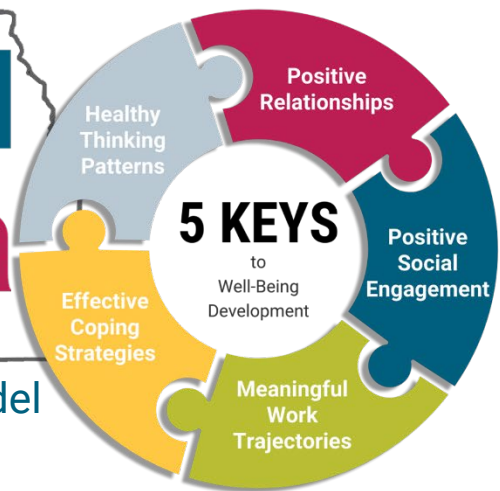NEBRASKA

DEPT OF CORRECTIONAL SERVICES

Advancing Strengths-Based Rehabilitation in Correctional Systems:

Implementing the Reentry Well-Being Assessment Tool

TRANSFORM
Nebraska

a 5-Key Model

Healthy Thinking Patterns

Positive Relationships

5 KEYS to Well-Being Development

Positive Social Engagement

Effective Coping Strategies

Meaningful Work Trajectories

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NIC Executive Excellence 23

Executive Summary

In modern correctional systems, the focus has shifted toward rehabilitation and reentry programs aimed at reducing recidivism rates and promoting successful community integration. However, traditional risk-need-responsivity assessments (RNRs) may overlook individual strengths and aspirations, hindering effective rehabilitation efforts. The current system of reentry assessment may fail to capture the full complexity of individuals' experiences and potential. By solely focusing on deficits and risks, we may miss opportunities to leverage individuals' strengths and goals in their rehabilitation journey.

This white paper explores the Nebraska Department of Correctional Services' (NDCS) implementation of the Reentry Well-Being Assessment Tool (RWAT) as a transformative approach to assessing reentry readiness. The RWAT, an integral component of the 5-Key Model for Reentry and Well-Being Development, emphasizes a strength-based perspective, individual accountability, and tailored programming, offering a more holistic and effective means of assessing rehabilitation outcomes. RWAT utilization replicates real-life pro-social community expectations across various aspects of an individual's life, such as self-advocacy.

Ultimately, the goal of correctional rehabilitation programs is to enhance public safety by providing opportunities for incarcerated individuals to participate in programming that can enhance successful community reintegration and reduce recidivism. The effectiveness of universal versus targeted approaches may vary depending on the specific context, resources available, and the nature of the incarcerated population. While research generally supports targeting rehabilitative programs to high-risk individuals for greater

effectiveness and efficiency, there are also arguments for providing some level of programming to all incarcerated individuals. The optimal approach may depend on various factors including available resources, the specific needs of the population, and overarching goals of the criminal justice system.

The approach Nebraska is taking to rehabilitation focuses on strengths, autonomy, and truly individualized interventions.

Introduction and Context

The effectiveness of correctional rehabilitation programs in increasing reentry success rates and promoting public safety has long been a subject of debate. Traditional RNRs typically focus on identifying deficits and criminogenic risks, often neglecting individual strengths and aspirations. The question of whether to provide rehabilitative programs to each incarcerated individual versus only those deemed high-risk remains a subject of ongoing debate in criminal justice policy and research. Utilizing the RWAT represents a paradigm shift toward a dynamic strengths-based approach to reentry assessment, aligning with contemporary understandings of effective rehabilitation practices.

The 5-Key Model for Reentry and Well-Being Development and the RWAT were developed by Pettus and colleagues with Wellness and Equity Innovations. It identifies five key ingredients that, when available in abundance, can increase reentry success and allow individuals to live to their fullest potential. Figure 1 provides a summary of each of these keys.

This model takes a strengths-based approach, making these ingredients universal to all people, not only those who have been incarcerated. The RWAT assesses the extent to which a person possesses the five key ingredients. It is self-administered, allowing individuals to reflect and assess their current state.

In Nebraska, 5 Key Model programming is delivered by staff members and incarcerated peers. This approach offers multiple benefits, which are detailed throughout this paper. Additionally, case managers utilize the principles, skills, and interventions in their regular interactions with individuals, such as case planning and classification actions.

Figure 1

Healthy Thinking Patterns

Adaptive mental actions or processes, the presence of empathy, and the acceptance of internalization of values and norms that promote pro-social behavior.

Positive Relationships

Reliable, mutually beneficial relationships between two people that range from brief to enduring in duration within formal or informal social contexts.

Positive Social Engagement

Social experiences organized for beneficial social purposes that directly or indirectly involve others, engaged in during discretionary time, and experienced as enjoyable.

Meaningful Work Trajectories

Sustainable compatibility of an individual's goals and abilities and the demands of that individual's occupation (obligations/job paid or unpaid) is sustainable.

Effective Coping Strategies

Adaptive behavioral and psychological efforts taken to manage and reduce internal/external stressors in ways that are not harmful in the short or long-term.

