



FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE
A Process Evaluation of Specialized
Substance Abuse Supervision in Nebraska

A final report prepared by the Vera Institute of
Justice for the Nebraska Community Corrections
Council

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Executive Summary

In 2000, after decades of enacting mandatory minimum sentences and limiting early releases from prison, Nebraska faced its second prison population crisis in a decade. State leaders recognized the need for a new approach to control prison growth, while at the same time maintaining public safety and holding offenders accountable. In 2003, the Legislature created a new state entity—the Community Corrections Council—which was charged with creating a community corrections infrastructure for Nebraska. To date, the Council has supported the development of a number of community corrections options for nonviolent offenders. Most significant among these efforts is Specialized Substance Abuse Supervision (SSAS), an evidence-based supervision program for prison-bound felony drug offenders and early-release parolees that combines treatment with services that address other types of needs. SSAS was piloted by the Office of Probation Administration (OPA) in five sites in 2006 with the explicit goal of expanding statewide to reduce growth in the state’s prison population.

To facilitate a data-driven approach for moving forward, the Vera Institute of Justice conducted a process evaluation of the five pilot SSAS sites to explore the fidelity of program implementation and to better understand factors that influenced program implementation. The goal of this evaluation is to provide feedback to the Council and OPA on both of these questions that can be used to further develop the statewide implementation model. This process evaluation is also an essential pre-cursor to a proper outcome evaluation of SSAS. Without a process evaluation, it will be difficult to determine if changes in outcomes such as recidivism are due to the program itself or the way it has been implemented. This report summarizes our findings and recommendations. In brief, our findings include the following:

- Participants were invested in the SSAS program and felt a strong sense of collaboration with other partners.
- Despite this support, participants felt that implementation could be enhanced in a number of ways.
- Analysis of administrative data suggests that selected eligibility criteria are being implemented consistently; however, many people involved in the administration of SSAS think these criteria should be revised—in particular the criterion related to crime of conviction.
- Probation and parole staff expressed a desire for clear and direct communication of procedures, policies, practices, and performance measures. This includes communication between administration and field officers and among field officers and staff who work in different areas of the state.
- Probation staff have difficulty using the agency’s electronic case management system and other data collection tools and expressed concerns about the accuracy of data in the system.

- Services are widely available to meet most client needs, although mental health and transportation needs remain prevalent.

Based on these findings, we recommend the following:

- Enhance the collaboration that already exists between administrators, field officers, and program staff by bringing invested parties together more frequently for exchange of ideas and discussion of best practices in supervision and service delivery.
- Outline policies, procedures, and performance expectations in writing for probation and parole officers.
- Explore options for expanding resources and services to meet additional client needs including mental health treatment, transportation services, and the formation of an alumni network for program graduates who seek further support.
- Develop training procedures and other informational materials for SSAS officers and judges to enhance their knowledge of SSAS.
- Revisit the eligibility criteria for SSAS—and in particular, the conviction criterion—to assess the impact on excluding individuals who have drug-related criminogenic needs and could benefit from the program.
- Explore options for making Probation’s electronic case management system and other data collection instruments more user-friendly.

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Introduction

For nearly a decade, officials in Nebraska have been developing a community corrections infrastructure to alleviate persistent prison population pressures while preserving public safety. In 2003, the Legislature enacted the Community Corrections Act, which, among other things, established the Community Corrections Council (Council) as the entity responsible for overseeing the development and advancement of community corrections for the state. With the support of the Council, the Office of Probation Administration (OPA) has taken the lead in implementing several new community corrections programs. Most significant among these efforts is the Specialized Substance Abuse Supervision (SSAS) program, an evidence-based supervision program for prison-bound felony drug offenders and early-release parolees that seeks to break the relationship between substance abuse and crime through treatment, cognitive-behavioral treatment, and intensive monitoring by specially trained probation officers. SSAS was piloted in five sites serving eight counties in 2006 with the explicit goal of expanding statewide to reduce growth in the prison population.¹

To facilitate a data-driven approach for moving forward, the Community Corrections Council requested that the Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) conduct a process evaluation of the five pilot SSAS sites to explore the fidelity of program implementation and to better understand factors that influenced program implementation. The goal of this evaluation is to provide feedback to the Council and OPA on both of these questions that can be used to enhance the statewide implementation model. This process evaluation is also an essential pre-cursor to a proper outcome evaluation of SSAS. Without a process evaluation, it will be difficult to determine if changes in outcomes such as recidivism are due to the program itself or the way it has been implemented. The evaluation focuses on five main questions related to the implementation of SSAS:

- To what extent were procedures implemented as intended?
- Was implementation of these procedures consistent across sites?
- What have been the biggest successes and challenges of implementation?
- How do different agencies and partners work together to supervise and provide services to SSAS clients?
- What occurs at each of the different stages of SSAS supervision?

We explored each of these questions as they relate to six stages of the program—sentencing/referrals, supervision, treatment provision, service provision at day-evening reporting centers (DRCs), violations/sanctions, and program completion/transition.

¹ These counties include Douglas, Lancaster, Sarpy, Cass, Otoe, Buffalo, Dawson, and Dakota. Cass and Otoe Counties each have their own reporting center for SSAS services but are considered to be one site because funding is split between the two. The same situation exists for Buffalo and Dawson Counties.

This report begins with an overview of the SSAS program, followed by a brief discussion of the methodologies used in this evaluation. The next two sections present findings from quantitative and qualitative analyses, and the report concludes with recommendations for continuation and statewide implementation.

Background: Specialized Substance Abuse Supervision

Specialized Substance Abuse Supervision (SSAS) is an evidence-based supervision program for otherwise prison-bound felony drug or DUI offenders and early-release parolees. It combines drug treatment with services that address other types of needs (e.g. educational, vocational and behavioral). On the front end, people are sentenced to SSAS as part of their probation supervision, while parolees are given the option of enrolling in SSAS as a condition of early release.

The SSAS referral process has two steps. First, cases are screened pre-sentence for basic SSAS eligibility by a referring probation officer. If a person meets the eligibility criteria, he or she is then screened for suitability by a SSAS probation officer. To be considered suitable, a person must be in a contemplative state of change (i.e., the idea that change has been triggered) in one or more criminogenic needs, show antisocial patterns, have a need for drug or alcohol treatment, have no diagnosis of mental illness, or if mentally ill, be in appropriate treatment, and be serving at least an 18-month probation term.² Once the two-step screen has been completed, the results are submitted as part of the pre-sentence investigation (PSI) report for the judge's consideration at sentencing. Parole cases go through a similar eligibility and suitability screening process; referring parole officers conduct a basic eligibility screen, and then they conduct the suitability screen.

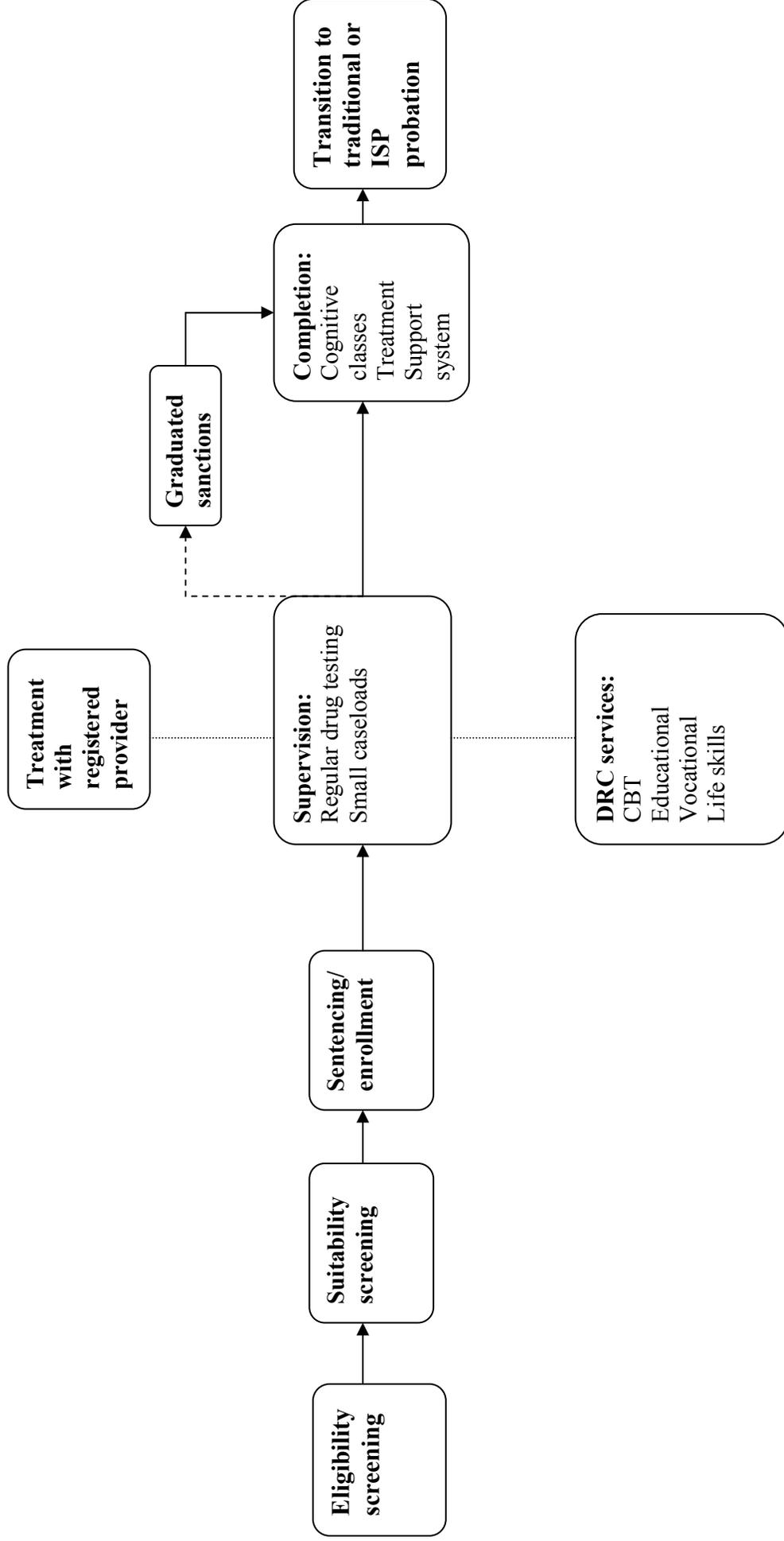
SSAS parolees and probationers are supervised by SSAS officers, who manage cases and plan treatment programs. Parolees continue to have a parole officer who oversees his or her case in coordination with the SSAS supervisor. Services are delivered at DRCs with cognitive behavioral treatment as a core component along with vocational, educational, and drug or alcohol treatment services. DRC coordinators manage the provision of services and work collaboratively with SSAS officers to supervise SSAS parolees and probationers.

