

The Comprehensive Approach to Sex Offender Management

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Introduction

The problem of sex offending has garnered significant concern and attention in recent years. The impact sexual victimization can have on victims and families, the fear these crimes generate in members of the public, and the unique risks and needs posed by sex offenders have led to more concerted efforts to develop specialized ways to manage known offenders as a means to prevent future sexual victimization.

The dynamics of sexual victimization and sex offending are multifaceted. Responding effectively to sex offending requires involvement from a wide range of disciplines and agencies. Jurisdictions across the country have recognized clearly that the effective management of sex offenders is more than just supervision and treatment: rather, it demands the thoughtful integration of these and other management components (including ensuring effective investigation, adjudication and sentencing; assessment; reentry; supervision; treatment; and registration and notification) and, perhaps as importantly, ongoing collaboration among those who are responsible for carrying out these activities. As such, strategies to address these issues should involve the key agencies, organizations, entities, and individuals who have a stake and role in adult and juvenile sex offender management.

The “Comprehensive Approach” to sex offender management described in this document is one framework that has been developed to define and encourage a strategic and collaborative response to managing sex offenders and reducing recidivism. This approach addresses a wide spectrum of critical issues, in terms of principles, policies, and practices. Moving beyond more traditional and sometimes fragmented and inconsistent responses, it connects each of the core components of an integrated model. As described in this document, the Comprehensive Approach offers a promising and well-grounded

framework that jurisdictions can consider as they build an informed, integrated set of policies and practices to promote the shared goal of ensuring victim and community safety.

Background

It is estimated that 265,000 sex offenders are under some form of supervision in the community (Greenfeld, 1997). These offenders represent a very heterogeneous population, and the risks that these offenders pose to the community vary tremendously.

Approximately 150,000 adult sex offenders are currently incarcerated in state and federal prisons throughout the United States, representing between 10% and 30% of prison populations in some states (see, e.g., Bynum, Huebner, & Burgess-Proctor, 2002; Greenfeld, 1997; Harrison & Beck, 2006a). During the past decade, there has been an 80% increase in the number of sex offenders in the nation’s prisons (Beck & Gilliard, 1995; Harrison & Beck, 2006b). And while many sex offenders are entering prisons each year, large numbers are also being released; between 10,000 and 20,000 are estimated to be returning to communities each year (CSOM, 2007). Some convicted sex offenders are sentenced directly to community supervision (e.g., probation), while others may be sentenced to prison or jail and are then released conditionally (e.g., permitted to live in the community under parole or probation supervision). Still others are sentenced to prison or jail and later released with no period of follow-up supervision. Since the overwhelming majority of sex offenders likely will be released into the community at some point (Hughes & Wilson, 2003; Hughes, Wilson, & Beck, 2002)¹, and because research demonstrates that

¹ Almost all criminal offenders – at least 97% – will eventually return to our communities. This equates to as many as 20,000 sex offenders being released into local communities each year.

observed recidivism rates for sexual, violent, and non-violent crimes are lower when sex offenders receive appropriate interventions, such as proper supervision and treatment (Aos, et al., 2006), it is incumbent upon public safety agencies to provide services to offenders that can ensure the most effective management of these offenders in an effort to reduce future victimization.

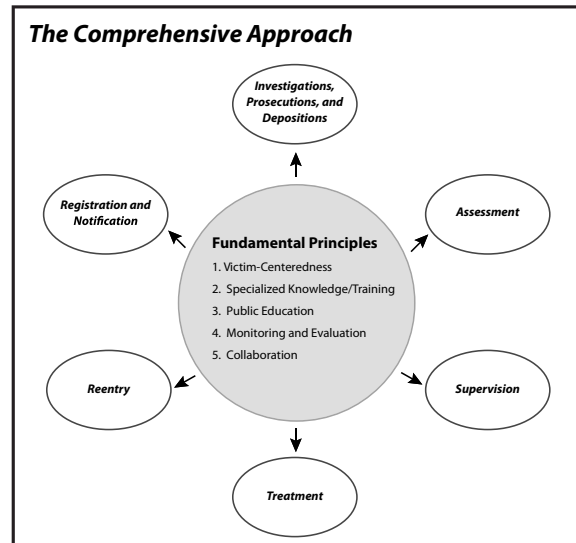
The Comprehensive Approach

Building upon some of the seminal work described above, the Comprehensive Approach defines the core components of sex offender management for those who have a key role and/or vested interest in how to manage most effectively this challenging offender population. Like the Containment Approach and others, the Comprehensive Approach recognizes the complex nature of sex offending and the need for key system stakeholders to facilitate accountability, rehabilitation, and victim and community safety throughout all phases of the justice system. However, the Comprehensive Approach reaches beyond the primary focus on the treatment–supervision–polygraph triad, and expands to a strategy that includes a broader sphere of partnerships and influence.

