PURPOSE: There is a large body of correctional research stating cognitive-behavioral programming, effectively implemented, assists appropriately targeted offenders in strengthening interpersonal skills and competencies, and reducing recidivism.

POLICY: The department will utilize evidence based cognitive skills programming by referring offenders to be evaluated for participation in evidence based cognitive skills interventions as provided by corrections. These interventions are an integral part of our department's mission and goals. These interventions are focused on enhancing public safety, providing accountability, and developing competencies.

DEFINITION: Cognitive Skills – The ability to focus and give offenders the opportunity to model and practice certain social skills and problem solving skills that allow them to be more successful and reduce problems. Some specific social skills may include: active listening, responding to the feelings of others, responding to anger and dealing with an accusation. Some specific problem solving skills may include: stop and think, describe the problem, get information to set a goal, considering choices and consequences, action planning and evaluation.

Cognitive Restructuring – The ability to focus on an offender’s beliefs and thinking in order to replace ineffective beliefs and thinking with more effective ways; this in turn replacing anti-social values and morals with more pro-social values and morals. Some specific skills may include: self-regulation and self-management skills, social skills, problem solving skills and critical thinking/reasoning skills.

Evidence Based Practices (EBP) - correctional practices in which an agency systematically finds, appraises, and applies the most current and valid research findings as the basis for developing and implementing targeted interventions and programming proven to reduce recidivism.

PROCEDURE: The department will utilize evidence based cognitive skills programs that include the tenants defined above. Below are areas of programming the department will employ to meet the above-mentioned purpose:

Choosing a Curriculum: The department will choose evidence based curricula and designate appropriate resources to effectively implement and sustain the chosen curricula. Meta-analysis will be referred to in identifying programs that are proven to reduce recidivism. Other considerations are: curriculum foundation based upon Social Learning Theory and CBP, includes detailed written curriculum including modeling, role playing, skill practice and homework, targets specific behaviors and specific populations, emphasizes positive reinforcement and includes aftercare and evaluation components.

Agencies will want to consider several aspects of curriculum in addition to those mentioned above to determine which curricula can be implemented with fidelity in their specific jurisdictions. Some of these
are: open-ended versus closed-ended group structure, duration and frequency of author-recommended delivery.

**Designating Staff:** The department will train, select and designate staff to facilitate cognitive skills groups based on criteria indicated in EBP research to produce the greatest impact. Some essential cognitive skills facilitator qualities are: a demonstrated understanding of behavior change strategies (stages of change, motivational interviewing, social learning theory, cognitive behavioral change, etc), knowledge of group dynamics, ability to coach/teach offenders, well-developed communication skills, and the ability to challenge/confront without demeaning.

**Assessment and Referral Screening:** Risk/need assessment tools to identify overall level of risk and specific criminogenic needs areas must be completed to assess the offender’s appropriateness for CBP. Only those offenders assessed high risk and have needs in such areas should be referred to CBP:

- □ Impulsivity
- □ Lack of social perspective and victim empathy
- □ Poor interpersonal problem-solving skills
- □ Insufficiently concrete thinking
- □ Inadequate planning skills and
- □ Inability to set and achieve goals

Further assessment is recommended and can be achieved by conducting semi-structured interviews to screen for cognitive deficits; cognitive readiness tools; pre-test designed for specific curricula; use of motivational interviewing techniques, and assessment of “readiness for change” to determine offender’s motivations. Factors that must be considered are:

- □ Denial or minimization
- □ Interpersonal anxiety
- □ Cultural/ethnicity issues
- □ Gender issues
- □ Sexual orientation issues
- □ Communication barriers
- □ Low intelligence
- □ Learning disabled or brain injured

**Implementation:** Cognitive Behavioral Programming (CBP) interventions must be implemented as part of a total programming EBP approach, rather than viewed as a “magic bullet” or a singular solution to reducing recidivism.
Many factors go into successful CBP implementation, including identifying agency needs, assessing the costs of program and related materials, the training needs, quality assurance methods and related resource allocation.

Like any organizational change effort, installing a cognitive behavioral program will require considerable time, resources, investment and planning. Buy-in must come from all levels of the organization. Cognitive Behavioral Programming must be in alignment with the department’s vision, mission and values philosophy and/or statements. Stakeholders need to be educated about CBP so that they can support the agency’s efforts; specific effort should be directed at communicating the agency’s strategic plan for CBP implementation, soliciting participation and support from all agency levels.

Support and structure must to be provided to staff assessing/referral screening and/or facilitating groups. All staff needs to be trained on the basics, so that learning can be supported beyond the group setting. For example, Thinking Reports would be used throughout the agency or institution as a tool when an offender is expressing some issue or problematic behavior.

**Training:** It is essential to acknowledge that small group facilitation and cognitive behavioral theory are historically not basic to administrator or probation officer training or education. Effective cognitive skills training must include full participation in a formal training process of cognitive behavioral programming including an overview of cognitive behavioral interventions, cognitive theory and specific curriculum training.