Clients stay in the program until they meet completion requirements, which include a 22-week cognitive-behavioral program and substance abuse treatment and the establishment of a community support system. Once completion requirements are met, individuals serve the rest of their sentences on traditional or intensive supervision. Clients who fail to meet the conditions of supervision (e.g., do not comply with their treatment plan) face graduated sanctions in response to violations (as opposed to new convictions) and the potential return to prison.

Figure 1 presents a flowchart of the SSAS supervision stages. For more detailed information on the components of each stage, refer to Appendix 1.

² Criminogenic needs are factors underlying criminal behavior that can be addressed and/or improved through targeted programming. One example is substance abuse; another is antisocial attitudes.

Figure 1: SSAS supervision stages



Methodology

The methodology for this study included both quantitative and qualitative techniques, as well as a review of SSAS policies and procedures. We employed this approach to explore both processes and outputs related to implementation and to ensure that the specific areas of exploration were directly informed by the elements of supervision outlined in the Office of Probation Administration's (OPA) policies.

Policy review

Vera staff first built an understanding of how SSAS was intended to function through a thorough review of all policies, procedures, and instruments related to the supervision program. OPA provided information on screening procedures, relapse policies, case management components, and caseload standards, in addition to copies of screening instruments and administrative forms. This information was then used to develop research questions about specific elements of the SSAS program.

Administrative data analysis

To explore the fidelity of program implementation, we analyzed administrative data on SSAS probation clients.³ Individual-level information was extracted from OPA's case management system, the Nebraska Probation Information Management System (NPMIS). NPMIS contains data on all probation cases and includes information on demographics, crime of conviction, assessments, drug testing, violations, and sanctions, among other things. The individual-level analysis is based on all individuals on SSAS supervision on or after October 1, 2007, a total of 352 individuals.⁴ To explore the frequency with which different services and programs are used by probationers and parolees, we also analyzed aggregate data from the DRCs. Because DRC reporting forms were introduced in late 2008, we were only able to analyze data from January 2009.

Vera staff explored how different elements of the sentencing and supervision process are practiced on the ground in a descriptive analysis. Our analysis focused on three areas of implementation: sentencing and eligibility criteria; DRC services and programs; and sanctions and revocations. Because this analysis is based only on a sample of individuals on SSAS beginning October 1, 2007, the patterns are not necessarily generalizable to all SSAS clients; however, given reasonably accurate data, they are representative of SSAS clients and processes during the study period.

³ We had also planned on using administrative data from the Parole Administration, but ultimately decided against it for two reasons: 1) Parole's database is more limited than Nebraska Probation Information Management System and would not provide us with much comparable information on parole clients in SSAS. 2) The number of parole clients is so small that a separate analysis on them would yield very little useful information at the aggregate level.

⁴ Data prior to October 1, 2007, were excluded due to concerns about quality.

Qualitative analysis

Because this evaluation focuses on the implementation *process*, we relied most heavily on qualitative data collected in interviews and focus groups with individuals who deliver and receive SSAS supervision and services. In these interviews and focus groups, we asked questions about how different elements of SSAS are practiced across sites, the nature of collaboration between involved parties, the elements of the program that have been easiest to implement, and the biggest successes and challenges that exist in following SSAS procedures and policies, among other things. Data for the qualitative analysis were collected during two trips to Nebraska in December 2008 and January 2009 and through phone interviews conducted between January and March 2009.

Vera staff convened focus groups with referring officers, SSAS officers, parole officers, DRC coordinators, and service providers. We conducted one-on-one interviews with a sample of district and drug court judges in Lincoln and Omaha. We also conducted phone interviews with an additional sample of judges, a sample of SSAS clients, and a group of DRC coordinators who were unable to participate in the in-person focus group.⁵ Each focus group contained up to seven participants. A summary of participants by group appears in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Interview and focus group participants

Group	Type of interview	Number of participants
Judges	One-on-one, in person and on phone	9
SSAS officers	2 focus groups	9 total
DRC coordinators	2 focus groups (one by phone)	4
Parole officers	1 focus group	6
Referring officers (Probation and Parole)	1 focus group	1 probation officer 4 parole officers
Service providers	1 focus group	4
SSAS clients	One-on-one phone interviews by phone	9 (8 probation, 1 parole)

Participants were selected using two different sampling approaches. For SSAS officers and DRC coordinators, we attempted to include as many individuals in the study as possible. Both of these

⁵ Originally, Vera staff planned to conduct in-person interviews with SSAS clients during the second trip to Nebraska. We were unable to do so, however, because we did not yet have access to the list of SSAS clients at the time of the trip. As an alternative, we conducted phone interviews with selected clients upon return to New York.

Originally, we planned to interview treatment providers as well; however, after conducting the first set of focus groups with probation and parole officers it became clear that treatment services do not fall under the umbrella of SSAS policies and procedures in the same way as other elements of the program. While OPA has outlined expectations for contacts between providers and officers, the treatment approach is decided by the individual provider. Because of the largely independent role of treatment providers in the administration of SSAS, it seemed that any information they provided in interviews would be only minimally useful for informing *Probation* policies and procedures. As a result, a decision was made not to interview them.

roles are significant in the delivery of SSAS, and there were not enough people in either group to select a random sample (13 SSAS officers and 5 coordinators). Service providers, referring officers, parole officers, judges, and clients were selected randomly using a multi-stage sampling frame that allowed for representation from different SSAS sites, different Department of Correctional Services regions in the case of parole officers, and individuals on probation and parole.

During focus groups and interviews, Vera staff tried to capture as much of the participants' perspectives as possible through detailed note-taking and observation. We also recorded in-person interviews and focus groups with participants' permission.

Qualitative data were analyzed for content, and overarching themes were identified by synthesizing findings across interviews and focus groups. Vera staff paid particular attention to analyzing commonalities and differences in the successes and challenges of practicing SSAS across the five sites and supervising probation clients compared to parole clients.

Administrative data analysis of SSAS probation clients

This section presents findings from the administrative data analysis. The purpose of this analysis was to explore the fidelity with which selected elements of the program were implemented across the five pilot sites, with an emphasis on three areas:⁶

- Sentencing and eligibility criteria
- Sanctions and revocations
- DRC programs and services

These areas were chosen based on the measures available in NPMIS to test implementation. Results presented in this section are based on data elements believed to have the highest degree of accuracy; for data elements in which concerns were expressed, this is noted in the report.⁷ Vera staff worked with data analysts in OPA in the collection, analysis, and interpretation of NPMIS data for this analysis.

Broadly, the analysis revealed that some measurable eligibility criteria are being implemented with high fidelity across the clients in this sample. Consistent with SSAS policies, approximately three-quarters of the sample scored in the moderate-high range on the Simple Screening Instrument (SSI), and the large majority of clients were convicted of at least one felony-offense involving drugs or alcohol. Of the small proportion who were not convicted of a felony offense involving drugs or alcohol, most had either a misdemeanor conviction or an aggravating factor linked to substance abuse.

The implementation of other program elements is more difficult to assess due to data limitations, but the data show that probationers and parolees visit DRCs most often for cognitive-behavioral treatment, GED classes, or drug testing—all core components of SSAS. The analysis did not provide any definitive conclusions on the use of graduated sanctions.

These findings are discussed in more detail in the remainder of this section.

Officers are using eligibility criteria related to substance use screening and crime of conviction with high fidelity among this sample.