The Comprehensive Approach to Sex Offender Management addresses three key questions:

- Who are the stakeholders who need to be involved in the full expanse of sex offender management efforts in order for them to have the most potential impact?
- What is the range and scope of activities that are central to managing sex offenders and reintegrating offenders into the community in a way that is safe and effective?
- How should professionals approach the sex offender management process (i.e., what are the foundational tenets and philosophies of the work and what are the evidence-based practices professionals should employ)?

The first question is addressed by the key components listed in the outer circles of the diagram depicted at right.



The second and third questions are addressed by the underlying principles of the Comprehensive Approach. These principles, represented by the innermost circle of the diagram, include an ongoing appreciation of the needs and interests of victims, the importance of specialized training and knowledge for policymakers and practitioners, the value of public awareness and education, the need to monitor and evaluate policies and practices, and the recognition of the critical role of collaboration in effective sex offender management.

The Fundamental Principles of the Comprehensive Approach

These principles represent the philosophical underpinnings of the approach, answering the question of “what is the foundation upon which our sex offender management policies and practices should be based?” These guiding tenets are described below.

Victim-Centeredness: The impact of sexual victimization on victims and communities must be a paramount consideration in sex offender management efforts; such efforts should offer the necessary system supports for victims and their families. Focusing only on the offender without consideration for the safety, interests, and needs of victims will do little to engender public confidence in the criminal justice system, or to prevent further victimization. Sex offender management efforts should include victim advocates in the development of policies and proce-

dures to ensure that their important perspectives are understood and valued and to consider the impact that such policies and practices may have on past and potential victims and their families.

Specialized Knowledge: Working with sex offenders is, in some ways, different from managing a general offender population. While these offenders may share some common characteristics with the general offender population, they also have an array of risks and needs specific to their sex offending behavior. As such, professionals in the field must possess specialized knowledge about sex offenders, their victims, effective interventions for this population (e.g., knowledge about specialized instruments that predict risk among sex offenders; understanding that sex offenders may have different offense motivations than other offenders), and legislatively-driven requirements by which offenders are required to abide (e.g., registration and notification). Given their roles and responsibilities relative to sex offender management on a day-to-day basis, supervision officers, treatment providers, and law enforcement officials in particular should have an in-depth knowledge about this population and should receive the intensive, specialized, and ongoing training that is neces-

sary for them to carry out their duties most effectively. Other criminal and juvenile justice system actors (e.g., judges, prosecutors and defenders, law enforcement, releasing authorities) will also benefit from specialized training on sex offender-specific issues to assist them with making informed decisions with respect to their specific roles in the sex offender management process.

Public Education: Increasing public awareness and providing the public with accurate information about sex offenders and offender management strategies is central to successful prevention and management efforts. Sharing information about who offenders are (e.g., most offenders are known to their victims; many offenses go undetected; sex offenders do not all present the same level of risk to the community) and how they are managed (e.g., specialized treatment and supervision strategies are essential in maintaining community safety) will help to dispel commonly held myths and equip the general public to better respond to and deal with the issue of sex offending in their communities. Educating the community about myths can equip them to enhance their own self-protection efforts, increase confidence about existing sex offender management efforts in communities, and eliminate or reduce some key barriers for

The Evolution of Contemporary Sex Offender Management Strategies

The Comprehensive Approach builds upon and complements the work of many in the sex offender management field who have argued the importance of multiple management components and collaboration over the past two decades. For more references to these earlier approaches, see the following sources:

