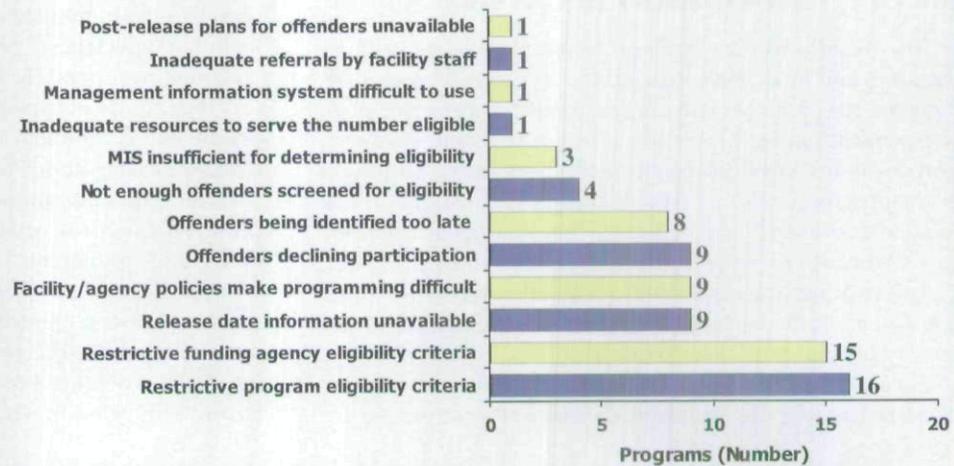


Table 1. Agencies/Community-based Organizations Involved in SVORI

Agency/CBO	Involved in SVORI (number of programs)	Made major contributions to SVORI programming*	Provided strong support for SVORI*
Post-release supervision agency	84	46%	42%
Prerelease supervision agency	81	42%	37%
Mental health	83	19%	26%
Substance abuse	80	22%	31%
Employment	78	32%	39%
Faith-based	75	12%	21%
Family/social services	75	19%	21%
Vocational training	68	24%	30%
Housing	64	19%	20%
Law enforcement	60	12%	18%
Educational institutions	58	18%	21%
Local school systems	39	22%	30%

*Percentages reflect the proportion of program directors who “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that the agency/CBO had made major contributions to SVORI programming or provided strong support for SVORI.

grams and 35 percent for juvenile programs) indicated that their total cumulative enrollment was lower than originally projected.

The primary barriers to program enrollment experienced by SVORI program directors are shown in Figure 2. The most frequently reported enrollment barrier was stringent eligibility criteria established by the program itself, followed by stringent eligibility criteria established by the federal funding agency.⁴ It is clear that agencies encountered structural problems once they attempted to identify and enroll potential SVORI participants. Foremost among these problems were obtaining accurate information about release dates for potential participants (a problem for programs designed to deliver services in advance of release) and facility or agency policies that made it difficult to deliver SVORI programming (such as institution transfer policies). The voluntary nature of many programs (two-thirds are voluntary) may also be at least partially responsible for lower-than-expected enrollment.

Serving Participants Effectively

The SVORI program funds were intended to be used at the state and local levels to: develop a reentry system that includes the key components (assessment, a reentry plan and a transition team), creates linkages to extant services, and provides services to fill identified gaps. Although conceptually straightforward, this model was far from “business as usual” and required state and local agencies to collaborate in ways that have been rare in the past. Program directors responded to a series of open-ended questions about the extent to which components of their reentry programs worked (or did not).

Several themes are evident in the responses to questions related to the program components perceived to

have made the most difference. Most common was cross-agency collaboration, coordination and use of teams — for project planning and establishing service networks and also for working directly with offenders. Many program directors reported involving community staff or partners prior to an offender’s release to more effectively bridge the transition from institution to community. Intensive case management, which includes assessment, treatment/release planning and supervision or contacts with individual offenders, was also frequently reported to be an essential component; many program directors mentioned the importance of beginning this process early during incarceration and providing continuity after release. Several program directors from juvenile programs said that SVORI provided post-release case management and service provision where none had previously been available. Program directors often cited the importance of specific programming or services provided before and after release, particularly employment-related assistance, although educational services also played a key role in several juvenile programs. In addition to agencies, processes and services, program directors also mentioned the importance of individuals, including specialized or dedicated staff, family members, and offenders themselves.