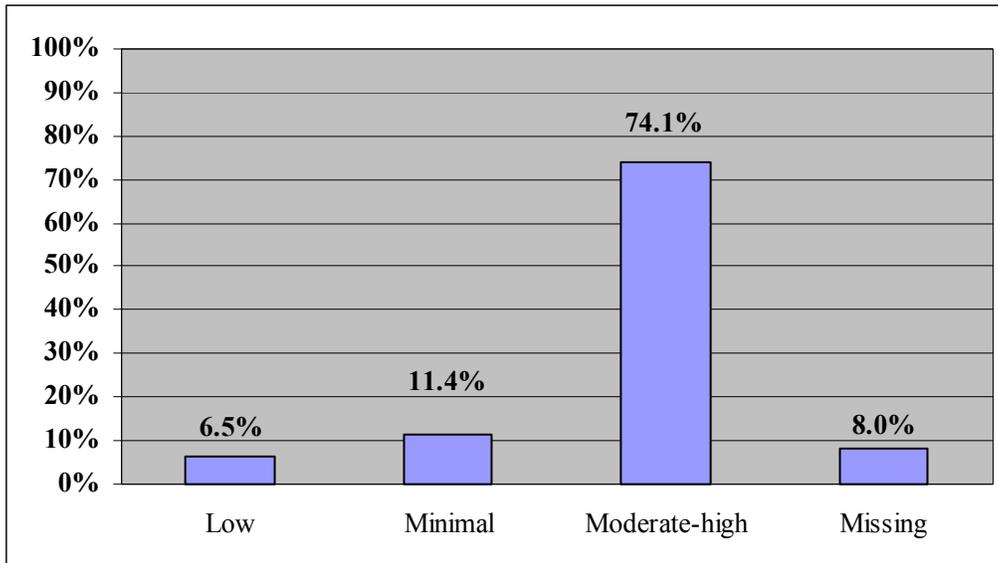
SSAS policies specify that the SSI, a substance abuse screening instrument, must be administered as part of eligibility screening, and individuals must score in the moderate to high range (four or higher) to be eligible for the program. Our analysis revealed that both of these

⁶ We also analyzed background characteristics and some preliminary outcomes for the sample of SSAS clients. The findings of those analyses are presented in Appendices 2 and 3.

⁷ This analysis excludes any data determined to be so unreliable that it would not provide any meaningful information to readers. For example, OPA expressed concerns about the quality of program end dates, so we did not include any findings related to length of time in the SSAS program. We opted to leave other data in the analysis with qualifications, however, if we knew the data tended to be biased in one way or another. For example, OPA was concerned that officers underreport sanctions, so we left that analysis in the report, with the caveat that our numbers likely underrepresent the prevalence of sanctions among the study sample.

policies were implemented consistently by the officers for this sample of clients. Only 8 percent of the sample was missing an SSI score, which suggests that officers are conducting these assessments as a regular part of the screening process. We also found that the majority of SSAS probation clients have moderate to high scores on the SSI.⁸ As shown in Figure 3, almost 75 percent of the sample falls into this range.

Figure 3: SSAS probation clients by SSI scores



Crime of conviction is among the most important criteria related to SSAS eligibility. The program is intended to target individuals convicted of felony drug or DUI offenses, and this is largely reflected in sentencing practices during the last year. Eighty-four percent of the sample had at least one felony substance abuse charge associated with their conviction. Of the 16 percent who did not, 5 percent were convicted of a misdemeanor substance abuse charge, and most of the remaining 11 percent had at least one aggravating factor linked to substance use or delivery.

These trends are further reinforced upon examination of specific convictions among the sample. Figure 4 presents the ten most prevalent conviction charges associated with sentences to SSAS.⁹ Nine of the ten charges are drug- or alcohol-related (the exception being criminal attempt,¹⁰ which accounts for 6.5 percent of the sample), and the most common conviction charge is possession of amphetamines, which is accounts for 24.7 percent of the individuals in the sample. Convictions for possession with intent to deliver and possession of a pharmaceutical

⁸ SSI scores range from 0 to 14. A score of 0-1 indicates no to low risk; 2-3 minimal risk; 4 or more moderate to high risk

⁹ For individuals who had multiple charges associated with their convictions, we used the most serious conviction charge in this analysis. Most serious charge, in turn, was defined using offense classification (felony 1, felony 2, etc.). Finally, if an individual had multiple charges of the same classification, we prioritized substance use offenses over other types of offenses.

¹⁰ Many of the cases where criminal attempt was the most serious conviction charge did not have a second charge associated with it.

controlled substance are also prevalent, accounting for 15.6 percent and 15.3 percent of the sample, respectively. These same patterns emerge when all conviction charges are analyzed.

Figure 4: Top 10 conviction charges among SSAS probation clients

Charge	Number	Percentage
Amphetamine--possession	87	24.7
Possession with intent to deliver	55	15.6
Pharmaceutical controlled substance--possession	54	15.3
Criminal attempt	23	6.5
Amphetamine--possession with intent	21	6.0
Driving under the influence of liquor	20	5.7
Cocaine--possession	18	5.1
Marijuana--selling	13	3.7
Cocaine--possession--with intent	7	2.0
Marijuana--possession--more than 1 lb.	7	2.0

Consistent with the identified core components of SSAS, the most prevalent programming and service visits to DRCs are for moral reconnection therapy (MRT), GED classes, and drug testing.

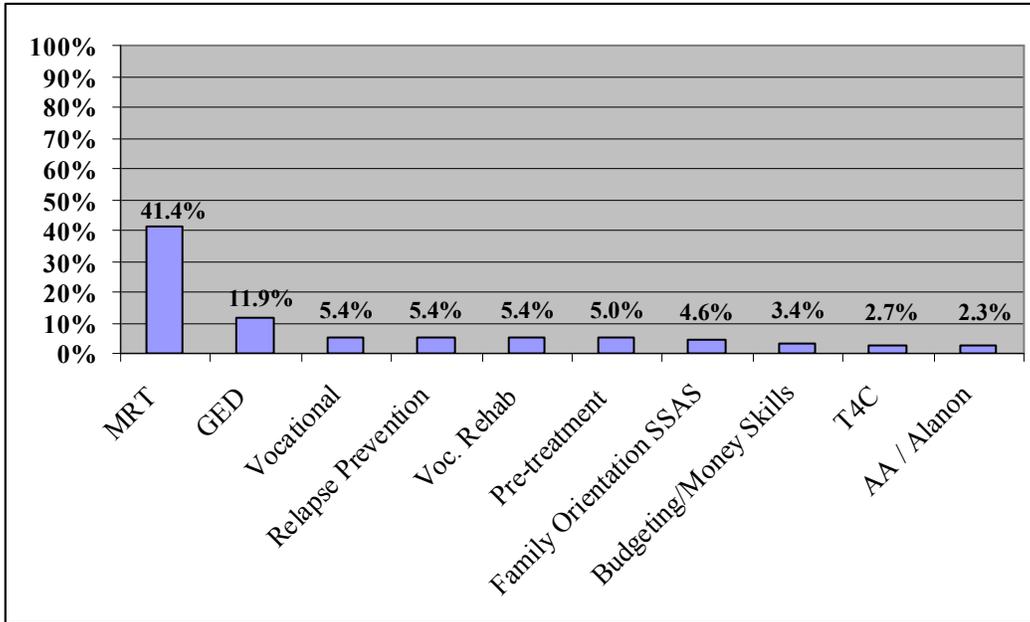
Aggregate-level data on day-reporting center contacts were used to explore the frequency at which different services and programs were utilized. Because the reporting system for DRCs is relatively new, only data for the month of January 2009 could be obtained. As a result, it was not possible to identify trends in service utilization over time.

In total, there were 1,555 visits to DRCs by SSAS clients in January 2009: 261 to participate in programming that addresses particular needs, and an additional 1,294 visits to participate in services that do not directly address underlying criminogenic needs, such as drug testing or child care.¹¹ Of greater relevance is a breakdown of visits by type of service or program received, which is depicted in Figures 5 and 6 (separate charts are presented for services and programs). Figure 5 presents the ten most prevalent programming visits during the month of January. Moral reconnection therapy (MRT), a form of cognitive-behavioral treatment, accounts for the largest proportion of visits (16.7 percent), followed by GED classes (14.4 percent), vocational services (through Goodwill) (5.4 percent), and relapse prevention (5.4 percent). When we examine service visits, we see that they are overwhelmingly comprised of drug tests (98.8 percent of the total). These findings are consistent with SSAS requirements specifying frequent drug testing, MRT, and educational services as core components of service provision.

Figure 5: Top 10 DRC program visits in January 2009 by type of program received

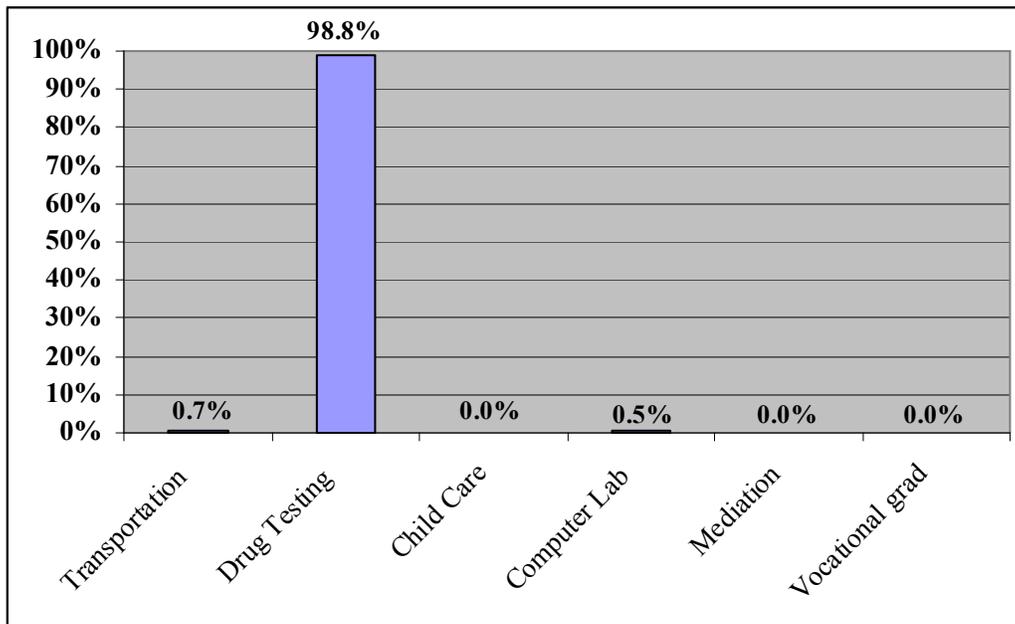
¹¹ We did not have information on the number of people who visited during this time period.

