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Improving Residents' Perceptions in a Women's Reentry Center

Assessing perspectives on the use of first names

Agency: East Boise Community Reentry Center, Idaho Department of Correction (IDOC)

Project Duration: 05/14/18–01/20/19

Pracademic*: Sergeant Amy Walsh

Context
Names and how they are used may affect self-perception, which in turn may affect a range of other perceptions and behaviors.

Key Finding
In this small pilot, the majority of residents surveyed prior to the change in practice to address residents by their first names were not opposed to being called by their first names. A subsequent survey conducted once the first-name practice was in effect found that very few residents opposed this change.

*BetaGov provides ongoing training to agency personnel to become research-savvy "Pracademics" who can lead trials.

Background

Negative self-perceptions may be reinforced in carceral settings due to labeling. Encouraging a positive self-perception could result in more positive perceptions, which may influence behaviors both in and outside the carceral environment. A simple change from calling residents by their last names to their first names may result in a more supportive environment and positive self-perception. The East Boise Community Reentry Center launched a small study to assess resident and staff opinions on the use of first names. The Center's mission is to help female residents shed their criminal past and ease them into a successful life in the community. This project and the potential shift to calling residents by their first names is the initial step in testing promising approaches for improving the transition to community living and successful reentry. Prior to this shift, residents were called by last names, akin to a military model.

Design

A resident survey was collected prior to a change in practice that involved residents being addressed by their first names. The resident survey conducted prior to the name change included 32 respondents. Residents in the same reentry center were surveyed seven months later, after staff started addressing residents by their first names. The second survey, conducted after the naming practice had been in effect for over seven months, included 47 respondents. Due to assurances of anonymity and due to movement into and out of the reentry center, these were not matched surveys, although there may have been some overlap in the respondents who participated in the first survey and those who participated in the second.

Lessons Learned

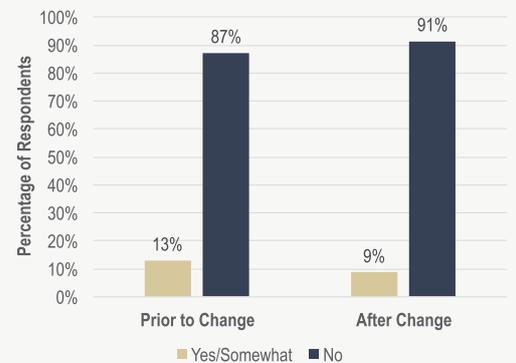
The majority (87%) of residents in the reentry center who were surveyed prior to the change in practice to address residents by their first name were not opposed to a change in practice that would involve residents being addressed by their first names. Only 13% of residents opposed a change. A second survey, conducted seven months after the change in practice to address residents by their first names, also found

that the majority (91%) of residents were not opposed to being addressed by their first names. Only 9% were opposed to this change in practice. Residents were also queried about their perceptions of the facility more generally, but there were no significant differences observed across the two surveys. This small study has several limitations common to research in reentry-center settings. Reassurances of confidentiality and regular movements of residents into and out of the reentry center precluded matching pre- and post- surveys at the individual level.

Next Steps

This project was informed by research showing that specific words may have a negative impact when used with carceral populations. In this small study, facility staff were instructed to refer to residents by their first names. The reentry center's leadership hoped that using first names would lead to more positive self-perception and perceptions of the Center's environment and to improved relationships. Center staff were sensitive to their residents' perspectives and solicited them on this candidate change in practice. This small pilot showed that residents were not opposed to being referred to by their first names. A larger study, preferably using an experimental design, is justified.

Responses to: "Are you opposed to staff calling you by your first name?"



Note: Surveys of residents in the reentry center conducted prior to, and 7 months after, the change in practice.

Why BetaGov Spark?

Sometimes a rigorous trial of an innovative idea just isn't possible, but with a Spark project a practitioner can learn important information about the idea, the agency, and the sample. What's more, a positive signal may inform a future randomized controlled trial and more definitive results. Spark projects meet Pracademics where they are comfortable—giving them the opportunity to learn about research and apply that learning to internal research projects.