

IN THIS ISSUE

Resilience Is Not Armor • A Message from President Charles Robinson • 5 Questions With a Leader: Allen Bell • When a Person Isn't a Data Point • Building a Shared Vision in Hamilton County, OH • Professional Development • News for Leaders • Corporate Partners • Join the NAPE Network

Editorial Note: Inclusion of practitioner initiatives, research summaries, or third-party announcements in this newsletter does not imply endorsement by NAPE. These features are intended to highlight emerging practices, local innovations, and relevant scholarship that probation leaders may wish to explore as part of their own professional judgment and organizational context.

LEAD STORY

Resilience Is Not Armor: Leadership in the Messy Middle

By Dr. Alex Walker, Director and Co-Founder, Alliance for Community and Justice Innovation • acji.org



I've often heard resilience defined as the ability to bounce back. And I must be honest, it is an appealing idea, especially for leaders. I can think of many times where I encountered a setback, absorbed the impact, recovered, and then kept on moving. In demanding environments, resilience begins to sound like another form of endurance: stay strong, remain focused, keep going. I believe that definition is incomplete.

The longer I navigate life, the more I believe resilience has less to do with how quickly we bounce back and more to do with how willing we are to remain fully human when things are uncertain, uncomfortable, and unresolved. And for all of you armored folks out there, I am sorry to tell you, resilience requires vulnerability.

Leadership carries an enormous pressure to find certainty in the uncertain. Sometimes that pressure comes from our teams; more often, it comes from within ourselves. We believe that leaders should know the answer. When you accept a leadership role it automatically comes with an expectation that you should understand what is happening, know where we are going, anticipate what comes next, and provide confidence to everyone around us.

But our work increasingly asks us to navigate problems for which there is no obvious answer. We lead people with competing needs and perspectives, operate within complex systems, make decisions with incomplete information, and confront challenges that cannot be solved by expertise alone.

In those environments, pretending to be certain is not resilience. What I have found is that resilience is often saying some version of "I don't know" and hoping that the last word is "yet". Resilience is having the courage to try something knowing it may not work. It is making the best decision available and remaining open to evidence that we got it wrong. It is owning a mistake without allowing that mistake to define us. And most importantly, it is doing the internal work to be able to do all of these things in public, in front of our staff, our superiors, and those around us who may be quick to judge. That kind of vulnerability can feel especially risky in high-stakes environments.

Throughout my career I have often forgotten that there is a profound difference between being wrong and being willing to be wrong. The first happens to all of us. The second is a leadership practice.

When we are under pressure, our instinct is to search for certainty and control where there is little. We look for something, or someone, to blame. We become more rigid, more defensive, more risk-averse. We narrow our circle rather than expanding it. And most unfortunately, we opt for quick-fix answers that can get us through the next political cycle, or help us wait out a leadership change or retirement, versus trying to get at the root of what is really going on. We turn inward, protecting ourselves and what we believe to be ours. We hoard resources, or double down on strict policies and procedures, trying to create safety where it doesn't exist.

“Resilience is the capacity to stay in the messy middle, the period after we realize the old answer no longer works but before we know what the new answer will be.”

Resilient leadership asks something different from us.

It asks us to build teams beyond ourselves and genuinely rely on their expertise. It asks us to stay curious long enough to understand what is actually happening rather than rushing toward the explanation that makes us most comfortable. It asks us to resist taking every disagreement, failure, or frustration personally.

One practice I have found useful is assuming that some part of every difficult situation belongs to me. Maybe it is 10 percent, sometimes considerably more; the exact number matters less than the willingness to look for it.

What did I contribute? What did I misunderstand? What expectation did I fail to communicate? What could I have done differently?

Resilience calls for accountability without self-blame. And resilient leaders create environments where other people can do the same. If acknowledging our contribution to a problem results in humiliation, punishment, or personal attack, people learn quickly to protect themselves. If accountability is paired with humanity, people have room to learn and that matters the most in the hardest leadership moments.

Resilience is having the same difficult conversation for the fifth time and still entering it with the intention of helping someone grow. It is holding someone accountable even when we are frustrated with them, and refusing to turn that frustration into an attack on who they are. It is remembering the humanity of people we disagree with, and even people we do not particularly like.

“Resilience is not armor. It is not becoming so tough that difficult things no longer affect us, rather developing the capacity to stay open when they do.”