These visits were broken down by DRC as well, although the numbers are not of great significance without knowing the number of clients who reported to each center during the time period as well.



N=2,762 visits for programming

Figure 6: DRC service visits in January 2009 by type of service received



N=1,294 visits for services

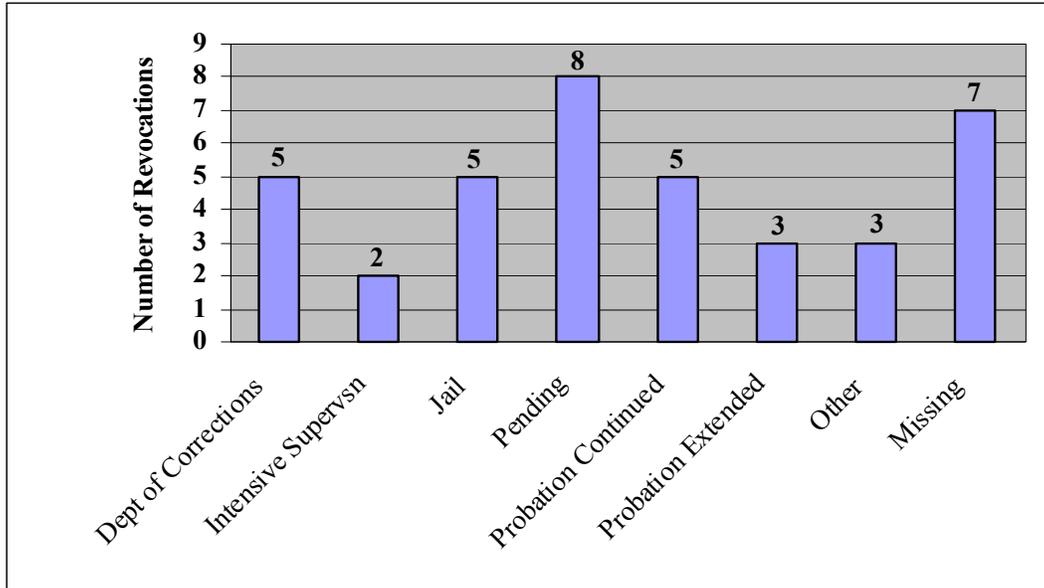
The use of graduated sanctions is unclear.

SSAS procedures specify that graduated sanctions should be employed for an individual until they have been exhausted, so we expected to find a substantial percentage of clients who had been sanctioned during the course of supervision. However, the large majority of individuals who were on SSAS on or after October 1, 2007 (73 percent) did not receive any sanctions, and an even larger majority did not receive any sanctions for substance abuse violations (75.9 percent). The low prevalence of sanction events does not necessarily indicate that officers are not employing graduated responses to violation behaviors though. It could be that officers are underreporting sanctions, a concern that has been expressed by OPA. Alternatively, the low prevalence could reflect a low prevalence of violation behaviors or be a function of people not being on the program for a long enough period of time. Unfortunately, we cannot test any of these explanations because we do not have data on violation behaviors that are not associated with sanctions, nor do we have access to an alternative data source on sanction activities or enrollment dates. The data do show, however, that of clients who were sanctioned during the study period, the majority had at least one substance abuse violation (89.5 percent).

The data also indicate that only a small proportion of the sample (10.8 percent) was revoked during the study period, and that three-quarters of revocations were associated with law violations (as opposed to technical violations). This proportion is clearly smaller than the proportion sanctioned (a difference of roughly 17 percentage points), which suggests that officers are employing graduated responses to some extent before they request a revocation warrant. Furthermore, the average number of sanctions administered to clients who were revoked is higher than the average for clients who were not revoked (1.58 vs. 0.34, respectively). Because the latter average includes a substantial number of people with no sanctions, however, it is difficult to know whether this trend reflects the use of graduated sanctions, the fact that most people who were not revoked did not engage in any behavior that would warrant a sanction or revocation, or the fact that most people in the sample were not sanctioned.¹² Figure 7 presents findings on the dispositions following revocation events, and although a large number are still pending (N=8 out of 38), we can see that roughly one quarter of revoked clients were sentenced to prison or jail. A noticeable number were returned to probation as well (eight out of 38).

¹² When people with no sanctions are excluded from the analysis, the numbers are much more similar (2.00 vs. 1.66, respectively), which suggests that people with no sanctions are driving the initial difference. The average remains higher among people who were revoked.

Figure 7: SSAS probation clients by revocation disposition



N=38

“Other” category includes Work Ethic Camp, SSAS intensive supervision, and dismissed cases.

Qualitative analysis on the implementation of SSAS

As discussed earlier, the purpose of the qualitative analysis was to better understand factors and processes related to the quality of SSAS implementation, including both the successes and challenges of this process, the nature of collaboration between partners, and the extent to which supervision practices and other program components vary across sites. This section presents findings related to these issues, drawing on perspectives from SSAS officers and parole officers, DRC coordinators, judges, service providers, and SSAS clients. Broadly, our interviews and focus groups led to findings in four main areas:

General Perspectives on SSAS

- The biggest success of SSAS implementation to date is the widespread support for the program. Across the board, participants were invested in the SSAS program and felt a strong sense of collaboration with other partners in the initiative.
- At the same time, participants felt that implementation could be enhanced in a number of ways.
- Clients were responsive to SSAS and found the program helpful.

Communication and Training

- Probation and parole staff felt that one of the most challenging aspects of supervising SSAS clients is their lack of clarity on procedures, policies, practices, and performance measures. They expressed a desire for clear and direct communication on all of these. This includes communication between administration and field officers and among field officers and staff who work in different areas of the state.
- There is a great deal of inconsistency across sites, both in terms of how services and supervision are delivered, the challenges that exist, and the populations served.

Resources and Service Delivery

- In general, services are widely available to meet the needs of SSAS clients, but mental health and transportation services remain prevalent needs.

SSAS Policies and Procedures

- People involved in the administration of SSAS think that eligibility criteria should be revised. Of particular concern are the criteria related to crime of conviction and, in the case of parolees, restrictions related to completion of drug treatment in prison.
- There are practical challenges involved in the supervision of parole clients on SSAS, ranging from communication to supervision logistics. Participants felt that many of these challenges could be addressed through the development of specialized procedures for the supervision of parole clients on SSAS.

- Probation staff have a difficult time using NPMIS and other data collection tools and expressed concerns about the accuracy of data in the system.

These findings are discussed in more detail in the remainder of this section.

General perspectives on SSAS

In general, interviews and focus groups with study participants revealed considerable support for the SSAS program. Across the different groups, participants felt that SSAS was an important initiative that addressed the gap in programmatic and treatment options available to offenders in the community. SSAS officers pointed out that little had been done to change OPA for many years and that they welcome the philosophical change in offender management. Participants across the board were pleased with the collaborative efforts between OPA and the Parole Administration, and most felt that they were “on the same page” as other partners. Some even said that strong collaboration between partners, ranging from referring officers to treatment providers, was one of the biggest advantages of the program.

When asked for their views on the purpose of SSAS, most study participants spoke about the rehabilitative impact on individuals rather than its impact on the prison population. The one exception was parole officers, who identified themselves as more law enforcement-oriented and said that they have less tolerance for relapse and other non-compliant behavior among the people they supervise. One judge also questioned the cost-effectiveness of having a separate program for drug offenders rather than more services for traditional probationers, but like the majority of study participants, this judge’s sentencing philosophy was closely aligned with the rehabilitative ideal.

Finally, our interviews with clients suggest that they also support the program, or at least those under supervision who referred to themselves as motivated to change. This was the case for most of the individuals who were interviewed for this study, and they said that SSAS provides the structure and support necessary to help them change.¹³ A number of participants mentioned the relationship with their SSAS officer in particular as an integral component of their success in the program. This is consistent with officers’ perspectives on SSAS clients. In general, they felt that their relationships with clients were good and that clients benefited from the program. A few officers even mentioned that some of their supervisees have intentionally violated supervision conditions to keep from transitioning out of the program.

Communication and training

One of the primary themes that emerged from interviews and focus groups was a desire among probation and parole staff for clear and direct communication, both from the administration regarding policies and procedures related to SSAS and among sites regarding supervision

¹³ Because we only spoke to a small sample of individuals from the program, these findings are not necessarily representative of all clients on SSAS.

practices. With respect to the communication of policies and procedures, one of the concerns expressed by SSAS officers was a lack of clarity about how well they are doing their jobs. To address this, a number of them suggested the inclusion of performance measures in policies. Officers also felt that new policies and procedures could be better communicated to line staff. This was a particularly salient issue for parole officers, who felt not only that they did not have a clear sense of the SSAS policies, but that changes in policies were not communicated to them effectively. There was even an instance of this during the course of the study. In January 2009, screening procedures changed so that parole officers became responsible for suitability screenings. Based on discussions that took place in the focus groups, however, it did not appear that this change was communicated to parole officers before it took effect.

