



Case Study

Technology Helps Rural Community Connect

Columbia County Probation Finds success with mobile supervision during a pandemic and beyond.

HIGHLIGHTS OF SUCCESS

- Columbia County Probation officers are now using a mobile app to communicate with their clients more frequently to improve outcomes.
- Those benefiting from the technology are a mix of low-, medium-, and high-risk clients from all types of caseloads including sex offender and domestic violence.
- When COVID-19 resulted in stay-at-home orders, the department used functionality called Text-to-All to immediately notify probationers that the office was shutting down, cancelling scheduled office visits, and shifting to remote check-ins.

LOCATION

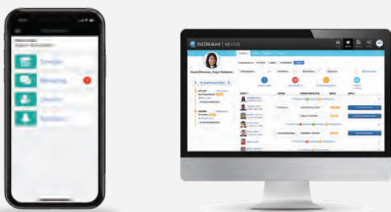
Columbia County, New York

CATEGORIES

Probation
Evidence-Based Practices
COVID-19

MOBILE APP & SOFTWARE SOLUTIONS

SCRAM TouchPoint™
SCRAM Nexus®



Program Overview

Nestled between the Hudson River to the west and Massachusetts to the east, sits the small rural community of Columbia County, New York. Local farms span the landscape and provide the area with fresh meat, eggs, herbs, and produce. Many of the 60,000 residents are employed in blue-collar professions in the construction, retail, and service industries, but face challenges like many in rural communities around the country. Lack of transportation options and difficulties finding affordable housing persist. And while many are employed, still more than 11 percent live below the poverty line.

These factors make the task set by the Columbia County Probation Department even more challenging. This dedicated group of officers serves a critical role in community supervision by overseeing justice-involved individuals charged or convicted of various crimes. They supervise these individuals through random drug and alcohol testing, referring them for counseling and treatment, and maintaining a close view of how well their

clients are complying with court-ordered probation conditions.

This mission, combined with the intrinsic challenges faced by members of the community, is what led the department to implement the latest technology to successfully accomplish the task. The Columbia County Probation Department was one of the first in the state to institute the use of SCRAM Nexus®, an innovative evidence-based practices software platform, in combination with SCRAM TouchPoint™ a client engagement smartphone mobile application.

How is SCRAM Technology Used?

Because clients spend most of their time in the community encountering daily stressors, triggers for crime, substance use, and negative influences from social circles, delivering treatment and interventions solely during office appointments is often not enough to impact sustainable behavior change.

SCRAM Nexus is the first-ever decision support software that compiles a client's behavioral data and automatically



Using Evidence-Based Practices and balancing enforcement, structure, treatment and support, we hold people on probation accountable and provide opportunities to forge a new path removed from the justice system.

—Columbia County Probation Department website

recommends evidence-based responses so supervision officers can assign appropriate incentives and sanctions swiftly and reliably. And in combination with SCRAM TouchPoint—an app that probationers download on their own mobile devices—officers can deliver and store secure, text-like messages to clients to easily deliver encouraging messages and performance feedback in real-time. This type of immediate communication also helps save time by enabling officers to deliver timely, positive reinforcement such as a congratulatory message after a client attends a counseling session or submits a negative drug test. Being continually connected to clients' daily lives can help reinforce program messages and ultimately improve client outcomes.

Columbia County Probation Director Vince Doto was a key champion of bringing the technology to the table for the department. Doto is a cutting-edge leader with a passion for bringing critical reforms to the complex field of community corrections. His focus on improving probation processes and reducing client recidivism is what led him to introduce SCRAM Nexus with TouchPoint to his department.

“It struck me as being the future of community supervision and probation,” said Doto, who touted TouchPoint’s ease of use and simple implementation as a major benefit. “It is a really effective way to have more efficient communication with the people that we are working with, which will lead to better outcomes.”

Columbia County officers developed a process of using TouchPoint to communicate with clients more frequently, to provide them automatic reminders of their appointments, and to request

that they complete check-ins to be done remotely through the app.

While the app gives officers a more reliable way to keep in touch, it also gives clients a more efficient way to make sure they are complying with court orders. Not only were they able to check-in according to an assigned schedule, but they can also scan and share documents that previously would have had to be delivered in person. And TouchPoint also provides appointment reminders that help probationers avoid technical violations that may land them back in jail.