None of this means lowering expectations. Accountability and humanity are not opposites. In fact, our ability to hold both may be one of the clearest expressions of resilient leadership. And, perhaps then, resilience is not armor. It is not becoming so tough that difficult things no longer affect us, rather developing the capacity to stay open when they do.

Resilient leadership is remaining curious when our default is to be defensive, being accountable when our default is to blame, being willing to be wrong when our default is to perform certainty, asking for help when our default is to have every answer. And perhaps most importantly, to remain connected when our default is to retreat because it feels safer.

Resilience is the capacity to stay in the messy middle, the period after we realize the old answer no longer works but before we know what the new answer will be. Leadership requires us to spend a surprising amount of time there. And so our goal should be to demonstrate what it looks like to live and lead within uncertainty without defaulting to fear, blame, control, or retreat.

And that is what I believe resilience is at its deepest level: not the capacity to bounce back from what is hard, but the courage to remain human while we are still in the middle of it.

President's Message

"Elevating the profession by strengthening executive leadership, amplifying practitioner voice, and collaboratively shaping the future of probation."



Every month, Executive Exchange reminds me that leadership is a practice, not a position. The stories in this issue come from different places, but they point to the same truth: the strongest leaders stay curious, stay accountable, and stay human, even when the answers are still being worked out.

Dr. Alex Walker puts it plainly in our Lead Story: resilience is not armor. It is the courage to remain open when the work is uncertain. I see that courage in leaders who say "I don't know yet," ask their teams for help, and are willing to check whether what they put in place is working.

That idea runs through the rest of this issue. Evidence-based practice is something we do, one person at a time. I was fortunate to co-author the 2012 article summarized in Evidence in Practice, and I'm grateful to Christopher Lowenkamp for bringing it back to our readers. Jennifer Scott and Chief Tiana Johnson then show what that looks like in Hamilton County, OH, where leaders built a shared vision before they built a model. And Allen Bell reminds us that leadership can be lonely, and that honest conversations with peers make us better.

Thank you to every contributor for sharing your voice, and to our Platinum, Gold, and Silver sponsors for their continued partnership. I invite you to engage in three ways this month:

- Share your agency's perspective by completing the NIC Staff Safety Survey in News for Leaders.
- Invest in emerging leaders through the 2027 Real Colors Leadership Cohort, offered by NCTI in cooperation with NAPE.
- Reach out to a peer. You don't have to carry this work alone.

"The strongest leaders stay curious, stay accountable, and stay human, even when the answers are still being worked out."

As you read, I'd ask you to consider one question: what is one thing I can do this month to lead more openly? Remember: It starts with me. It grows with me. It isn't just my mantra; it is a way of work.

Charles Robinson

President, National Association of Probation Executives

SPOTLIGHT

5 Questions With a Leader: An Interview with Allen Bell

Director, Midland County CSCD, Midland, TX



Tell us a little about you. Why did you choose probation, and what experiences have defined your leadership journey?

It seems many of us who entered probation in the early 1990s didn't set out with a grand plan—I stumbled into it and found a career.

After completing ROTC at UTSA, my wife and I entered active duty—she in the Army Nurse Corps and I in the Military Police. After deployments during Desert Storm, we decided to pursue a civilian path. My dad sent me a newspaper clipping about Midland Adult Probation hiring. Even with a degree in criminal justice, I had no clear sense of what the job entailed, but I applied anyway. Within a couple of weeks, I was an officer with Midland CSCD—complete with a badge, a key to the employee restroom, and the feeling that I had arrived.

I certainly didn't expect to stay 35 years. Along the way, I made a point of never turning down an opportunity—whether tackling new technology, earning my master's at Sam Houston State, or covering an unfamiliar caseload. I spent nearly twenty years as Deputy Director before stepping into the Director role in 2015, an experience that gave me an appreciation for both the executive side and the daily realities line staff face.

My leadership foundation was shaped by my military training: the worst thing you can do is freeze in the kill zone. Your job is to stay calm, move your people out of danger, and return fire. In civilian leadership, not every call is life-or-death, but two lessons stuck: project calm under pressure so your team has confidence and never let fear paralyze your decision-making. Indecision often does more harm than a flawed decision.

