

MFI

U.S. Department of Justice
Federal Bureau of Prisons

Federal Prisons

VOL. 3, NO. 3

Winter 1994



149733

149741

**U.S. Department of Justice
National Institute of Justice**

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Federal Prisons Journal

U.S. Department of Justice

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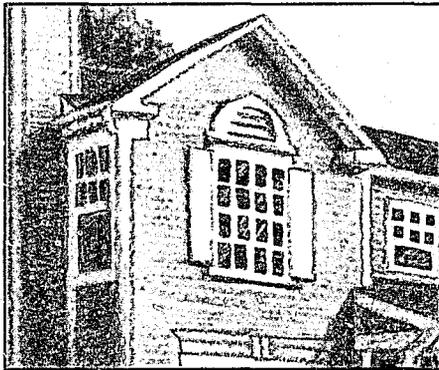
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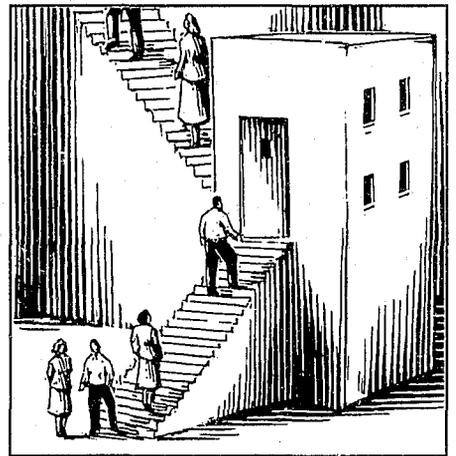
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Information as a Management Tool

Sharla P. Rausch

Like most State systems, the Federal prison system has been undergoing a period of unprecedented growth. In October 1984, it housed 25,919 inmates in 44 institutions. As of July 1993, it was functioning at 42 percent over rated capacity with 78,571 inmates in 71 facilities¹—with projections of 120,670 inmates by the year 2000.² Despite crowding, rapid expansion, and an increase in the percentage of new (and inexperienced) staff, the Federal prison system continues to run safe, orderly facilities free of court intervention or the assignment of special masters. This success has been attributed to good management (DiIulio, 1989a; DiIulio, 1989b; Allen, 1989; Fleisher, 1989; N.Y. State Dept. of Correctional Services, 1989).

An "information-oriented" approach has become a crucial element of proactive management during this period of growth and change. Three years ago, that approach was implemented sporadically at best—mainly by those managers already comfortable with using information. The importance of information in making management decisions was made clear by J. Michael Quinlan, then-director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons:

Managers who are used to making decisions "by feel" will find that they must make use of research findings and powerful information-gathering systems in their daily work. Evaluation must become a part of every Bureau activity, not just because it improves our efficiency, but because it ensures a wiser use of public resources (Quinlan, 1989: 14).

Managers who are used to making decisions "by feel" will find that they must make use of research findings and powerful information-gathering systems in their daily work.

The Bureau has developed several innovative tools for making well-informed management decisions. The acceptance of one of these tools was highlighted at a meeting 3 years ago in which the Bureau's executive staff—the director, assistant directors, and regional directors—discussed institution strengths and weaknesses while examining data for the first time housed in a PC-based information system, known as the Executive Staff Management Indicators Module. Participants included people who previously had little experience with computers, but who recognized that this module provided them with a powerful tool.

This article discusses several such "tools" that not only facilitate the daily operations of correctional institutions, but enable managers at all levels to access data to help them make decisions.

SENTRY

SENTRY, the Bureau of Prisons' online inmate information system, is designed to ease the daily tasks performed by institution staff. In little more than a decade, SENTRY has grown from an inmate population monitoring system, which included location, work status, housing and custody assignments, and other relevant information for every

inmate. It has added modules for property accounting, litigation, administrative remedies (inmate grievance procedures), and disciplinary tracking, to name a few.

All modules were added in response to operational needs. For example, the sentence monitoring function was added to increase accuracy and staff efficiency in computing sentences. That Bureau staff perform an average of 750,000 SENTRY transactions each day testifies to its usefulness. SENTRY has made staff increasingly aware of the benefits of automation; they continue to automate functions that facilitate the running of Bureau institutions.

Because the information from systems such as SENTRY, HRMIS (its counterpart for staff information), and discipline-specific databases is integral to operations, it is also useful for identifying what is important to prison managers.

