Recommendations for CSAC
Behavior Modification Subcommittee
July 2025

Purpose of This Memo

The purpose of this memorandum is to outline the strategic rationale for departing from the original behavior modification recommendations presented to CSAC in Fall 2024. This revised approach is informed by contemporary correctional research and implementation science and centers on individualized case planning, cognitive-behavioral strategies, and incentive-based interventions.

This updated framework is designed to enhance behavioral change practices within correctional settings by moving beyond static, punitive response models toward a more flexible, research-aligned approach that supports long-term desistance from crime and advances equitable outcomes for justice-involved individuals.

Rationale for Strategic Adjustment

The foundational idea behind this adjustment is that sanctioning alone does not lead to improved performance on probation, meaningful behavioral change, or better supervision outcomes. Traditional Behavior Response Grids were originally developed to standardize responses, reduce bias, and bring structure and consistency to community supervision. While these early frameworks offered clarity and uniformity, they often operate in isolation from well-established models of behavior change. For example, sanctioning grids are not directly referenced in the foundational Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) literature, which emphasizes addressing criminogenic needs, enhancing motivation, and building skills through cognitive-behavioral interventions. Instead, these grids typically rely on risk focused categories and emphasize punitive responses, frequently overlooking responsivity factors and the importance of positive reinforcement. Recent empirical findings, as well as conceptual critiques, highlight that such sanction-driven approaches can become disconnected from the practices most associated with long-term success, such as tailoring interventions and leveraging incentives to sustain engagement and promote lasting change (Robina Institute; Wodhal, Schweitzer, & Heck, 2024).

Structured sanctioning frameworks such as Behavior Response Grids are intended to promote standardization, consistency, proportionality, and greater transparency in responding to client misconduct or noncompliance. There is evidence that structured sanctioning frameworks make better use of agency resources (e.g. use of custodial sanctions, time spent in jail or court) compared with unstructured approaches (Robina Institute, 2020).

However, sanctions, in and of themselves, are not shown to create better performance on probation or bring about meaningful behavioral change, including reductions in recidivism (Robina Institute, 2020, Wodhal, Schweitzer, & Heck, 2024). Formal sanctions provide a technical response to a behavioral symptom: a missed appointment, a failed drug test, or non-compliance with a

condition. What they do not address are the underlying mechanisms driving that behavior: cognitive distortions, impulsivity, poor coping skills, or lack of prosocial support. Further, there is evidence to suggest that jail sanctions are no more or less effective than community-based sanctions in supporting compliance with probation (Wodehal et. al., 2015: Bowman et. al., 2019). In short, formal sanctioning may produce short-term compliance, but it fails to generate long-term change**.**

Over-reliance on risk status in the sanctioning process restricts our ability to understand the full context of a client's behavior. Scholars such as Rieger, Woodward, and Serin (2022) emphasize the importance of using multiple lenses, not just risk alone, to guide decision-making. There is a growing shift toward forward-looking, objective, and dynamic measures that better reflect the complexity of client behavior and reduce reliance on subjective judgment.

Evidence from correctional rehabilitation research, particularly that's grounded in the RNR model, supports this shift. The RNR framework demonstrates that the most effective interventions are those that match services to an individual's risk level, criminogenic needs, and responsivity factors (Andrews & Bonta, 2024). This model encourages strategies that build motivation, address underlying thinking patterns, and reinforce incremental progress, rather than rely on punishment.

There is a growing body of evidence suggesting that incentives are a powerful and underutilized tool for improving outcomes in community supervision. Research by the Robina Institute (2020) and Wodhal (2024) highlights that incorporating incentives can enhance engagement, encourage behavior change, and ultimately lead to better compliance and reduced recidivism. Wodhal (2024) specifically recommends that "community corrections agencies should prioritize efforts to integrate incentive use into everyday supervision practices." Despite this, most structured sanctioning frameworks focus primarily on punitive responses and fail to incorporate incentives in a systematic way. Moreover, there are currently no empirical evaluations of sanctioning models that include both incentives and sanctions (Robina Institute, 2020), underscoring a critical gap in both research and practice.

Punishment-based strategies, particularly when overused or lacking context, offer minimal long-term benefits. In contrast, cognitive-behavioral interventions and positive reinforcement are consistently shown to produce more durable outcomes. Moreover, heavy use of sanctions may disproportionately affect marginalized populations, reinforcing systemic disparities within the justice system (Wodahl, Schweitzer, & Heck, 2024; Robina Institute, 2020).

