

A large, stylized number '7' in a lighter shade of orange, serving as a background graphic for the title.

Tapping Technology for Probation Services



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The Cleveland Municipal Court Probation Department adopted a mobile supervision app to enhance defendant-to-staff communications and provide both with better tools via technology. This app is designed to enable communication and help defendants manage aspects of their probation.

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Keeping defendants engaged is always top-of-mind in community corrections. It is critical for agencies and officers to interact with defendants in ways that are relevant to them and their situation, but that can be easier said than done. Defendants come from all walks of life, and sometimes their personal situations provide barriers to fulfilling their supervision successfully. They need to attend meetings with their probation officer (PO) yet need to stay at work to be able to pay their bills and support their family. Defendants need to attend court events, but it can be challenging to remember all the dates and locations. They need to provide updates to their PO but have difficulty reaching them during office hours.

The Cleveland Municipal Court (CMC) looked for a way to support their defendants that could help reduce some of the common barriers. They found a new way to supervise defendants that provides several new avenues for officers and defendants to communicate combined with features that allow them to manage aspects of their supervision through a mobile app.

The probation department's philosophy stresses long-term rehabilitation, not just getting defendants on and off probation. One way to do that was to help reduce obstacles. The department was open to finding new ways to meet with defendants, so they did not have to miss work. But the department also wanted to help them create better habits, such as attending meetings, turning in paperwork, and completing check-ins on time. That's where the concept of using a mobile supervision app came into the picture. Most defendants have a smartphone and are familiar with using apps, so it made sense.

A challenge many agencies face is finding tools that help defendants that are also easy for them and their probation officers to adopt. That is where technology designed specifically to support supervision can help. At CMC adding a supervision mobile app provided new ways officers could communicate with defendants and additional avenues for defendants to manage appointments, complete surveys, turn in paperwork, share a text message, and hold a live video call with their officers—all from the convenience of their smartphones.



One of the most significant benefits of using the app is the ability to communicate with defendants whenever and wherever they have access to their smartphones.



An important factor in the decision to adopt the mobile app were the benefits the new program could provide to defendants. Allowing them to do the work they need to do with their mobile app was key, but equally important was the ability to do things that are important to their rehabilitation. Such tasks include holding down a job, earning money, taking care of their family, performing community service, and attending school and required programs. Additionally, the app saves defendants valuable time and money

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since they do not have to take time off work to attend meetings or pay for transportation, parking, or childcare.

Various supervision apps offer different ways to connect with defendants. The product CMC chose enables CMC to interact with defendants using features focused on appointments, questionnaires, two-way text messaging, and live video calls. “It allows the defendant a chance to report by phone and complete a monthly questionnaire pertaining to probation compliance,” explained CMC Probation Officer Marc Knipper.

CMC began its use of the supervision app by sending automated questionnaires to a group of defendants. Typically sent monthly or biweekly, the questionnaires were approved by the court to fulfill a required contact. The system sends the questionnaires to the defendants automatically along with reminders. The system records all responses and notifies officers when a defendant has not replied or has responded in a way that needs their follow-up. CMC uses the questionnaires to keep in touch with low-risk defendants and to supplement communication with defendants who require multiple contacts each month, such as domestic violence cases.

Questionnaires are not limited to sending and receiving required contacts and surveys. Users can take pictures of documents that often are forgotten or get lost in the mail, such as certificates of completion and community-service logs. The vendor has made communication easy with defendants by allowing them to upload treatment attendance records and other paperwork directly to CMC, which eliminates lost paperwork. Plus, the department can send a new sheet as needed.

Additionally, CMC embeds a question into monthly questionnaires where defendants can request help or a call from their officer. CMC uses the app to send an annual procedural-justice-oriented survey to gauge how they feel about their experience with CMC, if they feel they have been treated fairly, and how they feel about the mobile supervision app. The feedback on these surveys has been very positive, with many defendants noting that they appreciate being asked their opinion.

From court appearances to meetings with a PO, a defendant under probation has what can seem like a thousand appointments. They can be challenging to keep track of, so the ability to send appointment notices and reminders has made a difference with awareness and compliance. Appointments can be sent to the defendant for any purpose, ranging from court appearances to programming. The app requires the defendant to verify receipt of the appointment and provides the capability for the defendant to pull up a map to their appointment.

Defendants appreciate reminders, and officers like the fact that they do not have to track down defendants to remind them about meetings. Plus, with meeting reminders popping up on their phone it is much harder for defendants to use the “I didn’t know” excuse. The database also reminds staff if someone has missed an appointment so they can follow through with the next steps.