- Schwartz & Cellini (1988) for information about a “systems approach” to managing sex offenders.
- Hindman, J. (1989) for more information about a “victim-centered approach” that focuses on integrating victim and offender services, and involving prosecutors, police, and other key stakeholders in the management of sex offenders.
- Cumming, G. & Buell, M. (1996) for a discussion about the “external” dimensions of Relapse Prevention and integrating supervision officers, treatment providers, and support networks.
- English, Pullen, Jones, & Krauth (1996) for an overview of the “Containment Approach,” an influential model that proposes five key elements as central to the effective management of sex offenders in the community. These include emphases on an overall goal of community and victim safety, sex offender-specific containment strategies, interagency and interdisciplinary collaboration, informed and consistent public policies, and quality control.
- D’Amora, D., & Burns-Smith, G. (1999) for a proposed model that recommends integrating victim advocates into the management of sex offenders in the community.
- Cumming, G. & McGrath, R.J. (2005) and Cumming, G. & McGrath, R. (2000) for more information about the collaborative and specialized management of sex offenders in the community.
- Wilson, R.J., Picheca, J.E. & Prinzo, M. (2005) for information regarding the “Circles of Support and Accountability” model that promotes providing formal support to offenders in order to help them to reintegrate safely into the community.

offenders (such as the public's efforts to block treatment or residential programs designed to help offenders successfully reintegrate into the community). Therefore, the key stakeholders who represent the core components of the Comprehensive Approach must take active steps to educate the public about the nature of sexual victimization, who is most likely to be targeted and by whom, what the rights of the public are in these cases, how effective management strategies can increase community safety and prevent further victimization, and what role the public might play in monitoring offenders and promoting offender success.

Monitoring and Evaluation: As is the case with correctional strategies in general, sex offender management practices should be guided by evidence-based research as well as those practices that are promising in terms of impact and effectiveness. Therefore, agency practices should be assessed on an ongoing basis to ensure that they are consistent with the contemporary research and practice literature. Both policymakers and practitioners alike should be cognizant of the need to keep pace with emerging research in this area. Furthermore, jurisdictions should take care to objectively assess their own policies and practices in order to evaluate the extent to which they result in positive outcomes. In those instances when the desired outcomes are not met (or opposite effects are identified), practices should be realigned.

Collaboration: Because of the complex nature of sex offending and the range of strategies used to manage this population, no single entity or approach in and of itself is likely to address this issue adequately or effectively. Stakeholders must work together to ensure that their respective resources, capabilities, and strategies are brought to bear on this problem. The collective involvement of criminal justice agencies, treatment providers, victim advocacy organizations, members of the public, and other relevant stakeholders is central to a Comprehensive Approach to sex offender management. Sex offender management teams should ensure that all relevant disciplines and stakeholders are actively contributing members to these efforts and that a commitment to ongoing collaboration is shared by both policymakers and practitioners.

Core Components of a Comprehensive Approach to Sex Offender Management

The core components of the Comprehensive Approach are represented by the outermost circles of the diagram depicted on page 2. These components provide the substantive foundation of the Comprehensive Approach.

Investigation, Prosecution, and Disposition:

The investigation, prosecution, and disposition of sex crimes set the stage for the remainder of the offender's contact with the criminal justice system. In order to investigate these cases in the most effective way possible, the involved parties should have knowledge of sexual assault victim issues, including best practice in collecting relevant forensic evidence and interviewing victims. The system must also be committed to the swift and judicious resolution of these cases, ensure that the charges filed accurately reflect the nature and seriousness of the allegations, and protect the individual defendant's rights while maintaining the overarching interests of community safety. Finally, investigators and the courts should be critical consumers of assessment information, should ensure that sensitivity to victim needs throughout the process is safeguarded, and should remain committed to sentencing decisions that are based upon quality evidence and assessment information and promote the accountability of sex offenders.

Assessment: Because adult and juvenile sex offenders are such diverse populations, "one size fits all" approaches are neither appropriate nor effective. Determining what to do with which offenders, how and when to do it, and why it should be done demands careful consideration to the varied levels of risk, needs, development, and functioning of these individuals. This requires having access to (and making good use of) comprehensive and sex offender-specific assessment information. Well executed assessments are the key to informed decision making throughout the case management process, because the information gleaned from these reports can help stakeholders to understand the static (or unchangeable) factors in an offender's history that can help to identify risk factors for recidivism over the longer term. Supervision officers and treatment providers should also

maintain an ongoing awareness of the presence or absence of changeable risk factors that relate to recidivism or reoffending in the shorter term. In the Comprehensive Approach, assessment is defined as a collaborative effort, strengthened by input from all parties who are working with offenders and their victims. It contextualizes assessment as an ongoing process that provides practitioners not only with basic information about an offender's level of risk and criminogenic needs, but also about treatment progress, supervision compliance, the presence of community and other prosocial supports, and access to victims, among other issues. Assessed risk and needs information should also drive the allocation of limited resources to this population (e.g., targeting the most intensive services to the highest risk offenders).

