



*The 8 Evidence-Based Principles: #5 Positive Reinforcement*

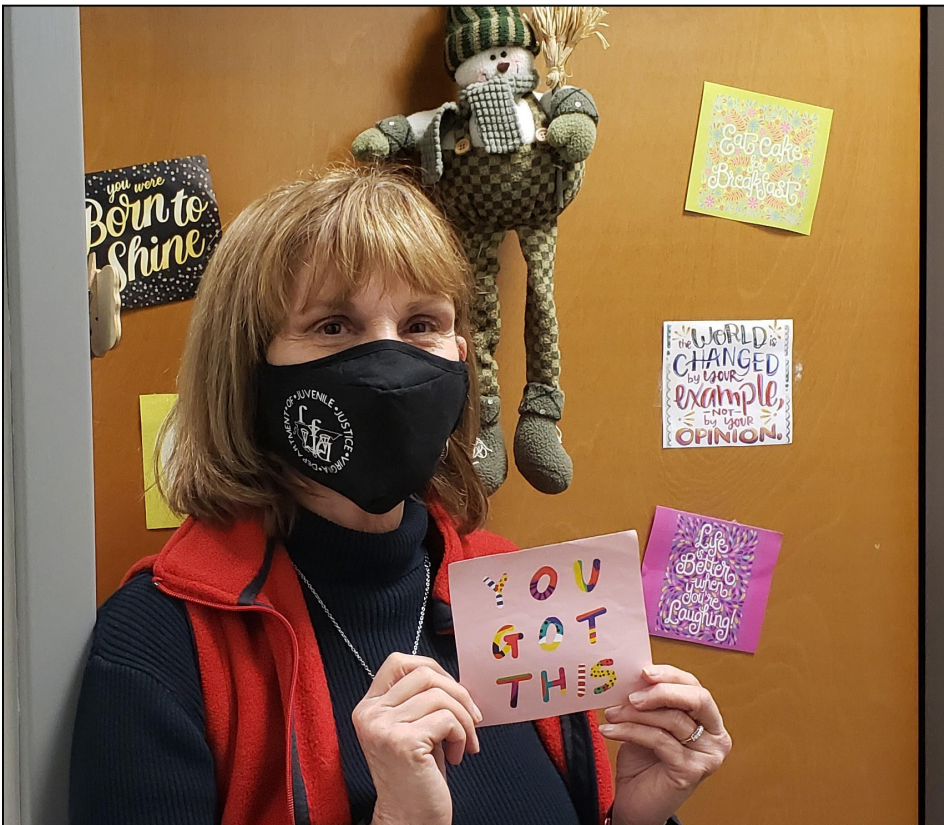
## More Rewards = Better Behavior

By **STEPHANIE GREEN**  
*Practice Improvement Supervisor*

Most of you have probably heard the old adage, “You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.” In other words, a little politeness and a positive attitude go a long way—much further than being rude or negative.

This same adage may be used when working with our youth. A positive attitude, positive reinforcement, or praise for a job well done will often get you much further than punishment alone or a “do it because I said so” demeanor.

The fifth principle of the eight evidence-based principles speaks of the benefits of positive reinforcement. With the adoption of EPICS as DJJ’s model of intervention, we



CSU 22–Rocky Mount Probation Officer Regina Davis designs post cards with affirming, supportive messages that she gives to youth she works with (see story, page 5).

Types of Reinforcers:	Examples:
Tangible Reinforcers: Items we can see, touch, or taste	Clothing, Books, Movie Tickets, Bus Tickets, Food
Token Reinforcers: Symbolic, can be exchanged for something else	Money, Awards, Certificates, Points
Activity-Based Reinforcers: Extra time to engage in activity	Watching TV, Playing Sports, Playing Computer Games
Social Praise Reinforcers: Limitless, Immediate, Free	Acknowledgement, Attention, Approval, “Good Job”

understand the importance of using appropriate responses to behavior including positive reinforcement, incentives, constructive feedback, and sanctions. We know that ultimately, the desire to change must be internalized to affect a long lasting positive behavior change. As a start, positive reinforcement goes a long way.

While increasing positive reinforcement for positive behaviors should not be done at the expense of, or undermine responses to, unacceptable behavior, we know that youth will tend to comply in the direction of the most rewards and fewest punishments. In fact, the ratio of four positives to one negative (the “4:1 ratio”) is the tipping point of promoting behavior change and is a start to increasing motivation to change. The beauty of positive reinforcement is that it can be applied randomly and still be effective.

The systematic use of reinforcement can

be a powerful tool to strengthen or teach new behavior. Positive reinforcement should be used when our clients exhibit a behavior that we want to see repeated. There are two types of reinforcement. One type is giving youth a tangible incentive to encourage the youth to engage and repeat positive behaviors. Another form is rewarding incentives to encourage youth to replace antisocial behavior with prosocial behaviors.

During our EPICS training, we learned the importance of using the behavioral practice of “effective reinforcement” when giving reinforcers. We must be intentional about helping young people celebrate their successes and connecting their small incremental gains to their personal goals. Effective reinforcement and an appropriate reinforcer can often be useful for beginning the process of behavioral change. Have you used Effective Reinforcement today?