Similar to probation and parole officers, judges expressed a desire for more frequent communication from the administration as well. Several of the judges with whom we spoke had a limited knowledge about the SSAS program and general programming options for defendants. For example, one judge said that he had little understanding of the types of services available to defendants at the DRCs; another judge said that he did not know the difference between SSAS and drug court. It should be noted that this was limited to non-drug court judges; district court judges that also preside in drug court had a much better understanding of the programmatic options available to defendants in the community.

In addition to improved communication of policies and procedures from the administration, some of the participants also expressed a desire for more communication across sites. As discussed earlier, one of the main questions explored in this process evaluation was the consistency of SSAS supervision across sites. During our focus groups with probation staff, it became apparent that not only are there many differences in how SSAS is practiced across sites, but also that officers found it helpful to come together and hear about what others are doing. Among the differences that emerged in our focus groups were practices related to service provision, supervision structure, and program and completion requirements. For example, officers in different sites have different processes for transitioning clients onto regular probation supervision. Many, but not all, use a phase or “step-down” system to transition clients, but the number of phases varies across sites. Cognitive-behavioral treatment is incorporated into supervision differently across sites. Some counties do not require participation in cognitive-behavioral classes if clients completed it in prison, while others require it regardless of previous experience. Based on these discussions DRC coordinators and SSAS officers expressed a desire for more frequent and consistent communication across sites to share information and best practices.

Finally, both probation and parole officers felt that improvements in training would be a good way to address these challenges related to understanding SSAS procedures. Many of the officers said that they did not have a sense of how the program was supposed to run after participating in the initial six-week SSAS training because the training provided a general overview of evidence-based practices but did not go into detail on the specifics of the SSAS program components. Furthermore, since the program was originally piloted, the duration of

training for new officers has been reduced from six weeks to one week. While some participants thought that one week was enough, a number said that longer trainings would be beneficial, at least for some of the new officers. One participant in particular felt that it would be helpful for new SSAS officers who were previously traditional probation officers, given that they are generally less accustomed to a rehabilitative supervision approach.

Resources and service delivery

Interviews and focus groups also revealed the existence of a continuum of services available to SSAS clients. Across the different groups, participants felt that services designed to meet the needs of SSAS clients were widely available throughout the selected pilot counties and especially in urban areas. Furthermore, DRC coordinators work with their SSAS officers to assess and update service provision on a regular basis. According to coordinators, SSAS officers are instrumental in providing information on additional services needed by clients, recommendations about particular service providers, and feedback on the day-to-day functioning of the centers. This allows coordinators to adapt service provision to best meet the needs of clients they serve.

Despite the range of services available, addressing co-occurring disorders (i.e. combined mental health and substance abuse issues) and transportation needs continues to be a challenge. Probation officers and DRC coordinators said that co-occurring disorders are prevalent among the people they supervise, and officers felt strongly that clients should be given a mental health screen in addition to a substance abuse screen. Many of them pointed out though that even if they had the capacity to do such screens they still would not have access to resources for people who were identified as having mental health problems. It seems that only the Lancaster reporting center has the ability to both screen and refer people to psychological counseling. Service providers who participated in the study suggested a voucher program to address these issues, similar to that of the substance abuse evaluation and treatment vouchers put into place by OPA in 2006.

Transportation is a challenge as well, particularly for the Sarpy and Lancaster sites where clients may have to travel up to 25 miles to attend programming. Similar to their thoughts on mental health needs, both service providers and SSAS officers were supportive of a transportation voucher program for SSAS clients whose options are most limited in this area.

Specific SSAS policies and procedures

Finally, while not directly related to implementation, the following findings specific to SSAS policies and procedures are worth directed attention. Our interviews and focus groups revealed that probation and parole staff have concerns and/or difficulties related to specific procedures and policies. One of the most prevalent was a concern with the current eligibility criteria for the program. As described in the background section, to be recommended for SSAS, an individual must meet a number of requirements, including being convicted of a felony drug or DUI offense,

being high to very high risk in antisocial patterns and drug/alcohol patterns on the Level of Service/Case Management Inventory risk/needs assessment, and being in a contemplative state of change (i.e., considering change) in one or more areas of criminogenic thinking. Individuals can also be excluded for certain reasons, for example, if they have a mental illness that is not being treated or if their supervision sentence is too short.

Across the groups we interviewed, there was a consistent concern with the conviction criterion in particular. Participants felt that limiting program eligibility to only individuals with felony drug or DUI convictions excludes a significant population of people who have criminogenic substance abuse needs and could benefit from SSAS, including people who plead down to misdemeanor drug charges and people convicted on non-drug charges (such as theft or burglary) whose criminal behavior is associated with substance use. Participants on the whole felt that SSAS should be available to anyone who has a drug problem.

There was a more mixed response to the inclusion of felony DUI offenses, which became eligible during July 2008. A substantial number of participants were against it, although their rationale varied. According to probation officers, DUI offenders do not exhibit the same criminogenic thinking patterns as drug offenders and therefore should be supervised in separate units so as not to dilute the integrity of the programming. This is already being done in Lincoln, where there is a large enough population of SSAS clients to fill all of the SSAS slots with felony drug offenses. It is an issue in smaller counties, though, where they do not have the same numbers of felony offenses. Judges had a more mixed response to the inclusion of DUI cases. Some felt it was a good idea as long as they would benefit from the program; others thought that felony DUI cases pose too great a threat to public safety to be supervised in the community. Despite some disagreement on who is appropriate for the program, participants agreed that SSAS should not be a “numbers game” that focuses too much on filling slots.

Our interviews and focus groups also revealed eligibility concerns specific to parole clients, although again, these perspectives were mixed. Both referring parole officers and field parole officers identified the exclusion of people on parole who completed drug treatment in prison as problematic. Reentry parole officers, who conduct eligibility screenings in prison pre-release, felt that people who participate in institutional drug treatment should still be eligible for SSAS, namely because staying drug-free in the community is much more difficult than doing it in an institution where there are fewer temptations and opportunities for relapse. Field parole officers, on the other hand, were supportive of this criterion. The group of officers who participated in this study said that their clients are dealing with too many other issues upon return to the community to focus on drug treatment. They also thought that people should be “given a chance to fail” before they are put into a treatment program and that clients are most receptive to SSAS after a violation when they are faced with the possibility of returning to prison. They liked having SSAS as an option for responding to violations.

A second theme that emerged in the area of policies and procedures was the challenge of supervising parole clients on SSAS. Both probation and parole officers identified a number of obstacles associated with this particular duty. First, although parole officers remain the primary

supervisors for parolees on SSAS, parole clients see their SSAS officers much more frequently than they do their parole officers. SSAS officers did not think that this was a problem because the supervision structure is explained to parole clients when they enroll in the program; according to parole officers, however, this sometimes causes confusion among clients regarding the role of each supervisor. One officer suggested that it might be beneficial to have one parole officer who is a SSAS officer and manages all parolees on SSAS. It is worth noting that the one parole client interviewed for this study did not identify this as an issue.

There are also administrative challenges in supervising parole clients on SSAS. One officer mentioned that Parole is not allowed to use drug test results from OPA to issue violations to parolees. If a SSAS officer administers a drug test to a parole client and it is positive, the parole officer has to do another drug test before he or she can issue a violation, and that test may be negative if it is administered too long after the original test. Other officers mentioned that it is difficult for SSAS officers and parole officers to meet once a week to discuss cases, especially in rural areas of the state where there are greater distances to travel. Both SSAS and parole officers acknowledged the value of regular communication and said that they try to speak frequently over the phone. Both groups also felt that communication has improved over time. Concerns were also raised about screening parolees into SSAS. Parole officers expressed a desire to have more discretion in selecting people for the program and to limit enrollment to people who need the full supervision program (as opposed to those who just need treatment).¹⁴ Some of the SSAS officers, on the other hand, were concerned that parole officers are not fully equipped to make recommendations.

Finally, a third policy and procedural issue that emerged in focus groups with probation staff is the difficulty of using their electronic case management system, the Nebraska Probation Management Information System (NPMIS), and other data collection tools. Participants said they often felt that they did not have enough time to enter data correctly. Even when they did have time, they did not know if they were entering information properly because there are no clear instructions for how to use the system or code information. A few people mentioned that they click on screens in a haphazard manner just to get out of the system, which leads them to input information that is not accurate. Others said that the system in general is not user-friendly and that the coding of the information varies depending on who enters it. Unlike NPMIS, which is an electronic system, DRC coordinators enter information on center activities manually into monthly spreadsheets, but they expressed the same frustrations as probation officers, including concerns about the quality of information and their confusion about how to code it. They too felt that information was being entered inconsistently from site to site and person to person. When asked, both probation and DRC coordinators said they would like to have data entry procedures outlined more clearly in the future.

¹⁴ About halfway through this study, parole officers were actually given more discretion in this area. As of January 1, 2009, parole officers are responsible for conducting suitability screenings on parole clients.