Treatment: Because research has demonstrated that the provision of sex offender-specific treatment is associated with reductions in both sexual and non-sexual recidivism (see e.g., Aos et al., 2006; Gallagher, et al., 1999; Hanson et al., 2002; Lösel & Schmucker, 2005; Reitzel & Carbonell, 2006), treatment is an essential component of a comprehensive sex offender management system. The primary goal of sex offender treatment is to assist individuals to develop the necessary skills and techniques that will prevent them from engaging in sexually abusive and other harmful behaviors in the future, and lead productive and prosocial lives. Several key elements specific to sex offender treatment (e.g., limited confidentiality, emphasis on group and cognitive-behavioral programming), tailoring the intensity and duration of treatment to the risk level of the offender (e.g., providing more intensive services to higher risk individuals and less intensive services to those at lower risk), and the use of an integrated model through which other professionals involved in the management process are able to provide input and seek information about offenders, are central to promising sex offender management practices. In addition, a comprehensive sex offender management strategy acknowledges that sex offenders are not "just" sex offenders. Indeed, many present general criminal risk behaviors that can be identified through empirically based risk/needs assessment instruments developed for the general offender population, and addressed through effective correctional interventions. In this way, intervention strategies should be both comprehensive and holistic.

Reentry: The vast majority of incarcerated sex offenders will ultimately return to the community. It is critical to be aware of and to develop strategies about how to respond to the unique dynamics and barriers that make reentry for sex offenders particularly challenging. For example, myths about sex offenders and victims, misconceptions about recidivism rates, claims that sex offender treatment is ineffective, and highly publicized cases involving predatory offenders fuel negative public sentiment and exacerbate concerns by policymakers and the public alike about the return of sex offenders to local communities. Furthermore, legislation that specifically targets the sex offender population – including longer minimum mandatory sentences for certain sex crimes, expanded registration and community notification policies, and the creation of "sex offender free" zones that restrict residency, employment, or travel within prescribed areas in many communities – can inadvertently but significantly hamper reintegration efforts. As a result, early reentry planning that acknowledges and addresses these challenges is essential. Ensuring that offenders nearing release are provided necessary risk reducing treatment, are linked to treatment services in the community, and are provided with other stabilizing supports (e.g., appropriate and sustainable housing and employment) is vital to successful offender reintegration. Institutional and community staff and treatment providers should coordinate closely both the services provided during the transition phase and the monitoring and supervision of sex offenders under conditional release in order to promote a seamless and safe return of sex offenders from prison to the community.

Supervision: Sex offender-specific supervision is a hallmark of contemporary sex offender management efforts. Specialized knowledge and training of staff facilitates: effective assessment and interviewing skills; supervision and field work practices; the development of sex offender-specific case plans with tailored conditions of supervision that enhance offender accountability, victim protection, and community safety; ongoing, individualized case management strategies; periodic reassessments of risk and continual monitoring of dynamic risk factors; and the appropriate use of ancillary supervision strategies as appropriate (e.g., polygraph, GPS monitoring) to promote risk management and public safety. Specialized caseloads, the use of team-based case management, appropriate

use of incentives, and proactive responses to non-compliance are also key. Because research has demonstrated that supervision – coupled with sex offender-specific treatment – can result in marked reductions in recidivism (Aos et al., 2006), an equal emphasis on both is advised. For this reason, community supervision officers, treatment providers, victim advocacy professionals, and others should work closely together in an ongoing fashion to monitor compliance and reinforce progress.