By nature, I am a planner who lives by lists and calendars, mapping months in advance. But leadership taught me that the best-laid plans often don't survive reality. Shortly after buying our home in Midland in the early '90s, I hired a contractor to drill a water well. Knowing next to nothing about it, I chose a spot on the lot that aligned with my neighbor's well. When the crew finished, I asked the driller whether it was a good well. He said it was and added, "My dad always says that even a blind hog finds an acorn every once in a while."

I've never forgotten that line, and I've come to use it less as a backhanded compliment and more to illustrate that things often don't go as planned, sometimes for the better. It doesn't mean a leader should stumble blindly without effort; it means a leader must put in the hard work to achieve success while staying alert and humble enough to recognize that things won't always go as scripted. You must stay alert for those subtle "God moments" that signal it's time to pivot, revise the plan, or head in a completely new direction.

What excites you the most about the role AI can play in creating efficiencies and improving probation outcomes?

I first viewed AI narrowly as a coaching tool, but once my son introduced me to hands-on AI tools, their capabilities blew my mind. Using them cuts my administrative work time in half, but their real value to probation goes far beyond saving desk hours.

Officers collect years of documentation, but large caseloads leave little time to analyze that history in depth. Supervision too easily becomes a superficial cycle of collecting data for reports rather than changing behavior.

What excites me most is AI's ability to process that mountain of data, synthesize it instantly, and surface meaningful insights. By handling the heavy lifting of data and documentation, AI frees officers to step away from the keyboard and focus on the real, face-to-face work of changing lives.

What challenges do you believe probation will face as we leverage AI tools, and what is the leader's responsibility?

You can't let AI run unchecked or leave it to handle probation work without rigorous human oversight. My main concern is intellectual laziness. Just as a student who relies entirely on AI for homework never learns the fundamentals and won't spot mistakes when the AI gets it wrong, officers who let the tool do all the thinking also fail to learn the fundamentals and won't spot mistakes when the AI gets it wrong. That's when we lose human control and drift from our core mission of accountability and behavioral change. A leader's job is to ensure staff have critical-thinking skills first. Let AI handle the heavy lifting of organizing data, but the human must always evaluate the analysis and decide how to apply it.

“By handling the heavy lifting of data and documentation, AI frees officers to step away from the keyboard and focus on the real, face-to-face work of changing lives.”

How would you describe NAPE's role in community corrections to a probation leader who is considering joining the organization?

Being a director or executive in this business can feel lonely. You're dealing with budgets, staffing headaches, new laws, and daily operational fires, and most folks around you don't fully understand the pressures of sitting in that seat.

That's why NAPE matters. I truly believe any probation leader can improve simply by stepping out of their shell and talking with peers, whether from their own state or across the country. Over the years, I've learned an incredible amount—and realized many of my own mistakes—through honest conversations with other directors and executives. As impressive as AI is, those peer-to-peer conversations are far more enlightening because they draw on real-world experience, real successes, and real failures. NAPE gives you that sounding board so you can bounce ideas off leaders who've walked the same ground, without having to reinvent the wheel every time.

What do you believe the future of leadership in community corrections looks like? What will the defining skills of a leader be in the coming years?

I definitely don't have all the answers, and I certainly wouldn't call myself an expert. But after spending over three decades in this field, it seems clear to me that leadership will require humility, common sense, and the ability to roll with the punches.

Things are changing faster than ever, and I think the leaders who do well in the coming years will rely on a few basic principles:

- **Checking your ego and knowing when to pivot:** No matter how smart we think our plans are, things will still go sideways. A good leader can't be too proud to admit when something isn't working, listen to subtle nudges, and change direction without making excuses.
- **Keeping your cool and not being afraid to make a call:** When things get tense or messy, your team looks to you to see if the building is on fire. If you stay calm, it gives them confidence. Even when you don't have 100 percent of the information, you can't freeze up. It's usually much better to make a decision and adjust later than to sit still out of fear.
- **Remembering why we're here:** With AI and new tech hitting our desks, it's tempting to let tools run the shop. But this job has always been—and will always be—about people. The leaders who succeed will use technology to handle paperwork headaches so their staff can get back to what matters: looking someone in the eye, holding them accountable, and helping them change their lives.

Bonus Question: What are you reading, listening to, or learning from right now that's influencing how you think about leadership and the future of probation?

I'll be honest: I'm not a big book reader. I just can't sit still long enough to read traditional leadership books.

