

“This train has left the station”

The Travis County Community Supervision and Corrections Department (CSCD), which has successfully implemented evidence-based practices throughout the organization, is a true example of how an investment in probation can yield significant results for taxpayers and communities.

Travis County’s current probation model is the result of a multi-year, collaborative effort aimed at revamping a system that had been based almost entirely on fulfilling often duplicative paperwork and enforcement mandates. Probation officers had been focusing their time and energy only on assuring that probationers were meeting their conditions of probation. Revocations were common because officers had not been working with individuals in a meaningful way to change their behavior.

But **Dr. Geraldine F. Nagy, Director of Travis County CSCD**, decided that her staff and those under their supervision would benefit by a top-to-bottom departmental realignment – not just in process and practice, but in philosophy and culture. And four years after the initiation of a new plan for Travis County – called the Travis Community Impact Supervision (TCIS) initiative – the results have been nothing short of impressive.

As noted in the extensive material found by clicking [here](#), Travis County CSCD ultimately implemented key evidence-based practices (EBP) in efforts to more effectively address the needs of supervised probationers, with a specific focus on appropriate diagnosis and assessment practices, differentiated supervision, and organizational assessments.

To achieve these practices, Travis County’s plan included the following new strategies:

- ▷ A centralized diagnosis process based on scientifically validated tools, with a Diagnosis Report for court officials and a Central Diagnosis Unit to consolidate intake and assessment work;
- ▷ Proper assessments, made by specifically trained staff, that are based on the identification of particular risk factors – and that can be used by judges to set appropriate conditions of supervision and treatment;
- ▷ Specialized probation officers handling appropriately sized caseload assignments based on risk and needs;
- ▷ Differentiated supervision plans that address the risk factors and needs of each individual, and that combine treatment, control, and incentives;
- ▷ Redesigned sanctioning strategies, with progressive sanctions and an incentives model, as well as the cooperation of judges in response to violations;
- ▷ “Hands on” staff training and participation, with an emphasis on motivational interviewing so that officers can meaningfully engage with their probationers, as well as on other foundational issues that have arisen with the new model, including coaching and leadership at the mid level on skills development;
- ▷ Personnel evaluations that focus on supervision outcomes related to changing probationers’ behavior, in addition to tracking auditing compliance;
- ▷ Measurement of outcomes, including an analysis of organizational and unit assessments for management purposes and policy planning, which allows for internal accountability and fidelity to the model; and
- ▷ Community support, involving the collaboration of key stakeholders and access to neighborhood resources.

These strategies have produced outcomes that have financially benefited both the State and Travis County itself. In fact, between Fiscal Year (FY) 2005 and 2008, Texas taxpayers saved an estimated \$4.9 million in state incarceration costs. In 2008 alone, Travis County saved approximately \$387,000 in jail avoidance costs.

But taxpayers have not only benefited financially as a result of Travis County's new risk-reduction strategies – public safety has also increased. In addition to having the steepest decline in felony revocations from FY 2005 to 2009 (24%) when compared to other large urban probation departments, Travis County's absconder population has also declined greatly, with a reduction of 53.1% from August 2004 to September 2009.

Additional public safety outcomes include the following:

- ▷ Travis County experienced the steepest decline in felony technical revocations (48%) from FY 2005 to 2009.
- ▷ Travis County also saw a significant reduction in the percentage of felony probationers re-arrested one year after placement in supervision (17%) when looking at probation groups pre- and post-TCIS implementation.

Other agencies that have been seeking to save money while benefiting staff and those under their supervision should look to the TCIS initiative as a clear model for reform.

Dr. Geraldine Nagy's Leadership

There is little we can add to the thorough work of those who have written about the restructuring of Travis County CSCD. In fact, the department has been featured in reports by the Pew Foundation and the Justice Center of the Council of States Governments, as well as in numerous articles, including in the *Austin American-Statesman*, *County Magazine*, and various journals, most recently in a piece by Dr. Tony Fabelo, published in the September-October 2009 issue of *The Prosecutor*, the official journal of the Texas District & County Attorneys Association.

But as we read through the pages of the many reports and articles detailing Travis County's achievements, and as we reflected on an interview Dr. Nagy was so kind to give us, we realized that the leadership, expertise, and "can do" attitude of that one woman, Dr. Geraldine Nagy, drove this excellent work that is now being considered a national model.

When Dr. Nagy was interviewed for her position at Travis County CSCD almost five years ago, the judges inquired about ways in which she could increase morale and balance the budget. Her answer focused the implementation of EBP. Little did those interviewing her realize what a jewel they were getting when they offered her the position of Probation Director.



Dr. Geraldine F. Nagy
Director of Travis
County CSCD

Almost immediately after being hired, Dr. Nagy conducted an organizational assessment of her department so that, after determining its strengths and weaknesses, she could begin to put in place her vision to institutionalize a new operational model, one which would turn the department into a “learning organization” equipped with the tools necessary to apply proven risk-reduction strategies while changing the department’s overall mission. She did this by striking a balance between supervision compliance (risk management) on the one hand, and targeting “social indicators” (including criminal thinking/orientation, peer relations, alcohol and drug use, assaultive behavior, etc.) on the other hand. Both strategies could drastically help to improve the behavior of those under supervision, thus increasing their likelihood of success.

