

Change Talk: Using Motivational Interviewing Techniques in Jail Programs

By Jamie Allen, Offender Services Manager, Louisville Metro Department of Corrections, Louisville, Kentucky

Time for Something Different

Louisville Metro Department of Corrections (LMDC) recently embarked upon a journey to change its program model to incorporate evidence-based practices and knowledge of “what works” nationally in the field of corrections. For years, our program model has included educational instruction and testing, substance abuse treatment, life skills courses, and spiritual groups. We have kept offenders constructively occupied by preparing them for their GED, teaching the dangers of drugs and alcohol, providing the skill set to be a better parent, and helping them find support in their faith.

Each of these programs is essential for helping our inmates move beyond a criminal lifestyle, but experience has shown us that curriculum alone isn’t enough. The most valuable tool in our toolbox is the ability to plant the seed that changes offenders’ behavior and thinking about committing crime. To truly engage offenders in the process of self-change, Louisville Metro is taking advantage of a communications tool known as Motivational Interviewing (MI).

One of the top goals of LMDC is to deliver quality programs and services that provide offenders the opportunity for positive change. As the Offender Services Manager, I had to ask myself, “How do I do this?” The answer came more easily than I expected. A new director, Mark Bolton, was appointed to lead Metro Corrections in 2008. With him he brought a wealth of knowledge in corrections and best practices. A new organizational culture that relies on evidence-based programming began to evolve under the guidance of our new administration. Even with this level of administrative support, however, it has still been a challenge to implement our new MI-focused approach.

Motivational Interviewing Basics

Fast forward to 2010. After months of research and preparation, LMDC decided to train our program service staff on the principles and concepts of Motivational Interviewing. Motivational Interviewing, or “change talk,” is a client-centered conversational technique for one-on-one interactions that lower an individual’s resistance and increase their motivation toward change. Motivational Interviewing was first used as an intervention strategy in clinical and therapeutic settings in the addiction field. Over time, the corrections field also has begun to adopt this strategy to motivate offenders toward changing their criminal or high-risk behaviors in favor of positive behaviors.

Motivational Interviewing fits into evidence-based practices by helping staff to build collaborative relationships with offenders that both motivate them and hold them accountable for their choices and actions. Motivational Interviewing is the foundation for developing and enhancing client responsivity. Questions and statements are tailored to make it more likely that offenders will think, talk, and act in a positive manner.

Motivational Interviewing is utilized to enable the offender to start working toward change. It takes place within a framework of six stages of change: Pre-contemplation, Contemplation, Preparation, Action, Maintenance, and Relapse.

- In Pre-contemplation, the offender is avoiding thinking about change and has decided that the benefits of the current behavior outweigh the consequences.
- In the Contemplation phase, the offender thinks he/she has a problem but has not decided what to do about it.
- During the Preparation phase, the offender is preparing to make a change and makes an initial plan of action.
- In the Action phase, the offender is actively making changes and is learning new ways to manage urges that likely would lead him/her back to problematic behaviors.
- In the Maintenance phase, the offender develops ways to continue managing the problem. It is during this phase that he/she can either maintain his/her positive efforts or relapse back into old behaviors.
- In Relapse, the offender revisits the problem behavior and may appear to be in denial about it.

Motivational Interviewing is based on five principles of accepting and responding to the information disclosed by the client:

- Expressing empathy to facilitate change, based on accurately hearing and understanding what is said;
- Developing an awareness of the discrepancy between the client's present behavior and his or her most important goals;
- Avoiding argumentation, which is counter-productive because it puts the client on the defensive;
- Rolling with resistance in a non-confrontational manner, a skill that goes far in allowing clients to find solutions to their problems; and

- Supporting self-efficacy and helping clients to believe in the possibility of change.

Motivational Interviewers use specific communication techniques to get an offender to engage in change talk.

- Open-ended questions are valuable in MI, as they increase internal motivation and encourage offenders to think about what they are saying.
- Affirming offenders' positive talk and behaviors builds rapport and makes positive behaviors more likely. Staff using MI should look for ways to praise offenders on positive behaviors.
- Reflecting information the offender is sharing means repeating back what an offender has said to encourage them to expand upon very specific information being disclosed.
- Summarizing is a way to revisit specific problematic behaviors that have been discussed in order to move toward developing a plan of action.

Implementation and Training

Metro Corrections connected with the Motivational Interviewing Network of Trainers (MINT) to begin training our program staff in the new technique. We planned the first session of Motivational Interviewing training to take place with our case management staff who worked at the Community Corrections Center.

The case managers' primary role is to assess offenders as they enter into the work release facility and to address their needs while incarcerated. Our work release population is comprised mainly of sentenced misdemeanants who have been given a court order to work while serving their sentence. We believed this would be a good population to begin with, because more than half of our work release participants did not have jobs and were not motivated to seek employment. Helping these offenders to think positively about their employment future would benefit both the clients themselves and also the community.

This initial round of MI training with work release case managers lasted two and a half days and was very structured. Staff learned the history of Motivational Interviewing and the principles and concepts they would need to use MI in their daily case management with offenders. Each stage of the change process was thoroughly explained, as were the specific conversational techniques. The staff learned how to ask appropriate questions to engage offenders in change talk. They were then placed into groups to role play and strengthen the skills they had learned. The role playing helped the staff put into perspective the challenges they would face in using motivational interviewing effectively with offenders and the importance of practicing and developing their motivational interviewing skills over time.