Most of my time goes to articles and podcasts directly relevant to our work, whether that's AI, liability issues, or shifting workforce trends. Hiring and retention are tough, and leaders can't assume what worked 30 years ago still works today, so I focus on understanding what newer employees value so we can adapt.

I look for things I can actually put to work. My focus is on keeping our department safe from liability, supporting the folks doing the job, and making sure we do things a little better each day.

To connect with Allen Bell, contact allen.bell@midlandcscd.net.

EVIDENCE IN PRACTICE

When a Person Isn't a Data Point: What Evidence-Based Practice Looks Like in a Supervision Meeting

Summary by Christopher T. Lowenkamp

When a Person Isn't a Data Point: Making Evidence-Based Practice Work. Christopher T. Lowenkamp, Alexander M. Holsinger, Charles R. Robinson, and Francis T. Cullen. Federal Probation, Volume 76, Number 3, December 2012.

Practice, or Practices?

This is a thought piece rather than an empirical study, and a few colleagues and I coauthored it, so read it with that in mind. Its argument turns on a distinction that may seem pedantic, but we believe effectiveness hinges on the distinction. When most of us say an agency is "evidence-based," we mean practices, plural: a validated risk tool, a cognitive curriculum, supervision levels tied to risk, a list of things the agency has adopted because research supports them. The article means practice, singular, as in a physician practices medicine. One is a noun, a set of things you buy and adopt. The other is a verb, something you do: making decisions about one person, making a referral, watching for a response, and changing course when the response is not there.

We give the field full credit for the first meaning. Risk assessment, targeting criminogenic needs, and adherence to the RNR model are real advances, and the article does not take issue with them. Its claim is that the second meaning has been largely missing, and that without it the field has gone “from one size fits all to another size fits all.” A curriculum that works for most offenders in a trial is a good reason to try it with the offender in front of you. It is not evidence that it is working for him.

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The Blood Test

The article borrows its model from medicine. A patient with high cholesterol is told to change his diet and exercise because group studies show it works for many people. The physician does not stop there. He orders a blood test in a few months, and if the number has not moved, he moves to a statin. Both treatments are evidence-based. Neither is assumed to work for this patient until patient-level evidence shows the evidence-based response is actually working. The article’s phrase for the correctional equivalent is that we need to regularly “run a blood test” to see whether the offender is responding to what we prescribed.

What the Evidence Looks Like in a Supervision Meeting

The article’s best illustration is an audio-recorded exchange between an officer and a high-risk offender who had been referred to a cognitive curriculum. For space reasons, the exchange is lightly trimmed:

Officer: Before I turned on the tape we talked about a more recent situation that happened to you. Can you talk about it? What is the external event?

Offender: I went to an AA meeting and I ran into the guy who helped set me up.

Officer: So you ran into what we might call the “snitch.” What were your thoughts at the time?

Offender: Man I’d like to beat his head in. I could probably get away with it. Ain’t nobody gonna know. He might tell on me again, but at least I get to feel better.

But then my thoughts were: Man, is it really worth going back to prison for putting hands on this person? My sobriety and stuff is way better than that. I enjoy my freedom way too much. Best bet is to just sit down and finish out my meeting.

Officer: So what I hear you saying is that your commitment to your sobriety has become...

Offender: ...more important.

Officer: How does that feel?

Offender: Feels good. I’m free, I ain’t got somebody telling me when I can go or when I can eat, I can be me. I’ll be able to be a better person to my kids and my father.

We read this exchange as evidence on four points: the offender acquired the skill being taught, can identify a situation where it applies, is motivated to use it, and sees value in continuing to use it. That is what person-level evidence looks like. It is not a reassessment score, and it is not a program completion certificate. It is the officer asking, in a specific situation from the offender’s own life, whether the treatment we assigned is being used and whether it is working. The article is candid that this kind of conversation “may well be rare in form and content.”

The Loop

Reading the piece again more than a decade later, the practical version of the argument is simpler than the article makes it, so what follows is my extension rather than a quotation. An officer who is practicing EBP assigns something to the offender based on the research: a cognitive program, a problem-solving skill, a specific supervision strategy. The officer then looks for evidence that it is working for this person: How have you been applying this? Is it working? Are you better able to manage the situations that get you in trouble? If the answer is yes, keep going. If the answer is no after a fair trial, the officer retools to a different curriculum, modality, or approach that may fit this offender better. Assign, check, retool. The policy layer decides what is on the “menu.” That is EBP as a noun. The officer working the menu one person at a time is EBP as a verb, and an agency can have the first without anyone doing the second.