## *Ratio Leaders Tell How They Do It*

**CENTRAL  
REGION**

**CSU 24—Lynchburg Incentives Ratio: 6:1**



*Youths who meet with CSU 24 Probation Officer Ashton Nolen never leave her office feeling defeated.*

**By NATASHA CHEEK**

*Supervisor, CSU 15—Fredericksburg*

CSU 24—Lynchburg’s transformation team began its incentives program by sending flyers explaining the program to local colleges, businesses, and restaurants. Several businesses donated gift cards and other items that could be used as incentives for youth. Staff also use certificates of recognition, extension of curfew, and verbal praise to encourage positive behavior changes.

“Verbal praise is an important incentive for youth because some clients don’t get it from their peers or family members,” says Probation Officer Ashton Nolen. “It builds kids up. I think it has the biggest impact.” Nolen ensures that she ends her probation appointments on a positive note: She allows clients to take items from her “incentives jar” after they have stated three positive things that are happening in their lives and one goal that they can reach by the next appointment. “It’s very important to me that my clients not leave my office feeling defeated,” Nolen says.

She also points out that incentives can take the form of rewards for positive behaviors the youth performs on his own. Ashton recalls a time when a youth was having issues with attending school as required. When the youth did return to school, there was an incident where the teacher was choking and the youth performed the Heimlich maneuver in front of the class to help the teacher. "This was a big deal for the youth because the juvenile is a very shy kid," Nolen says. "In response to this very

positive behavior while attending school, we gave him and his parents movie passes so they could spend time together."

CSU 24 Director Stephanie Meehan ensures that the use of incentives remains consistent, and probation officers provide the required documentation. "I always remind staff that incentives are only one of the eight evidence-based principles of effective intervention," Meehan says. "But they also are one of the easiest ways we can support our youth."

## SOUTHERN REGION

## CSU 12–Chesterfield Incentives Ratio: 6:1

By **WILLIAM STANLEY**  
*Director, CSU 12–Chesterfield*

Understanding how incentives work and the major role they play in the lives of youth and their families is key to a successful program, and is the reason we were able to lead the Southern Region in "incentive to sanction ratio" last year. Our probation and parole violations have decreased greatly over the past year as a direct result of staff and their focus upon the good things the youth and family does versus the small amount of negative things that take place while supervising clients.

Many believe incentives can only be monetary, but that is definitely untrue. An incentive is a "thing that motivates or encourages one to do something." Here in the Chesterfield area, we are encouraging our youth to maintain good behavior in the community with things other than money. Kids love gift cards from places like Chipotle, McDonald's and Chick-Fil-A, when they're available. We've also used extended curfews, permitting youth to obtain their operator's license, and releasing youth from previous sanctions if they have



*CSU 12 Probation Officer Christen Cox displays the "Kids Incentives" box. It can contain a variety of items ranging from gift cards, movie passes or sweet treats.*

made adequate progress. Staff sometimes provide transportation to mental health appointments, job interviews, and school appointments. This was done as an incentive for the client's progress on supervision.

In keeping with EPICS practice, our staff also provides verbal incentives for each client at each meeting. Thanking a client for arriving to a meeting on time, dressing appropriately for their meeting, completing EPICS homework, applying for a job, going to school every day are just some of the ways in which we orally "incentivize" our clients

to continue their appropriate behaviors and attitudes. These create an environment where staff members focus on the positive things a youth has done versus the small amount of negative actions. Our efforts have proven very successful in helping our youth comply with supervision rules, fulfill supervision plan objectives, and remain in the community.

I am proud of all our staff members for their roles in making this happen and staying true to DJJ's values and mission.

**By KIMBERLY JENNINGS**  
*Director, CSU 5—Suffolk*

The majority of youth served by CSU 4–Norfolk, DJJ’s largest, are between the ages of 14 and 16 and are brought to the court’s attention mainly for assault, larceny and weapons-related charges. CSU 4 is well known for providing innovative services and programs to court-involved youth. While I was in college, I did an internship with CSU 4 in 1995-96. During that time, the CSU was doing a good job of incentivizing youth through the use of positive reinforcement. Fast forward 25 years, and they are still on the leaderboard with a 5:1 ratio of incentives to sanctions.

CSU 4 Director Theresa McBride says the bulk of their incentives are verbal praise, but they also have been able to provide more tangible incentives like gift cards, backpacks, baby items, candy bars, certificates, etc. These are given when the youths are successful in areas ranging from obtaining their GED, graduating from the CSU’s Gang Intervention Program, being home for curfew checks, keeping appointments, or making progress in their identified behavioral risk areas. Before COVID-19, probation officers and youth were going to movies and engaging in other activities together. POs obtain youth buy-in by asking them, “What incentives would you like?” and



*Above, from left: Probation Officer Jerry Smith, Diagnostic Supervisor Deyonta Johnson and CSU 4 Director Theresa McBride display some of the incentives they use. Left: Gift cards and backpacks are among “tangible” rewards when they can get them. Right: Incentives work, no matter how small: Staff always keeps a supply handy.*



try, when possible, to provide the youth with incentives that they want.