Registration and Notification:

Legislative/policy trends specific to sex offenders have become an increasingly central component of sex offender management. Sex offender registration and notification laws have been enacted in an effort to deter offenders from committing future crimes; to provide law enforcement with an additional investigative tool; and to increase public protection by alerting the public to the presence of sex offenders in their communities. In order to most effectively implement sex offender registration practices, jurisdictions should ensure that their policies and procedures detailing the registration process for offenders and the roles of the involved agencies are clear and consistent. Registration policies should encourage collaboration and coordination of efforts among all of the agencies involved in the registration process. Additionally, procedures that delineate a clear system for the collection and maintenance of thorough, accurate, and current information on registered sex offenders should be developed. Important considerations when implementing community notification strat-

egies include: incorporating multi-disciplinary public education efforts into notification practices in an effort to reduce unintended consequences (e.g., vigilantism, homelessness); providing information and resources to the community regarding sexual victimization; and encouraging the community to promote offender success as a way to increase public safety. Ultimately, it will be important for the effectiveness of these and other sex offender-specific laws and legislation to continue to be evaluated in order to assess their impact and effectiveness.

Special Considerations for Juvenile Offenders

While the fundamental principles and the management components outlined in the Comprehensive Approach can be applied to both adult and juvenile sex offenders and the professionals who serve them, there are several key practical implications for juveniles that should be noted. Most salient are the developmental differences between adults and juveniles, relatively low rates of sexual recidivism among juvenile sex offenders, increasing evidence suggesting that the majority of these youth are not likely to continue offending sexually as adults, the effectiveness of community-based treatment with this population, and concerns about collateral consequences associated with applying policies and legislation designed for adults to juveniles (Chaffin, 2006; Fanniff & Becker, 2006; Garfinkle, 2003; Hunter, Gilbertson, Vedros, & Morton, 2004; Letourneau & Miner, 2005; Reitzel & Carbonell, 2006). In

Statewide Policy Boards Advance a Comprehensive Approach to Sex Offender Management

Many states have recognized the value of establishing formal policy boards to inform the development of comprehensive sex offender management policies and practices. Many of these boards have been legislatively mandated and represent "...multi-disciplinary groups of sex offender treatment/management and victim advocacy stakeholders charged with providing standardization, regulation, and policy input/oversight (in order to) work collaboratively to develop empirically supported sex offender management public policy initiatives."

These boards provide an opportunity for stakeholders to collaboratively assess current practice, identify areas of advancement, and suggest strategies to enhance sex offender management practice in a deliberate and informed manner.

To date, six statewide boards have been formally established (California, Colorado, Illinois, New Mexico, Tennessee, and Texas). An additional 16 states have also formed boards to work on specific issues (such as community notification or establishing treatment standards for providers). Several others have developed informal boards that may be formalized in the future. Please visit www.csom.org for more information about statewide policy boards.

Source: Christopher Lobanov-Rostovsky, Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers (ATSA) Forum, Vol. XIV, No. 3, Summer 2007.

light of these factors, juvenile sex offender management systems should specifically include: developmentally appropriate treatment and supervision practices; the use of specialized assessment tools designed specifically for use with a juvenile population; outreach to and collaboration with a youth's family and school, as appropriate, in both treatment and supervision practices; and the development of policies, practices, and legislation that are tailored to meet the needs and risks of this unique population.

Conclusion

Sex offending is a multi-faceted and complex issue that can have a significant impact on victims and the community. To prevent further victimization, stakeholders across disciplines must appreciate the value of one another's roles and responsibilities as part of an overall/broader strategy. Building upon the efforts and insights of researchers and practitioners nationwide, the Comprehensive Approach provides a framework by which policy and practice can be integrated at the state and local level as a means of enhancing sex offender management efforts. Although a growing body of research and practice literature supports several of the tenets and components outlined within this model, additional research is needed. Such research will provide considerable benefits to the field by ensuring that policies and practices are well-informed, maximally effective, and offer the greatest potential to safeguard communities.

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-Madeline M. Carter, Director, Center for Sex Offender Management

For More Information

CSOM has developed a variety of policy and practice publications that address a range of issues related to sex offender management, including the key substantive areas discussed

throughout this document. CSOM has also developed several publications designed to assist jurisdictions in assessing their own sex offender management policies and practices; and a comprehensive curriculum on sex offender management that is available on the web. These documents, along with a number of other tools that have been developed by professionals in the field to aid communities in their efforts to more effectively manage sex offenders and reduce future victimization, can be found at www.csom.org.

Please contact us with specific questions at askcsom@cepp.com or:

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