Two Things the Loop Depends on

The retool step is empty if there is nowhere to retool to. The article is blunt that most agencies pick one cognitive curriculum, call it their evidence-based practice, and expect every offender assessed as needing cognitive treatment to respond to it. In the article, we argue for more than one curriculum and for placement, and re-placement, based on how an offender is responding. That is an executive decision about procurement and contracting, not an officer skill, and it is the part of the argument most directly within a leader’s control.

The check step also depends on having a blood test sensitive enough to detect change. The article notes that reassessing with the same instrument used at intake may or may not serve this purpose because most risk tools, even dynamic ones, are not built to detect small changes over short periods. Although a risk assessment tool isn’t needed, the article points to the Dynamic Risk Assessment for Offender Reentry (DRAOR), which assesses acute factors alongside stable ones, and it also suggests that officers assess progress in a criminogenic need area each time they meet with the offender, which is what the recorded exchange above is doing. An agency that reassesses every six or twelve months and calls that its check is measuring something, but it probably isn’t measuring whether last month’s referral is working and might not be measuring sensitively enough to pick up the small changes, or large changes, that come about as a result of treatment, interventions, and supervision.

Questions for Leaders

1. When we say our agency is “evidence-based,” which meaning do we intend: the practices we have adopted, or the way our officers make decisions and check results in a supervision meeting? Could we tell the difference from our data?
2. After an officer refers an offender to a cognitive program, what is the officer expected to look for as evidence that it is working for that person? Is that expectation written anywhere, trained anywhere, or supervised anywhere?
3. If an officer concludes an intervention is not working for a particular offender, what options does the officer actually have? Is there a second curriculum, a different modality, or only more of the same?
4. What is our agency’s “blood test”? Are our reassessment interval and instrument sensitive enough to detect change within a supervision term, or do they only tell us after the fact?
5. How do our case plans change over the course of supervision? If we pulled twenty plans at intake and again at month twelve, would they look different, and would the differences reflect the offender’s response to the intervention?
6. What does our quality assurance or officer evaluation process reward: adherence to the referral (did the offender get sent to the program) or evidence of response (did the officer check whether it worked)?

EVIDENCE IN PRACTICE • PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Building a Shared Vision for Evidence-Based Supervision in Hamilton County, OH

By Jennifer Scott, Director of Innovation and Outreach, University of Cincinnati Corrections Institute (UCCI), and Tiana Johnson, Chief Probation Officer, Hamilton County Court of Common Pleas Adult Probation Department

When Tiana Johnson, Chief Probation Officer for the Hamilton County Court of Common Pleas Adult Probation Department, set out to implement a Risk-Based Supervision Model, the goal was never simply to launch a new program. Instead, Johnson led a broader organizational effort to redefine how community supervision is delivered, bringing together judges, court administrators, probation officers, and community partners around a shared commitment to improve outcomes, enhance public safety, and better align supervision with individual risk and need. As Johnson explained during a September 1, 2026, plenary at the International Community Justice Association (ICJA) Research Conference, “We started by bringing together leadership, officers, judges, court administration, and community partners around a common purpose.”



Chief Tiana Johnson, joined by stakeholders and partners from Hamilton County, OH, Court of Common Pleas, Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, Franklin County, OH, Probation, and University of Cincinnati Corrections Institute, served as keynote panelists to share about the Risk-Based Supervision Model at the 2026 International Community Justice Association Research Conference.

For Johnson, creating that shared vision began with helping stakeholders understand not only what was changing, but why it mattered. The department sought to move beyond traditional supervision practices and redesign its approach around evidence-based principles that prioritize resources where they can have the greatest impact. “We weren’t changing simply to create a new program,” Johnson noted. “We were redesigning supervision practices to better match risk, improve outcomes, and enhance public safety.” She emphasized that building understanding and support across the organization was critical, adding that “the Why behind the change was integral.”

“Risk-based supervision is not a project with a finish line. It’s an organizational commitment to continuously improving how we supervise individuals in our community.”