The weakness of such systems as SENTRY for management planning purposes is also their strength as daily operational systems—with the exception of some historical information, they are a "snapshot" of information at one point in time. Their data are constantly being overwritten as changes occur. To examine information over time, it is necessary to take these snapshots and pass them on to another system that can store them and provide users with easy access in various aggregations. The Bureau of Prisons has developed the Key Indicators/Strategic Support System for this purpose.

Key Indicators/Strategic Support System (KI/SSS)

KI/SSS is a PC-based management information system that gives users access to a range of information on

inmates, staff, and financial operations. Much of the information on inmates is from SENTRY and includes demographic, misconduct, administrative remedy, furlough, community corrections, education participation, population, capacity, admissions and discharge, sentencing/classification, and other data. Obligations, expenditures, staff overtime, and medical overtime are included in the financial section. The staff section houses demographic, turnover, performance appraisal, and tenure data, as well as results from the Prison Social Climate Survey—a comprehensive set of questions regarding staff perceptions of institution safety and security, inmate quality of life, staff work environment, and staff personal well-being. (This survey has been administered annually, since 1988, to a stratified random sample of staff at each institution. For more information about the Prison Social Climate Survey, see Saylor, 1984.)

KI/SSS provides managers with access to a range of information that can be used to address questions (for instance, does an increase in escape rates suggest problems with institution security?) or as context for these indicators (inmate demographics, crowding, and staffing levels as background for escape rates). In most cases, these data exist for each month over a period of years, enabling trend analysis. The information is presented in tables and graphs and structured so that users can compare information over time and across institutions, security levels, and regions. Because it is easy to make these comparisons, managers are better able to identify similarities and differences between institutions and examine why they exist (for more information regarding the development and implementation of KI/SSS, see Saylor, 1989a and 1989b, and Gilman, 1991).



Jeanne McVerde, Regional Computer Services Administrator, North Central Region, and Dave Freeman, Accounting Assistant Administrator, Food Service Training Center, Aurora, assist in computer instruction at the Management and Specialty Training Center, Aurora.

KI/SSS also contains several specialized modules, such as the Executive Staff Management Indicators Module mentioned above. This module contains information identified by the Bureau's executive staff as important to help determine whether areas of institution operations should be examined more closely. This includes such items as institutional capacity and inmate population, inmate classification, assaults on staff and inmates, escapes, and staff perceptions of their work environment. The module is further tied to the Bureau's strategic planning efforts by organizing the information according to the organization's goals of population management, human resources management, security and facility management, correctional leadership and effective public administration, inmate programs and services, and development of partnerships.

Much of this information is taken from data sources already resident in KI/SSS, and also includes other data representing various disciplines not currently included

in KI/SSS. Each warden reviews the Executive Staff Management Indicators Module information for his or her institution and provides comments to the regional director for use in interpreting the data.

This process has a number of benefits. First, it has resulted in the organization of relevant information in a way that is used to assess programs and institutions; second, it is a fairly open process in which wardens are able to see and comment on what their "bosses" are examining. In several instances, their comments have resulted in modifications to the data provided to the executive staff. Finally, this process has helped demystify data by presenting them in a more easily understood manner. Managers are better able to assimilate the data and apply them to decision-making.

However, while KI/SSS is invaluable for providing information on the performance of programs, institutions, institution security levels, regions, and the Bureau overall, it does not indicate *why* these may or may not be functioning well. Much of that information is provided by discipline-specific program reviews and the Institution Character Profile, both developed under the auspices of the Bureau's Program Review Division.

Program Reviews

Program reviews are conducted using discipline-specific guidelines developed and refined during the management assessment process. These guidelines provide very specific instructions to the reviewers as to which of the discipline's functions should be examined, as well as the steps for doing so. Although the

program review teams originate from the Program Review Division in the Bureau's central office, guidelines are developed by administrators from the relevant disciplines.*

A negative program review may result from any number of causes—inadequate resources, staff inexperience, lack of training, or inadequate guidance from supervisors and written policy. Identifying these causes enables reviewers to make specific recommendations for improvement. Tracking the occurrence and reasons for program weaknesses across a number of institutions enables the Bureau to identify program-specific problems, as well as more global causes, such as staff inexperience.

The Program Review Division provides a quarterly cumulative summary of these findings that is used by Bureau managers to determine whether any problems (or potential problems) exist in their own programs. This summary also identifies exemplary programs and information on external review activities relevant to managers.