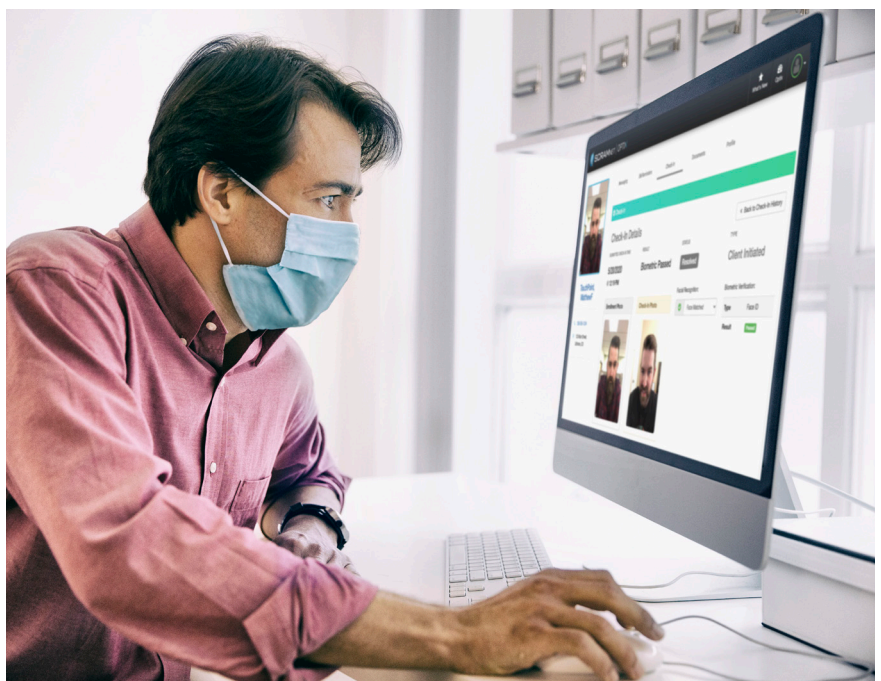
The team first began using TouchPoint to maintain a higher level of oversight with their sex offender caseload—a group of clients who are required to connect with probation weekly. TouchPoint enabled those check-ins to be more efficient and provided peace of mind for the officers by capturing a GPS point of the check-in location and a live photo to verify the client’s identity. “TouchPoint gave our

clients the ability to do a check-in without having to get out of work, or struggling to find a ride to the office,” Doto explained.

The team soon discovered the app had benefits they didn’t anticipate. Clients struggling with mental health or substance abuse issues found it beneficial to be able to send a message to their probation officer through TouchPoint rather than having to navigate the phone system and leaving a voicemail.

“I think it helps build the rapport and the relationship between the officer and the client,” said Doto. “In the end I believe that rapport is what is going to make the folks that we work with successful and have better outcomes more often.”

Providing positive reinforcement is at the core of implementing evidence-based practices. So, Probation Officer Lauren Ricci uses TouchPoint as an incentive for her clients who are doing well in completing the terms of their supervision. As a reward for improvement, her probationers can earn the use of TouchPoint to complete their required check-in remotely. “It shows trust,” said Ricci. “At some point they aren’t going to be on probation, so you want to give them that responsibility to see how they are going to do,” she explained, “and if someone begins to slip you can pull them back in.”



Responding to a Global Crisis

When COVID-19 impacted departments globally in the spring of 2020, the Columbia County Probation Department felt fortunate that they had already implemented this critical technology to communicate with many of their clients.

Once stay-at-home orders went into effect, Officer Gavin Cipollino was able to notify all clients at once using TouchPoint's functionality called Text-to-All. Using Text-to-All, the team was able to immediately notify probationers that the office was shutting down, instruct them to vacate scheduled office visits, and shift direction to remote check-ins. "It was really nice to be able to shoot out that huge text message to everyone and know that they got it," said Cipollino.

Columbia County Probation Officer Katrina Keyser was expecting her second baby when COVID-19 hit and found the prospect of being out in the community and potentially being exposed to the virus to be especially daunting. "When we were first beginning to use this technology, we didn't expect COVID," she said. "Once

it hit, [TouchPoint] was all I had, so the way that happened was amazing," she explained, "it was great to have that tool so I could keep up with my clients and didn't have to leave my house while pregnant."

Officer Ricci also found TouchPoint to be helpful during that time, when she was unable to do home visits but needed to retain contact with those on her felony caseload. "With COVID, all we could have is phone contact," said Officer Ricci. "This provided another avenue to keep in contact with our clients. And with GPS points [obtained during check-ins], we could see that they were still where they were supposed to be."

Outcomes

The Columbia County Probation Department has just over 100 clients enabled for SCRAM Nexus with approximately 50 of those using SCRAM TouchPoint. The clients are a mix of low-, medium-, and high-risk clients from all types of caseloads including sex offender and domestic violence.

For these clients, SCRAM TouchPoint has been successfully implemented to

enable a range of functions and features, including uploading documents, sending and receiving messages, completing remote check-ins, and delivery of appointment reminders – all with the goal of promoting client success and reducing recidivism.

For officers, risk-based responses are the key to client success. Incentives and sanctions that are too severe or too lenient and aren't based on client risk levels can result in negative client outcomes. Columbia County Probation officers use Nexus to recommend the proper magnitude of response matched with the incentive, sanction, or intervention based specifically on client risk and needs. The officers use interactive reports and analytics to surface valuable trends and to track what happens throughout a client's journey.

And, the team isn't quite done innovating or finding ways to use the technology to better serve their clients and the community. They are working with the team at SCRAM Systems to connect local treatment providers through TouchPoint. Once completed, officers will be able to seamlessly share information with the therapists and other service providers treating their clients. Doto also has plans to expand use of the app as the team and clients continue to rely on it, including making it a key tool for the amplified contact required of sex offenders around the Halloween holiday. And he is exploring the functionality that enables the Columbia County clients to make their required payments through TouchPoint.

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—Vince Doto, Columbia County Probation Director