Recommendations

Based on our review of SSAS policies and procedures, analysis of probation data, and findings from qualitative interviews and focus groups we identified recommendations in four main areas:

Collaboration between partners and clients:

- *Enhance the collaboration that already exists between administrators, field officers, and program staff by bringing invested parties together more frequently for exchange of ideas and discussion of best practices in supervision and service delivery.* All of the individuals interviewed felt that they had a good working relationship with other partners in SSAS supervision and expressed an interest in hearing more from these partners about how to best deliver SSAS services and how to enhance the relationships that already exist.
- *Consider providing needed support for an alumni network for graduates of the SSAS program who seek further support.* Our study suggests that SSAS clients with motivation to change are very receptive to the program and have expressed an interest in maintaining the support system that exists in SSAS after completion.

Communication and Training:

- *Develop specialized training procedures for SSAS officers.* The SSAS officers felt that current trainings focus too much on general evidence-based practices and that it is equally important to be trained in specific SSAS procedures.
- *Outline supervision procedures and performance expectations in writing for probation and parole officers.* Many of the SSAS officer participants expressed a lack of clarity about how well they are performing on the job because they do not know what is expected. Outlining more specific procedures and expectations in writing would give them a frame of reference.
- *Develop and disseminate specific procedures for managing parole clients on SSAS.* The study revealed a number of issues related to the supervision of parole cases on SSAS, including administrative obstacles and confusion among parolees about dual reporting. Developing specific supervision procedures for parole clients could provide clarity on many of these issues.
- *Provide information to judges at judicial meetings and other forums on the SSAS program and other elements and conditions of probation supervision to enhance sentencing decisions.* With the exception of drug court judges, many of the judges with whom we spoke had limited knowledge of SSAS and relied heavily on the judgment of

the probation officer when sentencing SSAS-eligible clients. Providing them with information on the program would enhance informed sentencing decisions.

Resources and service delivery

- *Concentrate supervision and services geographically and temporally, while exploring options for providing transportation to SSAS clients who do not have easy access to such services.* While overall, services and programs are widely available to address the needs of SSAS clients, some clients have difficulty traveling from one location to another to participate in different supervision components. This could be minimized by either limiting the amount of travel or providing assistance in getting from place to place.
- *Explore options for mental health services.* Co-occurring disorders are prevalent among SSAS clients; yet there are very few services to address these needs outside of Lancaster County.

Specific SSAS policies and procedures

- *Revisit the eligibility criteria for SSAS.* People consistently raised concerns that current eligibility criteria exclude individuals from SSAS who could benefit from the program and have substance abuse-related criminogenic needs. There was particular concern about the impact of the conviction criterion.
- *Explore options for making NPMIS and other data collection instruments more user-friendly.* Probation staff expressed confusion about the current data collection tools and raised questions about the accuracy of the data. These issues could be minimized through the development of a clear instruction manual, quality-control procedures, and regular training sessions for probation staff.

Conclusion

The goal of this report was to provide the Community Corrections Council with an assessment of how the Specialized Substance Abuse Supervision (SSAS) program has been implemented in the five pilot sites and to create recommendations based on findings for moving forward with statewide implementation. Based on our review of SSAS policies and procedures, administrative analysis of probation data, and findings from interviews and focus groups, we conclude that there is widespread support for SSAS and for the philosophical shift that has taken place in OPA over the last few years. There is also widespread support for statewide expansion of the program, and our study revealed a number of ways in which future implementation efforts can be enhanced. Drawing on this information, we recommend the following:

- Build on the collaboration that already exists between SSAS partners.
- Expand on the training and communication procedures that already exist.
- Explore options for mental health services and for helping SSAS clients access services.
- Revisit eligibility criteria.
- Consider ways to make data collection more user-friendly.

Probation has already begun to implement some of these recommendations on their own, which illustrates the momentum for community corrections reform that currently exists in the state. Exploring them further is likely to result in even more streamlined service delivery in existing SSAS sites and enhanced implementation as the program expands.

Appendix 1: Overview of SSAS supervision stages

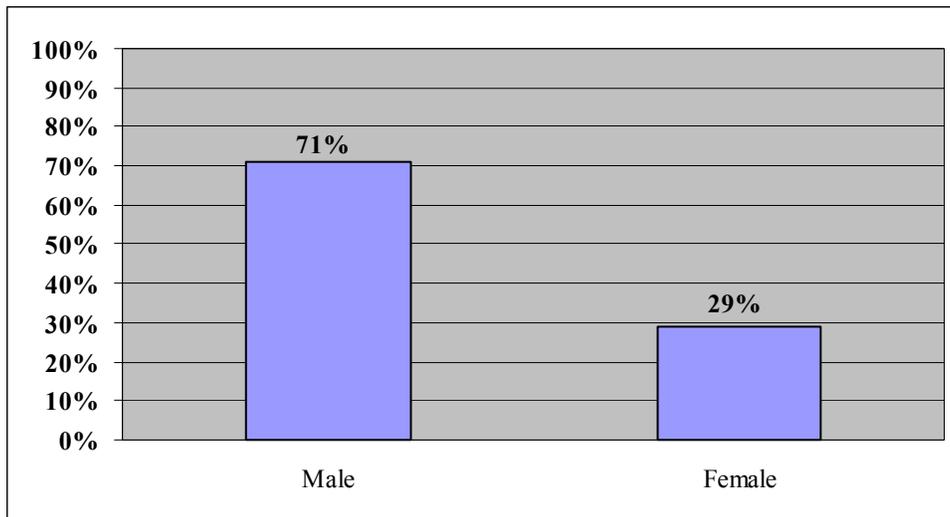
Stage	Carried out by:	Specific components
Eligibility screening	Referring probation and parole officers	<p>Criteria for eligibility:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conviction for felony drug or DUI offense • Score of 20 or less on the Offender selection worksheet • Score of 70% or higher on antisocial and drug scales • Risk-needs score placing individual on maximum level supervision (based on LS/CMI tool) • Simple screening instrument (SSI) score in moderate-high range • Verified address • No active warrants that would exclude from SSAS participation • Referral for substance abuse evaluation
Suitability screening	SSAS officers and parole officers conduct screening and make recommendations	<p>Criteria for suitability:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contemplative state of change on one or more criminogenic needs • Score high-very high on alcohol/drug pattern and anti-social pattern scales of LS/CMI instrument • Maximum range in Section 8 of LS/CMI • No diagnosis of mental illness, or if mentally ill, in appropriate treatment • Minimum term of 18 months on probation or 4 months on parole
Sentencing/enrollment	Judge (probation cases) Parole officer (parole cases)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Judge sentences defendants to probation with a condition of participating in SSAS • Judge does not have to follow recommendations of officer
Supervision	SSAS officers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small caseloads (25-30 people) • Regular drug testing • Home visits • Regular communication between SSAS officers, parole officers, and treatment providers
Treatment	Registered treatment provider	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Treatment protocol varies by provider but all providers must be in compliance with the standardized model
DRC services	SSAS officers and contracted service providers—DRC coordinators oversee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cognitive-behavioral treatment is required • Vocational and educational services are also core • Participation in other services as necessary
Graduated responses	SSAS officers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exhaust all graduated sanctions before returning a client to prison • Examples include increased drug testing, community service, increased home visits
Completion	SSAS clients, as assessed by SSAS officer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 phases of SSAS before completion • Must complete Thinking for a Change cognitive treatment program, substance abuse treatment, and have documented community support system

Appendix 2: Snapshot of SSAS clients

Background characteristics of a sample of 352 probation clients on SSAS on or after October 1, 2007 were analyzed using data from Probation’s NPMIS system. Figures 8 through 15 present findings on demographics, education, employment, and county of sentencing.

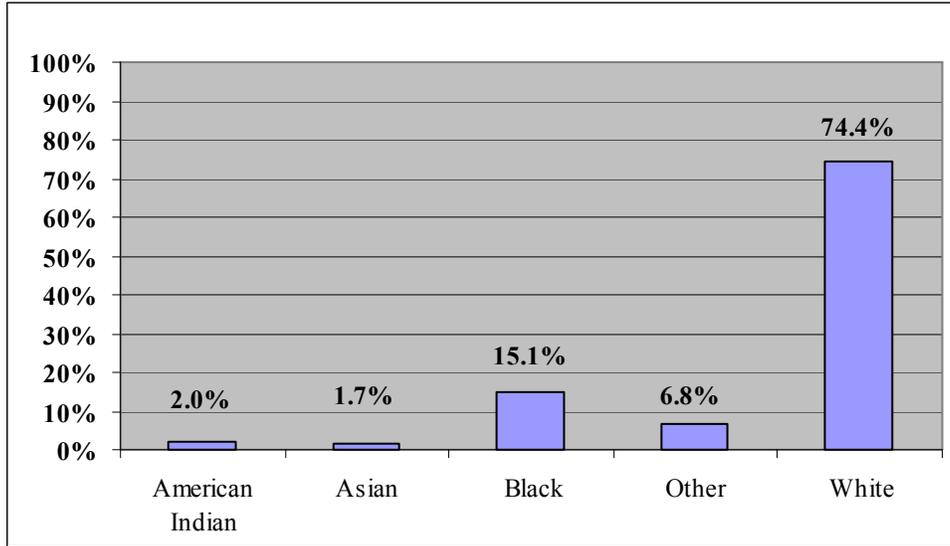
As shown in Figures 8 through 10, the sample is composed primarily of non-Hispanic white males. Almost 30 percent of the sample is female, though, which suggests a diverse range of needs within the group. With respect to race, almost 75 percent of the sample is white, followed by African Americans, who comprise 15.1 percent. Other races, Native Americans, and Asians make up only small proportions. When compared to the racial breakdown in the general population of these counties, it appears that whites are underrepresented among SSAS clients (84 percent in the general population) while blacks are overrepresented (almost 7 percent in the general population).¹⁵