Shifting from Assessing RNR to Assessing Strengths, Wellbeing, and Reentry Readiness

Historically, RNRs have guided rehabilitation efforts by identifying criminogenic risks and deficits in individuals. While valuable, this approach may fail to recognize and leverage individuals' strengths and aspirations, limiting the effectiveness of rehabilitation programs and individuals' willingness to participate. The RWAT offers a novel approach by focusing on strengths, motivations, and goals, empowering individuals to take ownership of their rehabilitation journey.

The RWAT is based on research and best practices in the field of reentry and well-being assessment (See Figure 2). By using evidence-based tools and methodologies, professionals can make more informed decisions and implement interventions with a higher likelihood of success.

Figure 2
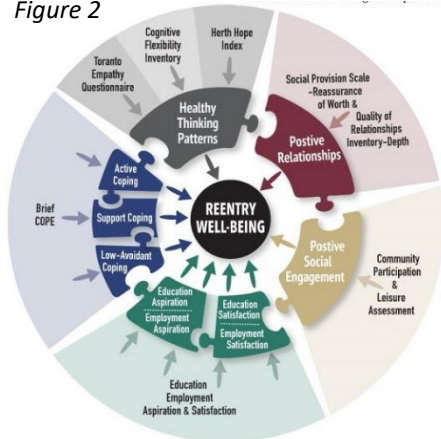
The RWAT provides a structured framework for evaluating various aspects of an individual's reentry process, including their physical health, mental health, substance use, social support, and access to resources. This comprehensive evaluation enables professionals to develop personalized reentry success plans tailored to the specific needs and challenges faced by each individual. By identifying areas of growth, the RWAT helps develop strategies to mitigate risks and promote a successful transition back into the community.

The RWAT assists in allocating resources effectively by directing support and services to areas where they are most needed, thereby optimizing the use of available resources. The assessment is self-administered, with results provided to reentry professionals, service providers, and other relevant community organizations to drive discussion on needed interventions. This collaborative approach promotes communication, coordination, and shared decision-making, enhancing the overall effectiveness of reentry efforts. Following the initial assessment, the RWAT can be used to track the individual's progress over time, allowing for adjustments to the reentry plan as needed and ensuring that ongoing support aligns with evolving needs. Involving individuals in the assessment process can empower them to take an active role in their own reentry journey. It also provides an opportunity for self-reflection and goal setting, fostering a sense of agency and responsibility for one's well-being.

Program Delivery

Nebraska's approach to service delivery focuses heavily on the use of incarcerated peers to facilitate programs, which mitigates staffing concerns and enhances overall engagement. Peer-led programming, where individuals with lived experiences or backgrounds lead activities, workshops, or support groups, offers a solution to the resource issue and provides various benefits. Participants may feel more comfortable and willing to engage in peer-led activities, as they perceive their peers as equals rather than authority figures. This can lead to higher attendance rates and more active participation in

discussions and activities. Peer-led programming empowers individuals to take ownership of their own growth and well-being. It creates a supportive environment where participants can offer advice, encouragement, and empathy to each other based on their shared experiences.

Serving as peer facilitators allows individuals to develop leadership, communication, and interpersonal skills. It empowers them to use their experiences to make a positive impact on others, leading to personal growth and a sense of fulfillment. Peers from similar cultural or social backgrounds can better understand the unique challenges faced by their peers and tailor programming to address specific cultural norms, values, and preferences. This promotes cultural sensitivity and relevance in interventions. Reduced stigma and judgment are significant benefits, as peers often create a non-judgmental and stigma-free environment where participants feel safe to share their experiences and emotions without fear of rejection or criticism. This can help break down barriers to seeking help and foster a sense of belonging and acceptance.

Recognizing Trauma as a Contributor to Behavior

The impact of trauma experiences on individuals engaging with programming can vary significantly depending on various factors, including the nature and severity of the trauma, the individual's coping mechanisms and support networks, and the characteristics of the programming itself. Creating a safe and supportive environment is essential for engaging individuals with trauma histories in programming. Building trust, establishing clear boundaries, and validating participants' experiences can help alleviate fears and increase feelings of safety, which are critical for engagement. Adopting a trauma-informed approach to programming involves recognizing the prevalence and impact of trauma,

understanding trauma's effects on individuals' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and integrating this understanding into all aspects of programming, from design to implementation. Trauma-informed practices prioritize safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment.

Peer-led programming can be particularly effective for engaging individuals with trauma experiences, as peers with similar lived experiences can offer understanding, validation, and support in a non-judgmental and empathetic manner. Peer support groups can provide a sense of belonging and connection, which are essential for healing from trauma. Programming can include skill-building activities and coping strategies to help individuals manage trauma-related symptoms and improve their ability to engage effectively. These may include relaxation techniques, mindfulness practices, emotion regulation skills, and communication strategies. Continuous assessment and adaptation are essential to ensure that programming remains relevant, accessible, and effective for individuals with trauma experiences.

