TEN STEPS TO SYSTEM CHANGE

Sustaining new ways of doing business takes …
*… **a close look in the mirror.***

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Change efforts in the criminal justice system often focus on interventions proven to reduce an individual's likelihood of committing crime. But no intervention program exists in isolation, no agency operates alone, and relevant political, social, and financial forces are constantly shifting. To be truly effective, most intervention programs need to take place within a framework that supports ongoing excellence, even under varying circumstances. Sometimes this requires fundamental system change.

How does system change happen?

In a system poised for change, leaders are willing to take a critical look at themselves and their organizations. They examine how their agencies do business and acknowledge their accountability for public safety outcomes in the community. They review the research available in the field, reach out to peers in other communities, and craft practical solutions to systemic problems. They take steps to continually improve their agency's effectiveness, committing to ongoing learning and implementation of best practices. The result is a fundamental shift—away from policies and practices that were instituted decades ago and toward those that work for today's world. And tomorrow's.

If leaders in your local system are ready for change, they can take the ten critical steps below for system improvement:

Step 1: **COLLABORATE.** The first step is to ensure that the local justice system is truly functioning as a system. Policymakers must step out of their silos and consider how the different elements of the system interrelate, and how each contributes to public safety outcomes. This can take time and energy but reap rewards in the form of trust and collaboration, so that organizations have a shared understanding of the system, both as it exists now and what it can be in the future.

> ➤ *What are the components of our local system, and how do they function?*
> ➤ *What are the barriers to effective collaboration, and how can they be addressed?*
> ➤ *Who will convene local partners and facilitate the collaboration process?*

Step 2: **LEAD.** Policymakers who engage in collaborative system change play two key

leadership roles. The first is as a lever in the system; leaders understand the role that their agency plays and how its operations contribute to system goals. Within the collaborative, each leader is responsible for committing his or her agency to change, and for being accountable for that change. Leaders also act as change agents within their own agencies, establishing a vision for change; nurturing that vision through communication, education, and implementation; and engaging in an iterative process of measurement and quality improvement.

> ➤ *What do we each need to change in order to achieve shared goals?*
> ➤ *What will it take to advance those changes in my agency?*

Step 3: **ANALYZE.** The most effective system change efforts are guided by data at every step in the process. Internal data provide insight on how the system currently functions and what issues there are, while external research offers guidance on how to address those issues. The system must invest in the capacity to collect, analyze, and present data in a timely way, and partners must be willing to act on what the data are saying.

> ➤ *What do the data tell us about what's working and what's not?*
> ➤ *What guidance is available in the research literature?*
> ➤ *What additional information do we need to understand the problem and find a solution?*

Step 4: **ENGAGE.** Commitment from leadership is necessary for system change, but by itself it is not sufficient. Affected groups must be on board to advance the new way of doing business, and to move forward despite barriers and setbacks. Engaging the community, the workforce, and other interested groups doesn't happen on its own. As motivation for change starts to build, conversations can begin with affected parties. Transparency and genuine opportunities for input by constituents support engagement.

> ➤ *Who will be affected, directly or indirectly, by system change?*
> ➤ *Do those who will be affected understand what is changing and why?*
> ➤ *How can these individuals and groups be given a voice in the process?*

Step 5: **PLAN.** A detailed plan is essential for organizing and guiding complex change initiatives. The planning process compels partners to consider their specific goals and how those goals will be achieved, while the plan itself is an invaluable communication and quality assurance tool. Many leaders within criminal justice systems are familiar with strategic planning and have a process for identifying high-level goals and objectives. But equally important are the supporting tactical plans, which detail the day-to-day steps of implementation. Once completed, tactical plans can provide a clear picture of what will be achieved and how.

> ➤ *Do we have specific, measurable goals?*
> ➤ *Do we know how we are going to achieve those goals?*

➤ *Is everyone clear on their own responsibilities?*

Step 6: IMPLEMENT. Implementation consists of the details of system change, such as revision of policies and procedures, staff training, and quality assurance. Implementation is not a point in time but an iterative process, and the attention devoted to implementation can make the difference between paying lip service to a new policy and transforming daily practices. Fortunately, implementation science is a body of literature in its own right and can guide this process if leaders pay attention to and learn what makes implementation efforts successful.

➤ *Are we moving forward as planned?*
➤ *Are quality assurance and feedback mechanisms in place?*

Step 7: INNOVATE. Systems that are trying to solve big problems, such as public safety, over- incarceration, and racial disparities, often can't find the solutions they need in existing literature. They may need to synthesize the best available literature and then take the leap to a bold, new approach. Innovation requires that the best and the brightest from across the system explore what exists, develop creative approaches, garner support for implementation, and, most importantly, evaluate the impact of changes.

➤ *What problems do we need to solve, even though there is no clear solution?*
➤ *What risks are we willing to take?*
➤ *How will we determine whether our innovations work?*

Step 8: ALIGN. To improve effectiveness and efficiency, all business practices need to support system goals. If employees need different skills, hiring and training practices may need to change. If new programming within the jail is called for, the physical plant must be able to accommodate those activities. Human resources, communications, information technology, facilities, and other support systems must change in order to enhance the new way of doing business.

➤ *How will the proposed changes impact the way resources are allocated?*
➤ *Who will have to do their jobs in a different way?*
➤ *What infrastructure needs to be in place to facilitate new approaches?*

Step 9: REFLECT. After the initial work of implementation, it is tempting to consider system change complete. Instead, at this point partners can step back and examine whether target outcomes are being achieved, whether practices are contributing to those outcomes as intended, and whether new approaches have had unintended consequences. Effective reflection requires data from across the system, as well as an open mind to take stock of what's working, what's not, and what still needs to change. The reflection step also is an opportunity for additional transparency and communication with constituents.

> ➤ *Are you achieving the goals that you set for yourself?*
> ➤ *What opportunities are available for improvement or enhancement?*
> ➤ *What is not working?*

Step 10: IMPROVE. A commitment to evidence-based system change is a commitment to evolution. Systems must continue to refine their strategies and tactics as new challenges emerge, innovations are evaluated, and the body of research grows. Success cannot be sustained over the long term if tomorrow's problems are tackled with yesterday's solutions.

> ➤ *Are the issues that your community is facing still the same?*
> ➤ *Are the solutions you have in place still state-of-the-art?*

As the steps above make clear, system change is not an easy undertaking. It's a marathon rather than a sprint. Fortunately, jurisdictions that are willing to take a close look in the mirror and improve what they see can ensure ongoing improvement that maximizes benefit for their communities.