Figure 8: SSAS probation clients by gender



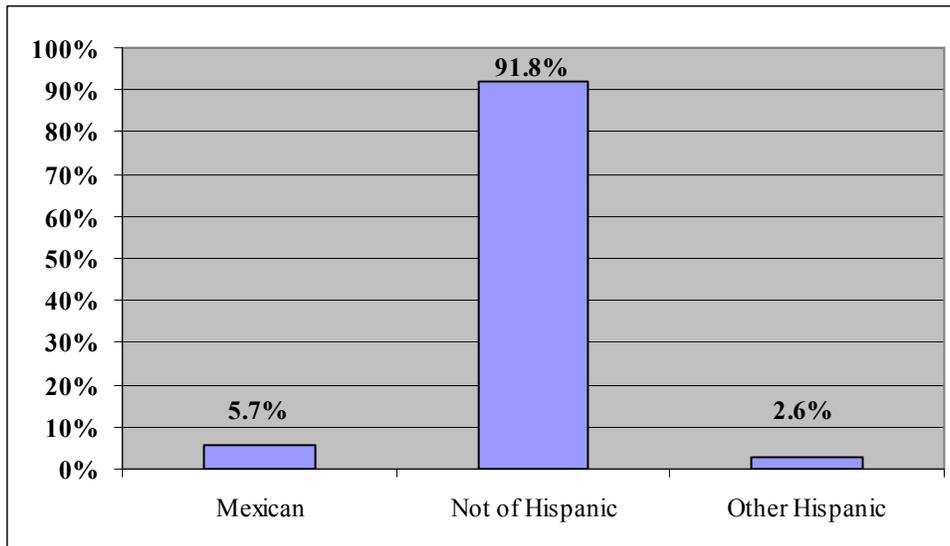
¹⁵ These estimates are based on data from the American Community Survey (ACS) collected between 2005 and 2007.

Figure 9: SSAS probation clients by race



The data do not specify what racial groups are included in the “Other” category.

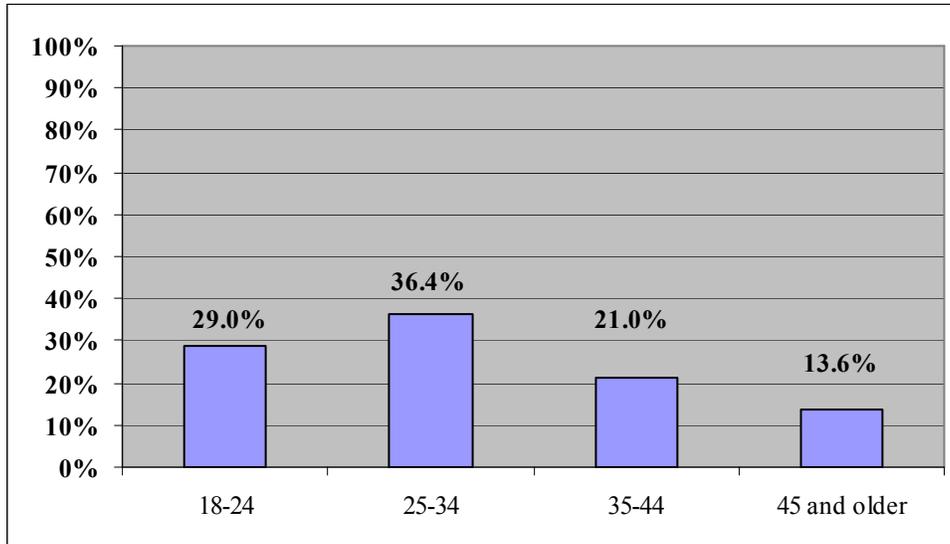
Figure 10: SSAS probation clients by ethnicity



The average age of SSAS probation clients at sentencing is 31.6 years old. This is somewhat older than the peak age of criminal activity demonstrated in the criminological literature but is consistent with the offenses targeted for SSAS (drug and DUI offenses), which cut across a wider range of ages. When the sample is broken down into age groups (Figure 11), we see that the largest percentage is between the ages of 25 and 34 (about 36 percent). There is also a substantial proportion of clients 35 and older (over 30 percent). Similar to findings on gender, the range of ages in this population suggests that there may be diverse needs as well, given that

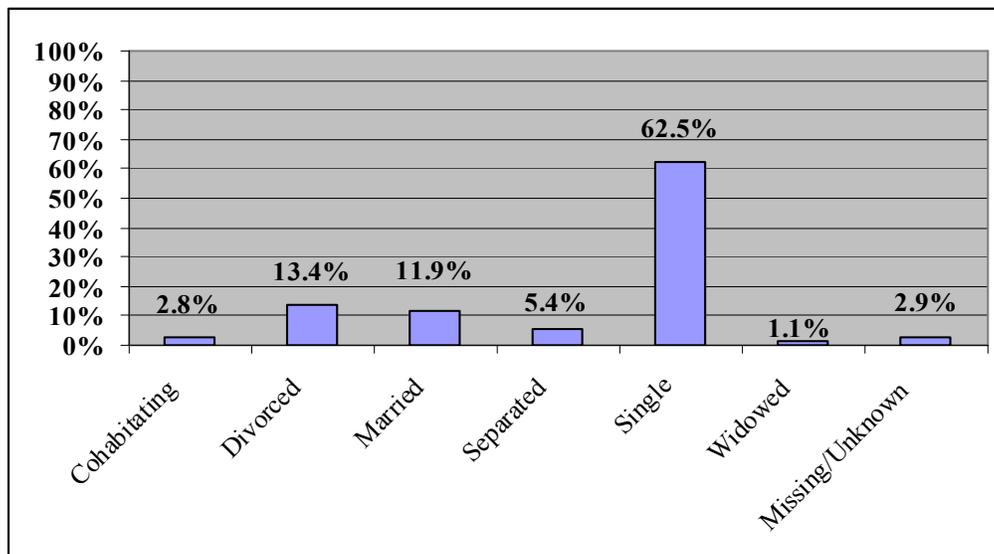
the challenges facing a 25-year-old individual are likely to be different than those facing a 45-year-old.

Figure 11: SSAS probation clients by age



With respect to marital status, the findings are also fairly consistent with established trends in the criminal justice population. The majority of clients are single (62.5 percent). Both married and divorced clients are represented as well though (roughly 12 percent and 13 percent of the sample, respectively), which is consistent with the age breakdown in the sample.

Figure 12: SSAS probation clients by marital status



Figures 13 and 14 depict education level and employment status among the sample of SSAS clients. As shown, education needs are prevalent. Just over a quarter of the SSAS clients in this study do not have a high school diploma; about 17 percent of the sample, however, has at least some college education. Unemployment exists as well, although only 18 percent of the sample was listed as being unemployed in their most recent employment status. Almost half of the sample was listed as being employed full time (48 percent).