Overall, the impact of trauma experiences on engagement with programming underscores the importance of adopting a trauma-informed approach, providing a safe and supportive environment, and offering tailored interventions that address individuals' unique needs and preferences. By incorporating trauma-informed principles and practices, programming can better support trauma survivors' engagement, healing, and recovery journey.

Assessing Where Individuals Are and Where They Can and Want to Go

The RWAT emphasizes building the life people want, rather than solely addressing deficits or

avoiding criminal behavior. By identifying and nurturing individual strengths, the RWAT enables individuals to pursue personally meaningful goals and achieve successful reintegration into society. This approach fosters a sense of action and empowerment, self-advocacy, and ownership of their life's journey. Learning to advocate for oneself is a valuable skill that contributes to personal growth, empowerment, and success in various areas of life, resulting in positive outcomes post-release. Specifically, it promotes assertiveness skills, enabling individuals to express their needs, desires, and opinions confidently and respectfully. Self-advocacy helps individuals take control of their lives and decisions, leading to increased self-esteem and a sense of empowerment. Developing effective communication skills enhances one's ability to articulate thoughts and needs clearly, improving interactions in personal, academic, and professional settings.

The process of self-advocacy involves identifying problems or barriers and finding solutions to overcome them, fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills. It also encourages independence and reduces reliance on others for decision-making and problem-solving. Effective self-advocacy can lead to accommodations and support systems that meet individual needs, whether in education, employment, healthcare, or other areas. Facing challenges and advocating for oneself fosters resilience and adaptability, essential qualities for navigating life's ups and downs. Additionally, self-advocacy is crucial in advocating for one's rights and promoting equality and social justice, empowering individuals to stand up against discrimination and injustice. In professional settings, self-advocacy is essential for career advancement, as those who can effectively communicate their skills, accomplishments, and needs are more likely to succeed and progress in their careers. Assertively communicating one's needs and

boundaries can lead to healthier and more fulfilling relationships, as it fosters mutual respect and understanding.

Differences Between RWAT and Traditional Assessments

The RWAT offers several advantages over traditional risk/needs assessments. Traditional RNRs focus on criminogenic factors and consider multiple static factors, whereas the RWAT prioritizes individual accountability and is driven by the individual's interests, motivations, and ability to achieve progress. The RWAT emphasizes the present and measures progress quantitatively, offering a more dynamic and effective means of assessing rehabilitation outcomes. It was designed by the same researchers who developed the program interventions, providing tailored assessments aligned directly with programming needs. This fosters a holistic and person-centered approach to rehabilitation. Additionally, traditional RNRs are often proprietary and require staff to proctor the assessment, whereas the RWAT is self-administered and available via an open source, mitigating fiscal and staff resource challenges.

Conclusion

The implementation of the Reentry Well-Being Assessment Tool (RWAT) represents a significant step towards advancing rehabilitation practices in correctional systems. By embracing a strengths-based approach to assessment and rehabilitation, we can better support individuals in their journey towards positive change and successful reintegration into society. The RWAT shifts the focus from merely identifying risks and deficits to recognizing and nurturing individual strengths, goals, and motivations, fostering a more holistic and effective reentry process.

The RWAT's emphasis on personal accountability and self-advocacy empowers

incarcerated individuals to take ownership of their rehabilitation journey. This not only enhances their self-esteem and confidence but also equips them with the skills necessary for successful reintegration into the community. By involving individuals in the assessment process, the RWAT promotes a sense of agency and responsibility, which are crucial for long-term success and reduced recidivism.

Furthermore, the use of peer-led programming in Nebraska's approach to service delivery underscores the importance of leveraging lived experiences and fostering a supportive community within correctional facilities. Peer-led initiatives enhance engagement, provide culturally relevant support, and reduce stigma, creating an environment where individuals feel understood and motivated to participate actively in their rehabilitation.

Recognizing and addressing the impact of trauma on behavior and engagement is another critical component of the RWAT. By adopting trauma-informed practices, correctional systems can create safer and more supportive environments that facilitate healing and engagement for individuals with trauma histories. This approach not only improves the effectiveness of rehabilitation programs but also contributes to the overall well-being of incarcerated individuals.

The RWAT's holistic and individualized approach stands in contrast to traditional risk/needs assessments, offering a more dynamic and person-centered method of evaluating and supporting reentry readiness. Its open-source and self-administered nature addresses fiscal and staff resource challenges, making it a practical and scalable solution for correctional systems.

Looking ahead, the success of the RWAT in Nebraska serves as a model for other jurisdictions seeking to enhance their rehabilitation practices. Continued research and evaluation of the RWAT's outcomes will be essential to refine and expand its application. Future developments could include integrating technological advancements, such as digital platforms and data analytics, to further personalize and optimize reentry plans.

In conclusion, the RWAT represents a transformative approach to correctional rehabilitation, aligning with the broader goals of public safety and successful community reintegration. By focusing on strengths, well-being, and individual accountability, the RWAT not only addresses the immediate needs of incarcerated individuals but also fosters long-term positive outcomes. This innovative tool has the potential to reshape the landscape of correctional rehabilitation, paving the way for more effective and humane practices that benefit individuals, communities, and society as a whole.

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