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Allen County's judicial branch now has a new set of tools to assess the needs and risks of offenders, with the ultimate goal of reducing recidivism.

The Indiana Risk Assessment System (IRAS) and the Indiana Youth Assessment System (IYAS) each use a standardized questionnaire to help formulate assessments. Sentencing in Indiana is evidence-based; these new tools could be used to help make those decisions. Probation, corrections and all community-supervision agencies will use the system as well, according to Sheila Hudson, the executive director of Allen County Community Corrections.

The plan was recommended for use in Indiana in 2008 by the Judicial Center. It was first implemented in 2010.

Michelle Goodman, staff attorney for the Indiana Judicial Center, steered a task force of 30 representatives – from all branches of the judicial systems throughout the state – in designing the assessment tools. Their goal, Goodman said, was to keep departments from using different standards and replicating an assessment over and over again as an offender moves through the system.

Eric Zimmerman, chief adult probation officer in Allen County Adult Probation, said his department of 24 probation officers went through three days of training to learn how to administer the IRAS. The new process takes a little longer than the old system, but as they settle into it, they have been able to streamline the procedure.

“It's a slower process at the beginning,” Zimmerman said. “Officers do a full pre-trial investigation, looking for risk factors in the offender's environment that can be eliminated so they don't repeat.”

Zimmerman said the great thing about the IRAS is for the first time, all probation departments across the state use the same criteria to evaluate offenders and assess their risks of re-offending. Allen County had been using a risk-assessment tool for the past 20 years, but some counties in the state were using nothing at all. All of the data is collected in a statewide pool that can then be evaluated in the future.

Goodman says the first batch of compiled data should be ready no later than early next year. After looking over the data, the task force could then decide if they need to tweak the plan in some areas.

“Before we had some offenders who were over-monitored, and some that were under-monitored,” Zimmerman said. He believes the new system will eliminate this problem.

Hudson said the Task Force worked on designing the system for two years, with some committee members initially skeptical that a standardized system would work. As the number of people entering the prison system kept increasing, however, the task force realized something needed to be done.

Hudson said looking at the systems previously used across the state was like seeing two different worlds: Some judges still used systems backed with paperwork, while other counties were computerized. Few, if any, had a similar assessment plan.

“Each agency just started from scratch again with your assessment process, if you had one,” said Stan Pflueger, Allen County Community Corrections deputy director of operations.

The system Allen County Community Corrections is using, IRAS Domains, assesses seven different areas in an offender's life. They are then scored in each of these areas. How high they score determines how much time they will spend in the system, how much programming they will be given and how much staff supervision they will have. There are 16 different programs in the community-corrections system designed to help individuals institute a change in their behavior. Most of the clients they see are medium to high risk, and the program does mean more face-to-face time with corrections personnel for these individuals.

“Time is spent on enhancing our motivational techniques with clients, and motivational techniques are sent to explain the benefits to change,” said M. Javier Zaragoza, Program Division Coordinator for the Allen County Community Corrections.

Zaragoza also said they work on changing cognitive behavior, citing an example of a client who continually forgets to bring in paperwork for a meeting. Instead, they suggest the client put the paperwork next to their shoes so they remember to grab it after putting on the shoes.

Allen County Superior Court Judge John F. Surbeck, Jr., said he and the rest of the judges will be trained by the Allen County Community Corrections Department on the new assessment tool. The judges are currently not up to speed, but his understanding is they will be using the IRAS assessment tool during sentencing to decide if an offender would be better served if part of their sentence was suspended in favor of community programming.

In theory this could shorten the length of an offender's time in prison, and it is hoped the community-based programming will keep the offender from committing another crime. Surbeck said this new assessment tool will help target individuals and get them into the most effective program for their needs.

“This will be truly valuable when we all get up to speed,” Surbeck said.

Both the IRAS and IYAS were developed by the University of Cincinnati; the IYAS is similar but is designed for juveniles.