Program reviews also identify programs or procedures that are exemplary and should be replicated. As is the case with negative findings, this information will be communicated to administrators for use in refining programs, identifying needs, and allocating resources.

*In addition to the reviews coordinated by the Program Review Division, field staff, using the same evaluation guidelines as the program review teams, conduct their own evaluations. Such self-evaluations are required at least once in each year that a program review is not conducted, but institutions are encouraged to conduct them more frequently.



Matthew Borkoshi

A program review team visits the Federal Correctional Institution, Petersburg, Virginia. Left to right: Program Review Examiner W. Bob Bryce, Warden Carolyn Rickards, and Accounting Supervisor Darlene Ely.

In sum, data in KI/SSS are used by managers to identify possible problems and to help them ask questions, while the program review process identifies where a program may be faltering. However, it is possible that procedural breakdowns may not immediately appear as a problem. Ideally, program reviews will allow problems to be resolved before they have any noticeable effects on the program.

Institution Character Profile

Institution Character Profiles were designed primarily as a management tool for regional directors and their wardens, and as a better means of communicating what is going on in institutions.

Institution Character Profiles are conducted for each institution at least every 3 years by a review team composed mainly of administrators from the regional office. The process entails visiting the institution; interviewing staff and inmates; recording observations on a range of topics related to morale, professionalism, and communications;

interviewing relevant department heads and program administrators; examining community relations (through observations and interviews with the community, local law enforcement, and so on); and examining relevant institution documents (e.g., training plans, budgets, and staff turnover statistics).

Information from the Institution Character Profile also is examined in conjunction with other information discussed previously. The different data sources combine to give the regional director and Bureau director a more complete picture of the institution.

The Institution Character Profile not only provides a better understanding of the institution; it gives a better understanding of the context for other information (such as that found in KI/SSS). This can be particularly useful when determining resource needs.

Management Assessments/ Strategic Planning

All of the tools discussed above are important to the Bureau's management assessment and strategic planning processes. To a large extent, good management decisions are based upon good data. By providing good data, the Bureau's information systems and program evaluations help ensure the quality of decisions.

■ Program administrators from the Central and Regional Offices routinely perform management assessments in their particular disciplines (such as health services, education, correctional programs, or financial management). On a continuous basis, line staff are encouraged to help identify issues and forward them through their institution's administration to their regional administrator for consideration at the assessments. If significant deficiencies are found, program review guidelines are strengthened in those areas; in some cases, issues arise that cross disciplines, and must be presented to the Executive Staff for resolution or inclusion in national strategic plans.

■ Strategic planning empowers Bureau staff in their day-to-day work by ensuring a two-way flow of information. Line staff identify critical issues, not only through management assessments, but also by forwarding issues directly to the Central Office for consideration by assistant directors. Conversely, once Bureau goals are established by the Bureau's Executive Staff (based on input they receive from the field), supporting action steps are developed by regional and institutional program managers.*

*For additional information regarding the Bureau's strategic planning process, see State of the Bureau 1991.

Conclusion

In what DiIulio calls "The New Old Penology" (DiIulio, 1991), there is an emerging consensus that the major factors determining the extent to which prisons are safe, secure, orderly, just, and humane institutions are not so much what sort of cards the institutions are dealt but how they are played. In other words, the types of inmates, the size and age of the physical plant, the abundance (or lack) of resources, the degree of overcrowding, or other such variables do not necessarily determine whether an institution operates smoothly. What matters most are the variables of organization, management, and governance.

But which of the many management variables actually make the most difference? It is easier to identify examples of good management than to discover just what makes them successful. This article has described a number of administrative tools developed by the Bureau of Prisons to manage its facilities more efficiently, effectively, and responsibly. With the exception of SENTRY, these tools are still in the research and development stage; continued use and feedback will result in further refinements consistent with the Bureau's management styles and needs. To the extent this occurs, the use of information will become a natural part of management, thus enabling the Bureau to manage proactively during a period of immense growth and tight resources. ■

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"The Right Tool for the Job: Strategies for Making the Use of Information a Natural Part of Management," presented at the 1991 meeting of the American Society of Criminology.

Notes

¹Source: KI/SSS (Volume 4, No. 8).

²Figures, provided by the Office of Management Support, Administration Division, Federal Bureau of Prisons, are as of December 1, 1992.

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