One of the more problematic consequences of the current approach is the misuse of treatment and services as sanctions. When programming is assigned as a form of punishment, it undermines the therapeutic purpose of those services and can diminish client engagement and trust (Robinson & Lowenkamp(s), 2015).

This strategic adjustment is not a rejection of accountability or structure, it is a movement toward evidence-based flexibility. The revised approach retains a focus on accountability while embedding the core principles of equity, responsivity, and therapeutic alliance. This evolution in practice better aligns with current research and the ultimate goal of long-term behavioral change.

Key Elements of the Revised Recommendations

1. **Cognitive-Behavioral Interventions as Core Practice**
   Correctional staff will be trained to use structured, cognitive-behavioral techniques to help clients identify and modify criminogenic thinking patterns, build problem-solving and coping skills, and make pro-social decisions. This includes consistent use of role plays, skill practice, and reinforcement strategies embedded in day-to-day interactions.

2. **Integration of Incentives into Case Planning**
   Incentives are not stand-alone rewards but are integrated within the broader case planning process. They are tailored to the client's personal goals and motivations, reinforcing positive behavior change tied to meaningful milestones. This strengthens their role as meaningful drivers of behavioral transformation.

3. **Recognition of Progress in High-Risk Domains**
   Progress in addressing high-risk criminogenic needs (e.g., substance use, antisocial attitudes) should be acknowledged and incentivized. The level and type of reinforcement will correspond with the magnitude of effort and behavioral change, ensuring proportionality and reinforcing the principle of fairness.

4. **Evidence-Based Interventions for Behavioral Concerns**
   When behavioral issues arise, the response will prioritize interventions over punishment. Staff will apply evidence-based strategies such as motivational interviewing, cognitive skill practice, or problem-solving sessions. Progressive sanctions may still be used when necessary but will follow a clearly articulated, individualized rationale.

5. **Equity-Informed, Individualized Case Planning**
   Case planning will move beyond static risk categorization to include responsivity factors such as trauma history, cultural background, readiness for change, and existing protective factors. This nuanced approach promotes fairness and supports individualized pathways to success.

6. **Discourage the Use of Services as Sanctions**
   Treatment, programming, or supportive services must be assigned solely based on assessed need. Using services as punishment compromises their therapeutic purpose and may reduce their efficacy by eroding intrinsic motivation.

7. **Support for Customizable Automation**
   Future use of digital tools or automated tracking systems must include the capacity for customization. This ensures alignment with individualized case planning, allowing systems to reflect client progress, reinforce positive behavior, and adapt to changes over time.

Key Changes from Previous Model

Element	Status	Justification
Structured Behavior Responses	**Modified**	Now include flexible, goal-based incentives and context-specific responses
Behavior Tracking Grids	**Removed**	Replaced with dynamic metrics linked to progress and individualized plans.
Incentives and Privileges	**Expanded**	Reinforced through contingency management principles and client engagement.

Element	Status	Justification
Cognitive Skills	**Added**	Embedded into routine supervision and intervention practices.
Individualized Case Planning	**Added**	Central to identifying risk drivers and tailoring responsivity strategies.

Implementation Recommendations

1. Staff Training and Communication
Provide comprehensive training in cognitive-behavioral techniques, incentive planning, and motivational interviewing. Initial training should occur, with regular refresher sessions to maintain fidelity and adapt to implementation challenges. Transparent communication about the rationale for change is essential for building staff engagement and ownership.

2. Pilot and Feedback Process
Implementation should begin with pilot sites or specialized teams, using iterative Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles to gather data, refine practices, and ensure alignment with intended outcomes. Direct feedback loops from staff and participants will be integral to continuous quality improvement.

3. Policy and Documentation Updates
Update existing policies, supervision manuals, and data systems to reflect the new approach. Documentation templates should support individualized planning, real-time incentive tracking, and a narrative that captures meaningful behavior change, not just rule compliance.

4. Monitoring and Evaluation
Establish clear fidelity measures and outcome indicators focused on progress in criminogenic domains and behavioral improvements. Equity audits should be integrated into ongoing evaluation processes to monitor and address any unintended disparities.

5. Stakeholder Engagement
Active collaboration with staff, supervisors, community partners, and participants is critical. Engaging these stakeholders ensures the new approach is informed by lived experience, operational realities, and community needs, fostering shared commitment to successful implementation.

Absence of a Formal Tool

At this time, a formal automated or algorithm-based "tool" for behavior response implementation will not be developed due to funding constraints. However, the principles embedded in this new model including individualized planning, structured incentives, and cognitive-behavioral interventions can be applied using consistent language, templates, and case planning protocols that promote standardization.