That collective vision ultimately became the foundation for the county’s Risk-Based Supervision Model. The approach integrates risk and needs assessment, individualized case planning, cognitive behavioral interventions, motivational interviewing, structured responses to behavior, and ongoing quality assurance into a unified supervision framework. Johnson described the model as “the blueprint for everything we do in Hamilton County Court of Common Pleas Adult Probation,” explaining that it allows officers to match supervision intensity and interventions to the specific needs of each individual while remaining focused on the overarching goal of “better outcomes for clients, lower recidivism rates, and safer communities.”

Today, Hamilton County continues to strengthen and refine the model through coaching, data-informed decision-making, and ongoing collaboration. Johnson views the work as a long-term commitment to organizational excellence rather than a completed initiative. “Risk-based supervision is not a project with a finish line,” she said. “It’s an organizational commitment to continuously improving how we supervise individuals in our community.” For probation leaders across the country, Hamilton County’s experience illustrates that meaningful transformation begins not with a policy change, but with a shared vision that aligns people, practice, and purpose.

For more information, contact Tiana Johnson at tiajohns@hamiltoncountycourtsoh.gov or Jennifer Scott at scott3jm@ucmail.uc.edu.

Professional Development

Sponsor Professional Development Opportunity — presented by NCTI, in cooperation with NAPE

2027 Real Colors Leadership Cohort

Designed exclusively for emerging leaders in community supervision, the Real Colors Leadership Cohort, offered by the National Curriculum and Training Institute, Inc. (NCTI) in cooperation with NAPE, is a professional development experience that equips the next generation of leaders with the skills they need to thrive.

Over four interactive virtual sessions, participants will:

- Discover their unique leadership strengths
- Master communication strategies for diverse teams
- Practice leadership scenarios specific to community corrections
- Build a personal leadership action plan
- Connect and network with peers

“The previous cohort sold out, so please express interest early.”

Program Details: Four 3-hour virtual sessions • 12 APPA Contact Hours

Dates: February 4, 11, 18, and 25, 2027

For more information, contact Lindsay Boyd, Account Manager, NCTI, at lboyd@ncti.org or info@ncti.org, or visit ncti.org.

News for Leaders

NIC Seeks Agency Input on Staff Safety

The National Institute of Corrections (NIC) is conducting a survey of community corrections and related agencies on staff safety. The survey gathers high-level information about current practices, strengths, and challenges faced by agencies, and will be used to build a view of national practices. Its ultimate goal is to inform an NIC training initiative on staff safety for fiscal year 2028 (FY2028).

Agencies that have not yet completed the survey are asked to do so to the best of their ability and are welcome to share it with other community corrections agencies. Agencies that have already completed it may disregard this notice.

Take the survey: surveymonkey.com/r/NICStaffSafety

Questions? Contact Jeff Hanson, National Programs Advisor, National Institute of Corrections, at jhanson@bop.gov.

HARP Launches State Technical Assistance Center for Medicaid Reentry Waivers

On October 1, 2026, the Health and Reentry Project (HARP) announced the launch of a State Technical Assistance Center (STAC), which HARP describes as the first of its kind. The STAC is dedicated to supporting state leaders in implementing policies that connect people transitioning from prison to jail to health care at reentry.

HARP states that the STAC is the only national center dedicated solely to providing technical assistance to states implementing 1115 Medicaid reentry waivers. HARP's experts will help states learn from one another and provide timely content on key issues, including expanding access to medication-assisted treatment for substance use disorder, connecting people to community services after release, and building information sharing between health and corrections. The STAC was developed with input from state leaders and offers technical assistance options that vary in intensity.

According to HARP, access to health care during reentry can improve health, including by reducing the high risk of opioid overdoses at release, improve public safety, and reduce fragmentation and inefficiency across health and criminal justice systems. The launch follows Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) approval of four states' and the District of Columbia's proposals shortly before the announcement. Twenty-two states plus D.C. now have approved 1115 Medicaid reentry waivers, and four more are pending.

The STAC will work with state Medicaid agencies, corrections departments, juvenile justice agencies, and implementation partners, building on HARP's existing support to sheriffs, jail administrators, and other correctional leaders. State officials can register for a help desk, a library of implementation resources, a peer chat system, and learning communities.

The STAC is led by Kati Habert, HARP's Director of Technical Assistance. HARP is led by Founder and Executive Director Vikki Wachino.

Learn more at healthandreentryproject.org.

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