Training models should be determined according to curriculum author recommendations; modifications to format, content, length/duration, etc should not be made without specific permission from the author or author’s designee. CBP curriculum training involves skill modeling and practice; identified trainers will have attended and successfully completed foundation training skills and author-determined training-for-trainers for identified curriculum. For both trainers and staff training to facilitate CBP curricula, participation in all portions of training are mandatory and planning should include appropriate task/duty coverage for all participants in order for successful trainee skill acquisition.

Each agency will identify initial and on-going CBP training goals according to position and factors that affect level of CBP involvement such as whether or not the staff will be participating in EBP strategic planning, facilitating CBP groups and/or supporting CBP interventions as part of their job duties. Training will be on-going in order to retain knowledge and skill; it is important to note that so-called “booster trainings” are not a substitute for initial CBP overview or specific curriculum training.

**Quality Assurance:** The agency will develop an infrastructure to support cognitive behavioral programming by connecting it to mission statement, comprehensive plans, job descriptions, performance reviews, etc. Provide training to the judicial bench, administrators, supervisors, probation officers and support staff on the content of the curricula and the connection to evidence based practices; encourage support and expand on the work done in programming.

The agency will identify a qualified coordinator to oversee programming implementation, assuring tools are accurately being used to appropriately target offenders, specialized programs are implemented for specific needs (gender, age, ethnicity, etc), facilitator selection criteria tools are used to select skilled facilitators, co-facilitation is consistently implemented and new facilitators are partnered with strong, experienced facilitators.
The agency will set up a support network between those who coordinate and over-see the program and the program facilitators. The network will meet regularly to discuss curriculum (ensuring avoidance of program “drift” and “tweaking”), implementation issues including selecting and administering a monitoring/evaluation tool to observe facilitators’ skills and provide feedback.

The agency will designate representatives to develop processes and protocol to ensure on-going special consideration will be taken if CBP is to be provided by an outside contractor and/or third party. All issues of referral targeting, training, implementation, quality assurance and outcome targets need to be attended to and communicated in a coordinated manner in order to maintain integrity and effectiveness of CBP. The agency will plan for and provide the appropriate time and resources necessary to ensure the tenets of EBP are met whether CBP is being implemented internally, externally or both.

Additionally a periodic review of cost/resource assessment will be crucial. Administrators and supervisors will work with the CBP network of staff to ensure that facilitators have ample time to prepare for, deliver and complete all appropriate follow-up, without being overwhelmed by other duties. On-going definition of assessment, training, quality assurance and the related resources available must be reviewed, re-defined and addressed periodically as part of the CBP implementation plan.

**Outcome Measurement:** In order to establish an effective implementation plan and maintain longer-term applications of cognitive behavioral programs in an agency, outcome measurement must be an essential component of the planning process. In other words, an agency should be prepared to address questions such as: Is this specific program working? Are offenders changing their thinking, feelings, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors? Is recidivism declining and public safety increasing due to offender participation in a given cognitive behavioral program or intervention?

*The following is a partial list of questions that should be considered and addressed, in order to pursue a comprehensive evaluation plan for a particular behavior change intervention (cognitive-behavioral program) used by a probation or corrections agency:*

1) What are the objectives and goals of a particular program or intervention, and how do these objectives fit with the agencies overall mission and goals?

2) Which offenders will be targeted for these interventions (i.e. higher-risk)?

3) How will these offenders be assessed and selected to participate in the appropriate program?

4) What assessment instruments do we know of, and which will we use (pre and post testing)?

5) Which programs will we evaluate and how will evaluation results be reported and acted upon?

6) How can we identify and utilize appropriate control groups (similar/random)?

7) What length of time is most appropriate for the evaluation process (months/years)?

8) Who would serve well as an objective program evaluator?

9) What do we want to measure, in addition to recidivism rates?

10) What are the benefits of quantitative versus qualitative data (both may provide helpful program information)? Which areas will be of primary focus by the agencies evaluators?
Possible behavior change-focused measurement areas for cognitive behavioral programs may include:

a) Acquisition of new and specific skill sets (i.e. problem solving, social skills, effective communication, anger management, etc.)

b) Measurement of risk level reductions (i.e. LSI-R or YLS-CMI scores)

c) Recidivism rate reductions (i.e. types of crimes and severity levels)

d) Documented reports of increased positive behaviors (i.e. at home from family members, at work, in school, in the community, in a facility, and self-reports by the offenders)

In summary, it is also prudent to compare measurement outcomes with other jurisdictions and agencies that are implementing similar interventions, to elicit assistance of professional evaluators and researchers when possible, and strive to secure resources for outcome measurement and evaluation.

This document is designed by the Minnesota Cognitive Behavioral Network to be a general policy template for corrections agencies developing or implementing cognitive behavioral programming. If you have questions or would like further information, please visit our website at: