

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/does-a-strengths-based-approach-miss-the-point>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

At [APT](#), we have a story we use for training new staff about the complexities of using strengths-based communication in systems focused on risk.

A few years ago, in preparation for a court appearance about one of the kids in our program, the APT therapist submitted a report summarizing our clients variable progress since the last hearing. The kid had struggled with several of his court-mandated requirements, but from a therapeutic standpoint, we at APT saw some forward motion. Our goal in the report was to highlight his successes and place his challenges in a context of incremental progress.

From the bench, the judge considered the report. Then he looked up and, holding it by the staple at the corner of the page, said How did you enjoy the play, Mrs. Lincoln?

Its a great example of the tension that can exist between treatment and criminal justice. The judges intended, if somewhat esoteric, message to us was that when assessing a youth with significant problems, talking about anything besides the problems misses the point entirely. From a treatment perspective, however, the counterargument is that information about context and strengths is not a distraction; it reveals key elements of the solution to the problems.

The risk is that in the face of this tension, treatment providers generally either shrug their shoulders and say that the justice system just doesnt get it when it comes to good treatment, or respond to the demands of the system, focusing only on problems and risk in an effort to be taken more seriously.

Neither of those is the solution. If treatment providers believe that we are the ones who get it, we have an obligation to articulate to the justice professionals how to tap into clients strengths to address their problems. Although it is an advance to describe clients as possessing strengths, instead of as the sum of their problems, it doesnt go far enough. In order for strengths-based work to be most meaningful, we have to be able to describe not only the existence of strengths and risks, but also their connection. I stand by the court report submitted that day; I dont think it glossed over the fact that the kid had failed to do most of what the court had asked of him. For APT, the storys abiding lesson has been to focus our work on effectively describing the relationship between strength and risk, so that judges will no longer have to ask why that relationship is relevant.

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