And so, under Dr. Nagy’s leadership, all operational facets of the probation department became aimed towards risk reduction. With her 26 years of criminal justice experience, Dr. Nagy brought with her a broad wealth of knowledge about community supervision, treatment programming, and leading effective organizational change. Dr. Nagy’s expertise and vision helped her build an infrastructure guided by data-driven research, which she in turn used to strengthen the knowledge base of her team via internal trainings and mentoring.

Ultimately, Dr. Nagy and her staff were able to realign the organization across functional areas, while also appropriately realigning the resources given to the department. Because of the bipartisan support and investment made by the Texas Legislature, Dr. Nagy had been able to obtain financial assistance through the Community Justice Assistance Division (CJAD). Dr. Tony Fabelo, former director of the Texas Criminal Justice Policy Council and present Director of Research of the Justice Center of the Council of State Governments, assisted Travis County CSCD in leveraging the new funding by re-appropriating it towards the new evidence-based practices and strategies discussed above. Throughout the process, Dr. Nagy involved staff at all levels while raising the standards to which they were held. Through example, training, and by providing them a clear and thoughtful plan, she made her team understand that their performance meant one more life changed for the better, one less victim, and a stronger and healthier community in the long run.



Through example, training, and by providing them a clear and thoughtful plan, Dr. Nagy has made her team understand that their performance meant one more life changed for the better, one less victim, and a stronger and healthier community in the long run.

If one were to ask Dr. Nagy’s team about the transition process and subsequent results, they would tell you that “this train has left the station.” Travis County CSCD is moving forward, bound for a more successful future. Dr. Nagy’s leadership and long-term commitment to the implementation of EBP has been made possible by the department’s true and meaningful collaboration with judges, District Attorneys and their staffs, county attorneys and their staffs, defense attorneys, law enforcement (including the county sheriff’s office and city police department), county agencies, its budget office and commissioners, service providers, community leaders, advocacy and consumer groups, state agencies, and legislative groups. Not only has Dr. Nagy been effective at keeping these stakeholders involved in the process and informed about what EBP really means, but she has used data to back her department’s achievements. All stay informed and educated through a strong communication structure, which involves involvement in task forces, working groups, the Community Justice Council, and Travis County-led initiatives and committees.

One Key to Implementation of Evidence-Based Practices

Dr. Nagy will admit that EBP are not easy to implement, but with a committed team, she has proven that the results are more than possible and the effort is undeniably worthwhile. An investment in community supervision creates real results, and a state that is truly serious about long-term public safety and healthier communities should support local probation departments’ efforts to implement EBP.

But again, a key to making EBP work is a transparent discussion of issues – organization-wide communication. Staff must be supported through the difficult phases of change, and changes must be paced in a way that they can be implemented effectively. Staff must be mentored so that they can see their leadership abilities bloom, and mid-level managers must have the support to transition to a new communication model.

Leaders must be prepared for the challenges and obstacles that come with change, and they must encourage open communication with all stakeholders during and after implementation. Modifications may be necessary as outcomes (such as fidelity to the model) are measured, and as new data (revocation rates and recidivism trends) are analyzed. These changes will need the ongoing support of staff, but with a strong commitment to the new process and to those under their supervision, probation officers and other leadership can have a significant, positive affect on the lives of so many individuals in Texas.

“It doesn’t end with implementation.”

Dr. Geraldine F. Nagy



Many Texas probation departments are implementing EBP; we hope to feature them in upcoming months. In light of a statewide budget shortfall, it is imperative that the Legislature continue its commitment to – and financial support of – community supervision and those who make it possible. Doing so will continue to save taxpayers money, create less victims, and strengthen communities.

BIO

Dr. Geraldine F. Nagy was appointed Director of the Travis County Community Supervision and Corrections Department (Adult Probation) and Pretrial Services on January 1, 2005. Prior to her appointment, Dr. Nagy held the position of Deputy Director for the Community Justice Assistance Division (CJAD) of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, where she focused on bringing evidence-based practices (EBP) to community corrections programs statewide. She was previously the Director of Training for CJAD and worked for 6 years as a psychologist, drug abuse program coordinator, and research analyst for the Federal Bureau of Prisons. Dr. Nagy has also worked as a probation officer and Deputy Director of the Bastrop County Community Supervision & Corrections Department, and as a national consultant on criminal justice issues. Dr. Nagy holds a Ph.D. in Cognitive Psychology from Kansas State University.



As Director of the Travis County Probation Department, Dr. Nagy has led efforts to work with numerous agencies and local stakeholders to reengineer the operations of the department to support more effective supervision strategies. The goal of these collaborations is to strengthen probation by using an EBP model. This includes the creation of a new diagnosis process based on evidence-based tools, the reorganization of the intake process, the redesign of supervision and sanctioning strategies, and the creation of process and outcome tracking reports. In the last 4 years, the department has accomplished a transformation that changed and strengthened the internal processes and culture of the organization to promote EBP. Her current focus is on fine-tuning the policies adopted and promoting fidelity in implementation. With her 26 years of criminal justice experience, Dr. Nagy brings a wealth of knowledge to the field of community supervision, treatment programming, and leading organizational change.