The vendor offers live video call functionality, which provides another way in which officers and defendants can meet. During the pandemic, the appointments were almost normal; officers could see the person and have a quality conversation. In addition to providing the visual aspect, the probation department found that

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the live video calls helped to build rapport between defendants and officers.

Few things provoke as much frustration as phone tag between officers and defendants. Using the app to message helps to significantly reduce that frustration. In the time it takes to type the message, officers and defendants can communicate securely whenever they want. Defendants receive pop-up notices on their phone when they are sent a new message, and they can reply at any time. Officers see the information that the message was read or not read, in addition to message replies. Officers can send out unique messages to a single defendant, as well as group messages when the need arises for reasons such as weather closure or a change in COVID policies.

One of the most significant benefits of using the app is the ability to communicate with defendants whenever and wherever they have access to their smartphones. Since most people carry their smartphones with them virtually 24/7, they can see all the messages and notices that pop up and reply easily from almost anywhere. This new way of communicating with defendants has helped to build a stronger rapport as they see that CMS is trying to work with them. They see probation officers as “friends” that will hold them accountable.

The app has provided CMC the ability to do regular probation supervision tasks and create alternative ways to work with the defendants, such as:

- Supervise college students who do not live in Cleveland. Students can report from school using their mobile phone without having to miss school. It helps

them take care of their probation requirements and get a college education at the same time. Everyone wins.

- Supplement meetings for defendants who are required to report multiple times a month. When appropriate, defendants can report to the office one week, and in the next week use the app to participate in a live video call and/or submit a questionnaire.
- Live video calls provide a way for officers to see if the defendant is where they are supposed to be—at work, community service, etc. It is a way to location check, plus let defendants show their officer where they are and with whom they spend time.

Adopting any new product has pros and cons. While CMC selected the new product based on the benefits it could provide defendants and officers, CMC found one challenge was convincing some officers to try the new technology. The defendants are generally younger and are comfortable using technology for everything from applying for a job to ordering food. They expect to be able to use technology regardless of what they are doing. However, as an industry, probation departments do not always have the latest technology and can be slow to change. As new officers join the department, it is easier for them to see the benefits.

The court has seen the benefits of the probation department using the supervision app. Most notably, defendants are more likely to attend court events when they receive appointments and follow-up reminders. In addition to providing the date and time of an event, POs can help

defendants be better prepared by adding a note about what to bring with them. Based on the defendant's phone capabilities, the appointment notice can provide the defendant with a map to the courthouse, where to park, and information about public transportation.

To use the app, the defendant needs a smartphone and regular access to Wi-Fi. While most smartphone users are tech savvy, before enrolling a defendant, it helps to review the activities they will be doing on their phone (text messaging, using the camera, checking schedules, and getting pop-up notifications) to make sure their phone has those capabilities and access is turned on, and the defendant has the appropriate skill set to manage those functions. A typical agency office desktop and internet setup is what the department's users need; no software download is required, and the officers log in via a desktop portal.

Security is always a priority when data are exchanged between defendants and officers, so it was important to CMC that the product have strong security. The app requires defendant to log in using two-factor authentication to verify their identity and requires officers to approve the enrollment before they can begin using the app. A defendant will log in using a username and password and then must follow facial and voice recognition prompts to use the app.

A benefit for POs is offering the use of the app as an incentive. The department has found that defendants who meet the appropriate criteria and consistently meet their probation conditions appreciate the ability to earn the privilege to use the app. It shows that CMC is a modern agency and wants to provide defendants with tools that will help them succeed.

CMC offers these ideas to help introduce new app technology to other courts who need to monitor defendants. For the initial rollout, identify staff and defendants that are tech-savvy and will support the product's use for your first group of users. Once some see the benefits, it is easier to get others on board. Generate frequently asked questions ready for officers and defendants before beginning enrollment. Begin testing using the product as a defendant would. It is easier to explain and understand how the app works if staff members have used it themselves. Take the time to train an internal "superuser" who can answer frequently asked questions. When possible, have the defendant enroll in the app while they are on the phone with an officer or in the office.

Encourage POs to think of other ways to use the product in their supervision beyond compliance checking. For example, have a video call to meet a defendant's new baby or when they are performing community service; create questionnaires that support the curriculum they are learning in their programs; or have live video calls with a defendant and their family. These can help build rapport and a strong support network.

If CMC learned anything from the pandemic, we learned that we must be ready and willing to pivot and try new things. The path forward requires us to meet defendants in the middle, and the right technology can do that.