Program directors were more reluctant to admit to problems, as 20 program directors either left blank the question asking about components that did not appear to work or explicitly stated that all components worked as planned (several of these, however, were willing to describe “challenges”). Among program directors who described problems with specific program components, most mentioned mentoring, generally because of recruitment challenges. Program directors also described challenges in providing housing and employment assistance. Locating housing was problematic because of availability

and policy barriers, whereas stumbling blocks with employment were generally attributed to problems with subcontractors or work force agencies.

Several program directors mentioned difficulties establishing restorative justice or victim-related components, and several described disappointments with the reentry court model. Program directors frequently mentioned the challenges of working with multiple organizations; several mentioned disagreements among partner agencies, or lack of involvement of certain agencies. Many program directors described problems either recruiting or working with service providers, most often in the community. They described subcontract problems with community-based organizations, and several specifically mentioned challenges working with faith-based organizations. However, most did not explain what specific aspects of working with faith-based organizations were challenging.

Collaborating Among Agencies

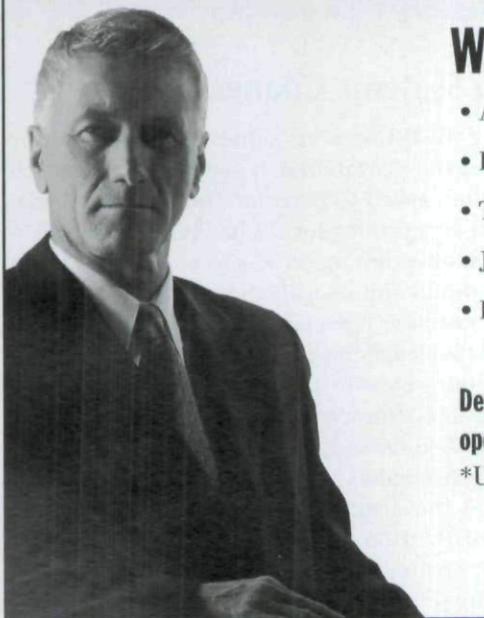
SVORI was intended to develop partnerships and improve collaboration among the agencies serving returning offenders. Therefore, the contributions of relevant agencies or community-based organizations (CBOs) to SVORI programming are important to evaluate. Program director perceptions of the role of agencies/CBOs are shown in Table 1. The agencies nearly universally involved

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in SVORI are pre- and post-release supervision agencies and mental health agencies. Not surprising, the local school system was much more likely to be involved in juvenile SVORI programs (91 percent) than adult programs (14 percent). No other major differences between adult and juvenile programs were evident.

Program directors rated pre- and post-release supervision agencies, employment agencies/CBOs, and vocational training agencies/CBOs as the organizations that had made major contributions to SVORI programming. Perceptions of support for SVORI were highest for the post-release supervision agency, followed by employment agencies/CBOs and prerelease supervision agencies. When asked about support for SVORI by individual stakeholder groups from within key agencies, program directors reported strong support from top administrators, supervisors and line staff at the

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Table 2. Sustainability Strategies Undertaken by SVORI Programs

Sustainability strategies	Number of programs
Assessed resource needs	79
Assessed progress achieved with original goals	78
Sought out other partnering agencies	71
Held sustainability planning meetings	68
Extended memoranda of agreement with partnering agencies	59
Developed a sustainability plan	57
Cross-trained staff	56
Pursued additional state funding	53
Reallocated resources in grantee agency to continue SVORI	46
Pursued additional federal funding	46
Pursued additional local funding	27
Reallocated resources across partners to continue SVORI	26
Pursued additional private funding	19
Other	10

post-release supervision agency and top administrators and supervisors at the prerelease supervision agency. Perceptions of support for SVORI were lowest for line staff at prerelease facilities and members of the communities to which SVORI participants were returning.

Lessons about interagency collaboration can also be gleaned from SVORI program director reports. Almost all program directors rated interagency collaboration extremely high and felt that it had improved as a result of SVORI. In addition, almost all program directors felt that the organizational climate within their grantee agency and community was favorable toward reentry programming in general. However, perceptions of support for SVORI from state legislatures and executive branches were lower.

Developing Sustainability Strategies

Although the original end date for SVORI funding was June 2006, many programs have engaged in sustainability efforts to extend SVORI programming. Seventy percent of SVORI programs were still enrolling new participants in spring 2006, and 92 percent planned to continue at least some elements of the program once SVORI funds were no longer available. Several programs were successful in receiving additional funding from a variety of sources, including federal funding (62 programs received supplementary SVORI funds and nine programs received other funds from the federal government), state funding (n = 16), local funding (n = 9) and private agencies (n = 2). Specific sustainability strategies in which SVORI program directors have engaged, including the pursuit of additional funding, are shown in Table 2. The most frequently used sustainability strategies include assessing needs, assessing progress, seeking out partnering agencies and holding sustainability planning meetings.