Funding is always the major hurdle to providing tangible rewards. CSU 4 has entered into a joint venture with the judges and clerk of courts to share the money from the vending machines. Staff who want to provide youth a very specific incentive can make a request for funding as well.

McBride admits she sets a high bar of expectation for the incentives program. She requires staff to document all rewards, and reviews cases

where youth on supervision receive violations or serious charge to find what incentives, if any, were given leading up to the violation.

To encourage staff who have done a good job of incentivizing youth, McBride recognizes staff/unit(s) who have the highest incentive rates over time. “We also must recognize that, because our employees are the caring people they are, they not only give their intellectual talents to the young people they work with, but they also give from their own pockets,” she says.

**By KEVIN HELLER***Probation Supervisor, CSU 27–Pulaski*

Incentivizing the pro-social behavior of youth supervised by CSU 22–Rocky Mount is prioritized through monitoring, reporting, staff creativity, and community partnerships. Director Joyce Green together with her management team, probation supervisors Rachelle Moore and Dawn Loving, have created a system of accountability for ensuring the use of incentives with youth. Probation staff monitor the use of incentives and provide monthly reports to the probation supervisors, who provide the reports to the director. The CSU staff review and discuss monthly report data. This process keeps staff at all levels mindful of the use of incentives and the proper coding of incentives in BADGE. The management team also models this practice in their daily work, providing a supportive and encouraging atmosphere in the District offices. Supervisors recognize staff successes during team meetings and staff members engage in discussion to affirm good work and uplift each other.

CSU 22 has two valuable partnerships with community partners. The vendor that owns the snack vending machines in the CSU's administration building donates surplus snacks to the CSU. Youth receive these tasty treats in recognition of achievements. Another community partner is Cardinal Village, a community youth center run by Constance Covington. Cardinal Village often conducts weekly community giveaways. Ms. Covington ensures the CSU receives items from these giveaways to include food items, clothing, hygiene products, and school supplies. There are special giveaways during certain holidays to include turkeys and holiday meals. Youth often satisfy court obligations by completing community service assignments through Cardinal Village. The CSU and the youth center maintain a mutually beneficial partnership throughout the year.

Understanding that praise and recognition is often in short supply for the youth they work



*CSU 22 Probation Officer Mellisa Brumfield with the vending machine from which unsold items are used for incentives.*

with, CSU 22 staff consistently find creative ways to recognize youth on their caseloads. Office Services Specialists often prepare individual certificates of achievement given to youth for successful release from supervision, completion of community service work, positive academic performance, and other positive responses to supervision. Probation Officer Regina Davis designs postcards containing affirmations and encouraging words of support for the youth under her supervision.

“We all seek positive regard,” Director Green says. “Small gestures really seem to mean something to our youth.”

**By VINCE BUTAITIS**

*Director, CSU 15–Fredericksburg*

The Alexandria Court Service Unit focused on increasing their use of positive reinforcement in their supervision practices. An Incentive Committee was formed of probation staff who received instructions to increase use of positive reinforcements to achieve the goal of 4:1 incentive to sanction ratio.

Valeria Antelo, Andrea Revilla, Lisa Vega and Katy Capsalis, committee members, start with the fundamental belief that youth under supervision are just like CSU staff. Committee members recognize that youths want to come to an office where interactions are positive and uplifting, they are recognized for what they are doing well and focused on achieving commonly shared goals.

The committee researched the subject and conducted a review of current practices within the CSU. The findings were that CSU practices have to be more clear on what accomplishments should be recognized, develop a tier system to increase consistency of incentives provided and to increase emphasis on documentation.

The committee’s signature event was a recognition luncheon for probationers. Each staff was allowed to nominate a high-achieving youth to be recognized at the event. Selected probationers were allowed to invite their “support group” which included parents, family members and counselors. Invitees received pizza and quality time to connect with their probation officer, as well as



*CSU 18 Probation Officer/Intake Officer Luke Daniele displays Subway and Taco Bell gift cards, among some of the incentives used in Alexandria’s incentive program.*

certificates of achievement and gift certificates. The probation staff received the biggest reward of all: They were able to see the joy on the faces of their high achieving youth.

CSU 18 increased its use of positive reinforcement by 131% from 2019 to 2020, achieving an incentive ratio of 4:1 in 2020.



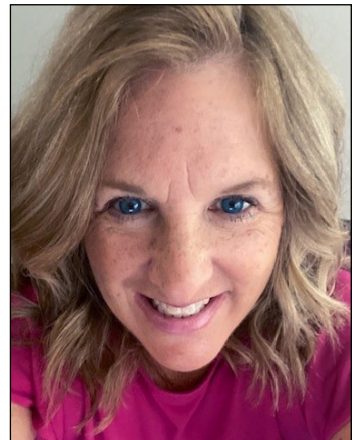
*Valeria Antelo*



*Katy Capsalis*



*Andrea Revilla*



*Lisa Vega*