Figure 13: SSAS probation clients by highest education level

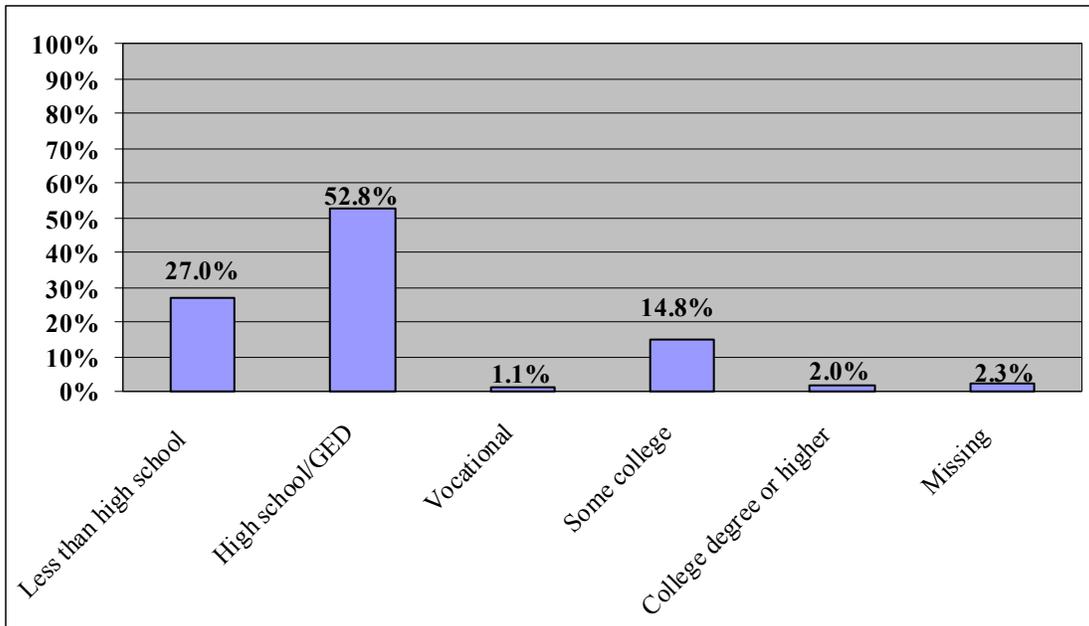
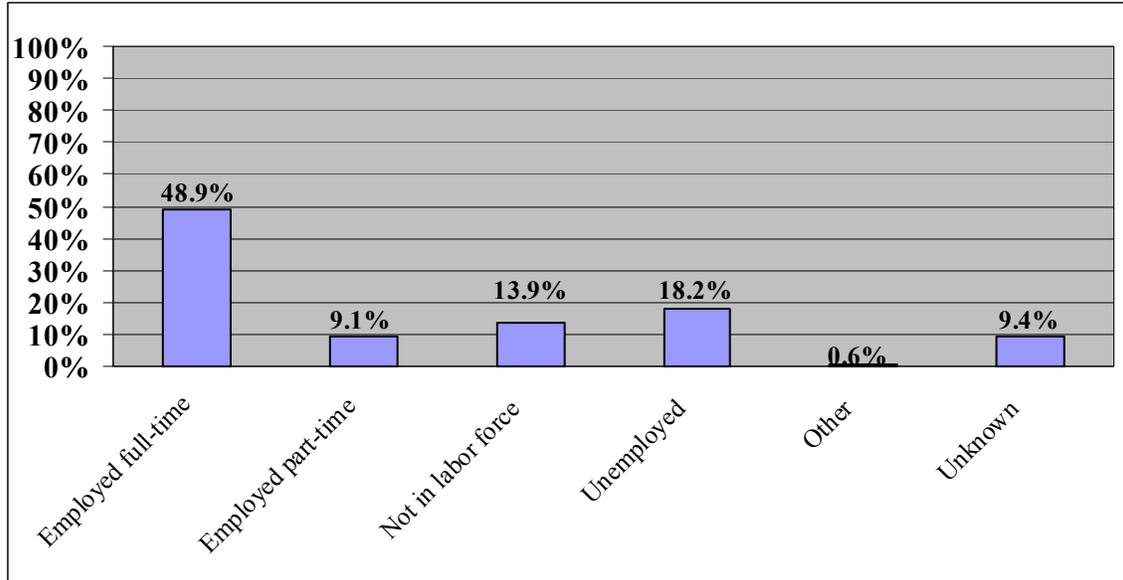


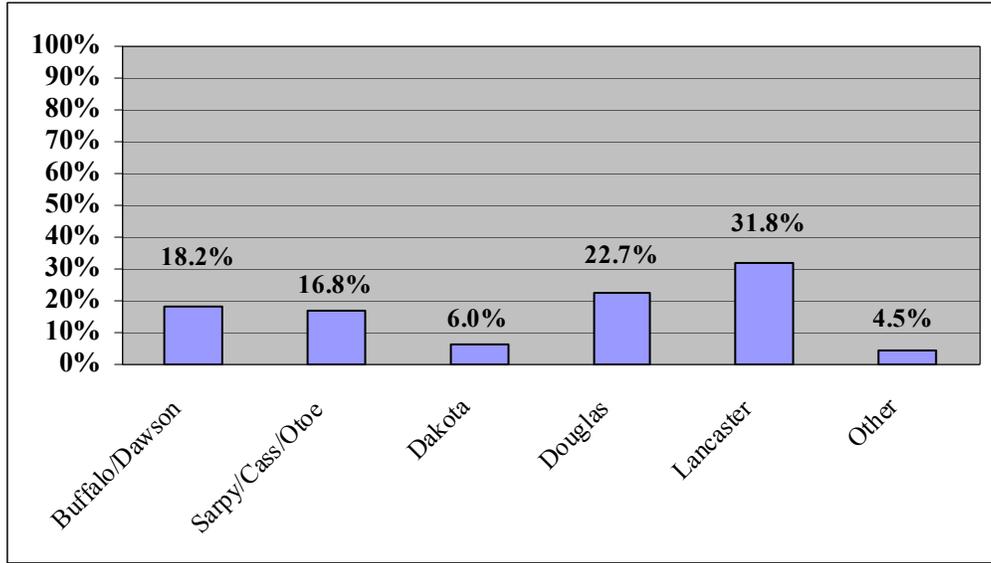
Figure 14: SSAS probation clients by current employment status¹⁶



Finally, we examined the breakdown of probation clients by county of sentencing, with counties grouped to represent SSAS sites. The results are presented in Figure 15, and as shown over half the sample was sentenced in either Lancaster (32 percent) or Douglas County (23 percent). These districts represent Lincoln and Omaha, the two most urban areas in the state, respectively.

¹⁶ The “Employed part-time” category includes individuals who work part-time seasonal, part-time permanent, and students working part-time; the “Not in labor force” category includes individuals in prison, homemakers, those who are unable to work because of a disability, and students who do not work; and the “Other” category includes individuals who work seasonally and on a temporary basis

Figure 15: SSAS probation clients by county of sentencing¹⁷



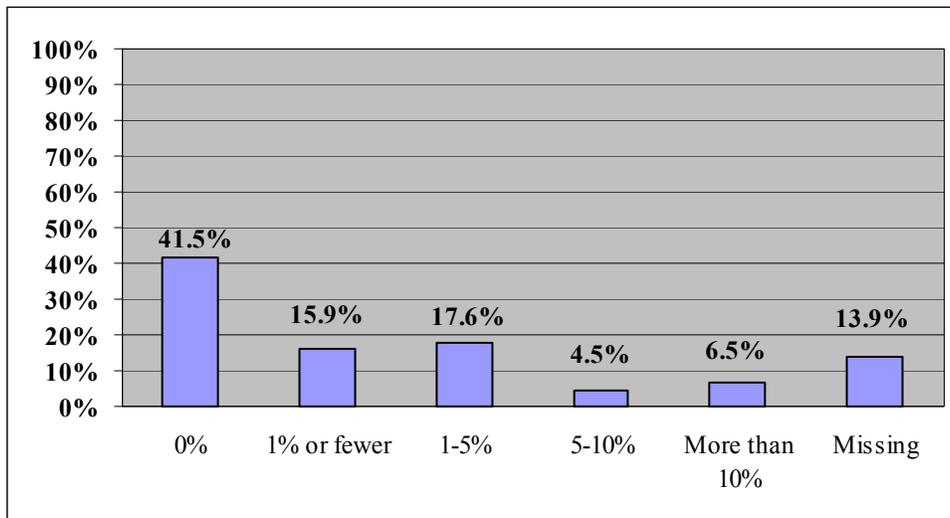
¹⁷ The “Other” category includes individuals sentenced out-of-state.

Appendix 3: Preliminary outcomes among SSAS probation clients

Although most of the 352 probationers in the sample (70 percent) were still in SSAS at the time that data were collected, we were able to examine some preliminary outcomes related to drug testing and violations. It should be emphasized that these findings do not suggest anything about the program’s impact on either outcome; this requires an evaluation with a comparison group. These findings merely indicate trends in preliminary outcomes for the individuals in the sample. Broadly, we found that both positive drug tests and sanctions were infrequent among this sample, although this may be due to underreporting.

We explored the prevalence of relapse events as the percentage of positive drug tests for each client. Although this is an imperfect measure, if we assume it represents drug behaviors accurately the data indicate that a substantial proportion of the sample has remained drug-free or close to drug-free on supervision (Figure 16). Over 40 percent have not had any positive tests since enrolling in SSAS (a failure rate of 58.5 percent), and over 50 percent have tested positive in less than 1 percent of their tests. This failure rate is consistent with those that have been documented in previous research on comparable populations. A meta-analysis of drug court evaluations in New York State found that in three of the seven courts reviewed the failure rate was between 50percent and 60 percent, and an evaluation of the Hamilton County, Ohio Drug Court found that the relapse rate among drug court participants was 55 percent.¹⁸

Figure 16: SSAS probation clients by percentage of drug tests with a positive result



The second preliminary outcome examined was violation behaviors among the sample. As discussed earlier, the data indicate that only about a quarter of the sample received a sanction for a violation behavior during the study period (again though, this may be underreported). When

¹⁸ Michael Rempel, Dana Fox-Kralstein, et al., “The New York State Adult Drug Court Evaluation” *Center for Court Innovation*, October 2003; Shelley Johnson and Edward LaTessa, “The Hamilton County Drug Court: Outcome Evaluation Findings” *University of Cincinnati, Center for Criminal Justice Research*, July 2000.

violation behaviors underlying sanctions are explored more closely, we see that almost half were associated with more than one violation event. To gain a better understanding of the types of violations that are most prevalent among SSAS clients, we also examined the first violation events associated with each sanction. Figure 17 presents the results of that analysis, and consistent with the criminogenic needs of the target population, most common are those related to substance use or substance use conditions. Approximately 50 percent of first violations involved admission of drug use or failure to report for a drug/alcohol test, and 20 percent of sanctions were administered for alcohol use.

Figure 17: Top 10 violations associated with sanction events

Charge	Number	Percentage
Drug use admission	41	24.4
Failure to report for alcohol/drug testing	41	24.4
Alcohol use admission	33	19.6
Positive drug test	12	7.1
Electronic monitoring/curfew violations	8	4.8
Failure to attend training	8	4.8
Positive alcohol test	7	4.2
Frequenting places or associating with persons engaged in illegal activities	6	3.6
Failure to pay fines or costs	4	2.4
Failure to avoid contact with victims or location	2	1.2