Because SVORI program directors are in a unique position to understand the factors necessary to expand reentry programming in general (not just continue SVORI-specific efforts), they were asked what they considered to be the primary factor necessary to take reentry programming "to scale" in their states. The most commonly reported response was the development of policies that would make reentry programming part of the agency's standard operating procedure (cited by 22 program directors), closely followed by support from the top administration at DOC/DJJ (cited by 19 program directors) and support from elected state officials (cited by 17 program directors).

Achieving Systems Change

One goal of SVORI was "to achieve systems change through multi-agency collaboration and case management strategies." When asked to describe the most significant organizational or systems-level changes as a result of SVORI, program directors reported successes in four main areas: collaboration and coordination, philosophy, practice, and sustainability. The majority of program directors mentioned system-level changes related to collaboration and coordination, primarily surrounding the development and continuation of the mandated reentry partnerships. They also described cross-agency cooperation and lasting relationships developed as a result of SVORI activities. Several described the creation of a unified system with improved coordination of service delivery, and some specifically mentioned efficiencies created through resource sharing.

Many program directors described changes in how participating organizations "do business," using terms such as "culture," "focus" and "awareness." Several specifically mentioned the establishment of cross-agency goals, proto-

cols, missions and terminology — all related to reentry. Program directors mentioned lasting changes to practices, policies and procedures. Some described specific changes to policies that had served as barriers (e.g., allowing community service providers to work with incarcerated participants), while others described more generic institutional changes that facilitated reentry, with the most common being planning for release at intake. Program directors also described the sustainability of their programs as evidence of systems change. Several mentioned statewide expansion of their SVORI programs; in some cases, legislative support from the state was cited. They also listed new reentry partnerships or initiatives that were built on SVORI efforts.

Conclusions

SVORI is a path-breaking effort to engage state and local agencies in conceptualizing and implementing innovative reentry programs for released inmates. Overall, states and local communities appear to have been successful in implementing SVORI, although they encountered some barriers and challenges. The “systems change” that SVORI program directors mentioned in terms of changes in overall philosophy about reentry and in practice may lead to sustained efforts to reduce recidivism rates and improve other outcomes for the thousands of released inmates that are returning to communities. Results of the outcome evaluation will determine the extent to which these efforts have been successful.

ENDNOTES

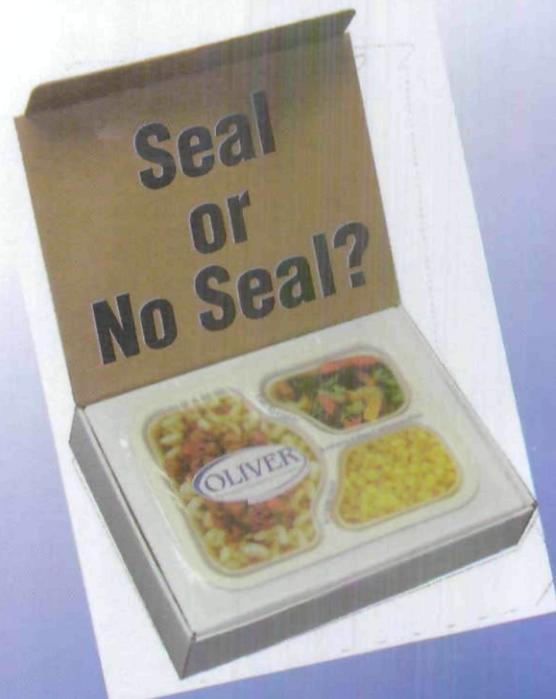
¹ The data collection for the impact evaluation consists of four in-person interviews (one month prerelease and three, nine and 15 months post-release) and two oral-swab drug tests conducted in conjunction with the three- and 15-month interviews. In addition, the impact evaluation will use administrative data from state correctional and law enforcement agencies to examine rearrest and reincarceration outcomes.

² Cowell, A. 2006. *Reentry research in action: Approach for conducting cost, cost-effectiveness, and benefit-cost analyses of SVORI programs*. Available at http://www.svori-evaluation.org/documents/reports/RRIA-Economic_Analysis.pdf.

³ Most of the “other” responses selected by program directors (shown as the third most frequently reported implementation barrier in Figure 1) also pertained to policies (e.g., case law, city regulations, and Housing and Urban Development policies).

⁴ The Federal eligibility requirements were that offenders must be age 35 or younger, be subject to post-release supervision and be considered “serious” or “violent.”

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