During the training, the case managers were engaged but hesitant at first in understanding how this would fit into their daily case management strategies. Let's face it—they were accustomed to calling offenders into their offices and using direct, closed questions to gain compliance. Now they were being asked to engage in change talk with offenders to motivate them to change their own behavior and thinking patterns. It was an uphill battle for me, because not only did I have to motivate the staff to believe in the potentials of Motivational Interviewing, I also had to convince them to actually use it.

Motivational Interviewing is a skill that is learned over time. It is not something that staff can thoroughly grasp without practice. Role playing was a valuable training tool for staff. As the staff became more familiar with MI techniques, they realized that they had already been using some of these techniques with offenders in some fashion—they just did not know it was “change talk.” The training helped them to better understand why these talking skills work and allowed them to improve and expand upon their techniques.

After using MI for 6 months in work release, Metro Corrections held a second training session, this time with the program services staff who were assigned in the main jail complex. This group of staff works with in-custody offenders, and they too sought to understand how the concepts of Motivational Interviewing could help them succeed in working with their caseloads. MINT trainers provided the same training to this group as they had provided to the work release case managers.

Metro Corrections also held refresher training with the Community Corrections staff to talk about the benefits of MI that the staff were seeing, as well as the obstacles. One of the biggest obstacles for staff was when offenders were resistant. Staff are taught that it is better to back off and try a different approach when resistance happens. Those who are newly trained in MI can find it hard to determine what concept they should use next to continue that dialogue of changing behavior. To get past this hurdle, staff can revisit their training notes and work with their peers and supervisor to find something new that they haven't yet tried. In the grand scheme of things, not all offenders will be receptive to even the more effective styles of case management. There will always be some clients who will disappoint the staff.

As our agency began applying the MI techniques, staff would come into my office and talk with me about their MI practice and how using the change talk strategy helped their rapport with offenders. The use of Motivational Interviewing has improved the atmosphere for both staff and offenders. MI makes a difference in the way the offenders react to staff and to the conditions of their supervision. The staff who use effective case management and MI skills no longer use confrontational statements with offenders. They express empathy, develop discrepancy awareness, and roll with resistance to begin the process of changing behavior. Overall, the engagement and staff support has been tremendous. Metro Corrections has successfully introduced to staff the concepts of Motivational Interviewing, which allows them to practice with offenders to start the initial steps to change their behavior.

Going Forward with MI

LMDC believes in the success MI is creating in our interactions with offenders, and we are continuing to expand its use. In March 2011, Metro Corrections opened a Day Reporting Center as an alternative to incarceration. It provides a community-based, structured supervision component coupled with delivery of resources and services to meet specifically identified offender needs. Motivational Interviewing is used in all individual cognitive behavioral therapy sessions with offenders as a requirement of the project agreement with the contractor that operates the facility. MI also is used as a foundation for the case management sessions. Offenders in the Day Reporting Center are responsible for choosing and carrying out steps toward personal change. The staff facilitate this change and engage in evidence-based practices for positive results.

In addition, we are slowly bringing the security officers throughout the agency into the concept of MI. A few of our sergeants went through the first session of MI training. Their acceptance of the concepts has been good, but so far it is not as strong as that of the program staff. The leadership and managers are excited about MI. As our agency delves more into evidence-based practices, we are becoming more committed to MI because we know it works. Our training unit captain is planning to create an MI lesson plan to use in annual in-service for all staff.

We are also beginning to measure the quality of our cognitive behavioral approach coupled with Motivational Interviewing techniques. Metro Corrections has partnered with the Metro Criminal Justice Commission and the University of Louisville to evaluate the Day Reporting Center Program and its effectiveness in reducing offender recidivism. We expect to have our first evaluation results by the summer of 2012.

Metro Corrections is committed to helping offenders reintegrate back into the community. The department has made great strides in training our program staff in practical skills for communicating with offenders and creating a positive, rewarding atmosphere. Above all, my goal and my passion as a corrections professional is to give staff the ability to effectively model and communicate positive change. Motivational Interviewing is our most promising new tool.

Jamie Allen is Offender Services Manager at the Louisville Metro Department of Corrections in Louisville, Kentucky. She can be reached at 502-574-2167 or jamie.allen@louisvilleky.gov

More information about Motivational Interviewing:

As of this writing, the Motivational Interviewing Network of Trainers (MINT) is developing a new website. Two websites are currently providing access to related material.

- Motivational Interviewing: Resources for Clinicians, Researchers, and Trainers (website). Christopher C. Wagner, Ph.D. in cooperation with the Motivational Interviewing Network of Trainers (MINT). Accessed May 8, 2011 at <http://motivationalinterview.net/>
- Motivational Interviewing (website). Mid-Atlantic Addiction Technology Transfer Center. Accessed May 8, 2011 at <http://www.motivationalinterview.org>.

Document available at: http://community.nicic.gov/blogs/national_jail_exchange/archive/2011/05/27/change-talk-using-motivational-interviewing-techniques-in-jail-programs.aspx

The National Jail Exchange is an ongoing electronic journal focusing on providing information to jails practitioners and is sponsored by the National Institute of Corrections (NIC). The contents of the articles, the points of view expressed by the authors, and comments posted in reaction to the articles do not necessarily reflect the official views or policies of the National Institute of Corrections.

To write an article or to learn more about the National Jail Exchange, visit the homepage for this journal at: <http://NICIC.gov/NationalJailExchange>.