While we lack a proprietary digital tool or software platform, staff will still have access to guidelines, decision-making frameworks, and documentation strategies that support uniformity in practice. The absence of automation should not be interpreted as a lack of structure. Rather, we are intentionally creating a flexible framework that allows for consistency across teams while preserving the ability to tailor responses to individual needs.

Ensuring Consistency and Uniformity in Sanctioning

One of the primary concerns in replacing the Behavior Response Grid is the potential for inconsistent application of sanctions. To address this, the revised model includes structured principles and clearly defined processes for how staff respond to behavior particularly violations or setbacks.

Undesirable behavioral will continue to follow a tiered and proportional approach, guided by the client's risk level, behavior history, and progress in supervision. Decision-making will be supported by case documentation, team consultation, and supervisory guidance to maintain uniformity across staff and sites.

Using this approach can help to distinguish between behaviors that present a true public safety risk, such as person offenses, versus technical violations, such as missed urinalysis (UA) tests or missed office visits. Traditional responses to these technical issues often relied on punitive court referrals or sanctions, which research has shown to be ineffective and, in some cases, counterproductive.

Changing to a more dynamic approach can help to:

- Prevent unnecessary punitive responses to technical violations by encouraging agents to explore the underlying thinking and circumstances driving the behavior.
- Encourage therapeutic and skill-based responses, such as cognitive behavioral interventions, motivational interviewing, or targeted problem-solving sessions.
- Establish clear boundaries for when a sanction can be used, ensuring it is applied only after all other intervention options have been meaningfully attempted.

Initial responses to undesirable, technical violation-based behavior should focus on informal, skill development-based interventions, such as cognitive behavioral interventions. Should the undesirable behavioral continue, formal, Court-involved sanctions should be introduced, such as Probation Violation or Sanctions Conference, followed by cognitive behavioral interventions. Should the undesirable behavior continue, high impact sanctions, such as incarceration, are appropriate. Again, followed by cognitive behavioral interventions.

This approach not only upholds accountability but also supports clients in learning to navigate and repair challenges in a way that builds long-term capacity for success without defaulting to sanctions or court involvement when lower-level behaviors arise.

Though the model moves away from a behavioral response grid, it does not abandon accountability. Rather, it strengthens it by ensuring consequences are thoughtful, fair, and rooted in each individual's behavior and context while still maintaining organizational consistency.

Conclusion

This revised approach represents a strategic alignment with correctional research that consistently demonstrates the value of individualized, cognitive-behavioral, and incentive-based strategies. By moving beyond the limitations of the Behavior Response Grid, we strengthen our capacity to support sustainable behavior change, reduce recidivism, and build systems rooted in equity and effectiveness.

The path forward requires deliberate action, ongoing evaluation, and a commitment to learning. With this approach, we reinforce the core mission of correctional practice: to facilitate meaningful change, promote public safety, and support individuals in building law-abiding, prosocial lives.

Resources

Andrews, D. A., & Bonta, J. (2024). *The psychology of criminal conduct* (7th ed.). Abingdon, UK: Routledge

Boman et al., 2019. *Responding to Substance-use-related Probation and Parole Violations: Are Enhanced Treatment Sanctions Preferable to Jail Sanctions?* Criminal Justice Studies, September 2019.

Lowe et al., 2013. *Use of Incentives and Sanctions to Promote Compliance with Supervision during Reentry: An Implementation Strategy.* American Probation and Parole Association Presentation.

Bonta, J. (June 2023). *The Risk-Need-Responsivity model: 1990 to the Present*. Academic Insights, HM Inspectorate of Probation.

Rieger, Woodward & Serin (2022). *Preliminary Validation of the Community Supervision Decision-Making Framework,* Federal Probation Journal.

Robina Institute (2020). *Research in Brief - Use of Structured Sanctions and Incentives in Probation and Parole Supervision.*

Robinson & Lowenkamp(s) (2015). *Towards An Empirical and Theoretical Understanding of Offender Reinforcement and Punishment*, Federal Probation Journal

Wodahl et al., 2015. *Responding to Probation and Parole Violations: Are Jail Sanctions More Effective than Community-based Graduated Sanctions?* Colorado Probation Research In Brief, 2015.

Wodhal, Schweitzer & Heck (2024). *The Efficacy of Incentives and Sanctions for Improving Probation Supervision Outcomes,* Criminal Justice and Behavior