



# **Virginia Department of Corrections Impact of Dialogue Implementation**

Research—Strategic Planning Unit

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May 2020

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# Introduction

In recent years, the Virginia Department of Corrections (VADOC) has undergone a major cultural shift, with the creation of several new practices aimed to create a healing, rewarding, and motivating organizational culture. In 2010, newly appointed Director Harold Clarke, aimed to transform correctional leadership, not by commanding control, but by nurturing leaders to inspire others.<sup>1</sup> Beginning in 2012, Director Clarke and the VADOC implemented the Healing Environment and Dialogue initiatives to improve public safety in the Commonwealth by cultivating an organization that works together to encourage positive and progressive changes.

In order for Director Clarke to move forward with his vision for an improved culture at the VADOC, he brought the teachings of Peter Garrett and Jane Ball with the Dialogue Associates to the agency.<sup>2</sup> Named the original pioneers of Professional Dialogue, they believed that Dialogue practices were the foundation of the Healing Environment and all other initiatives at the VADOC. The development of the Dialogic Modes, Actions and Practices, aimed to educate employees on effective ways to talk and think together.

In addition to adopting the teachings and techniques from the Dialogue Associates, Director Clarke introduced his first reading list. The reading list included *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together*, by Dr. William Isaacs. Dr. Isaacs describes the underlying problem for organizations as their inability to think and speak together in critical moments. How individuals in a specific organization communicate will have a direct impact on their effectiveness as a whole.<sup>3</sup>

Over Director Clarke's tenure, recidivism rates have decreased, which is a positive indicator of staff engagement. Beginning with the implementation of the Healing Environment and Dialogue initiatives in 2012, Director Clarke continuously strives to bring positive changes to the Commonwealth. Another positive change came with the adoption of Learning Teams for all VADOC employees in 2016. Learning Teams allow employees to come together and engage in meaningful dialogue pertaining to various personal and professional topics each month. Learning Teams provide a safe container, a place where employees can openly share, to continue to learn and think together.

The following information will explore the agency's culture and offender behavior since introducing the VADOC to Dialogue. First, the report will examine recidivism rates from FY2007 to FY2015. It is important to note that from FY2007 to FY2015, the total number of State Responsible (SR) Releases with the VADOC that were re-incarcerated within three years of their release date, decreased by 3%. Virginia has reported the lowest recidivism rate in the country for the past four years. Next, the report will provide findings from the Annual Employee Survey, specifically related to Dialogue initiatives. In order to analyze trends and understand the evolving culture at the VADOC, this report highlights results across six employee surveys.

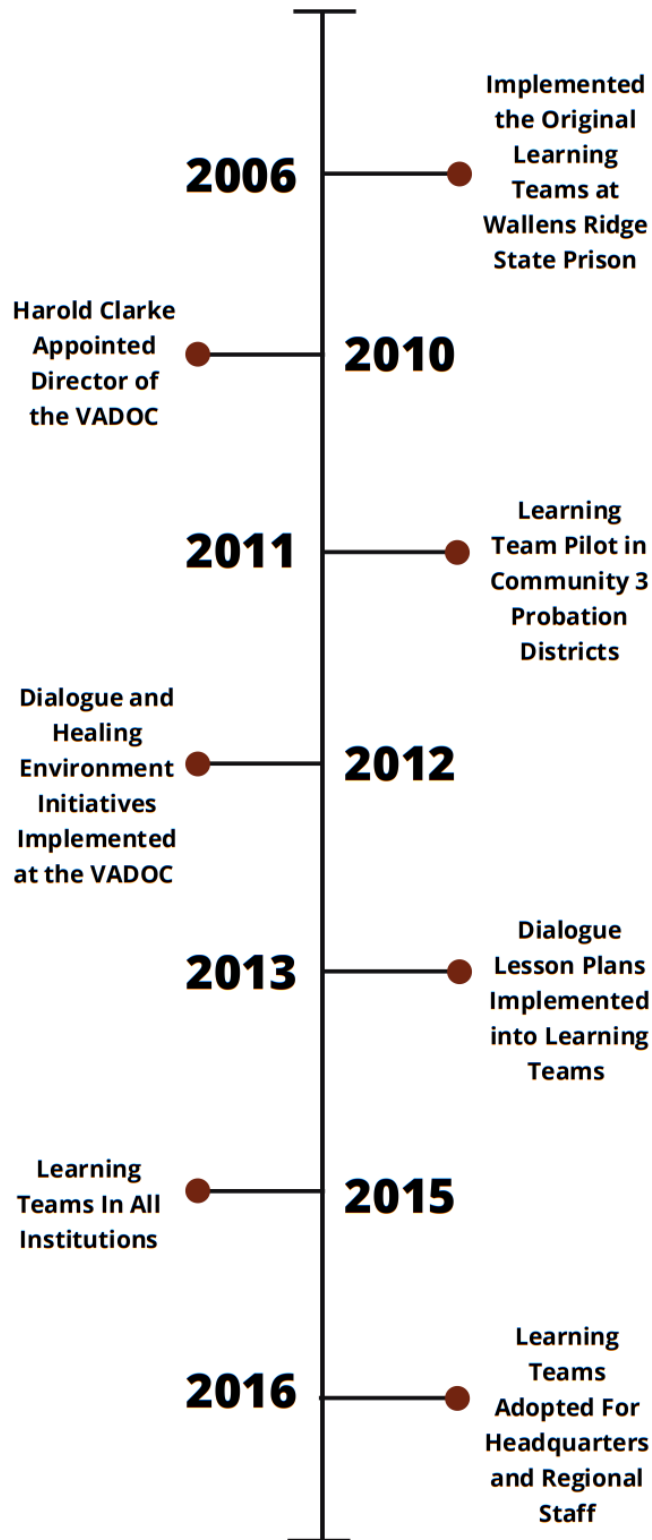
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<sup>1</sup> Clarke, H. & Williams, S. (2018). *Dialogue and a healing environment in the Virginia department of corrections*.

<sup>2</sup> Dialogue Associates. (n.d.). <https://www.dialogue-associates.com/>

<sup>3</sup> Isaacs, W. (1999). *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together: A Pioneering Approach to Communicating in Business and In Life*. New York: Currency.

# Timeline of Initiatives



Virginia Department of Corrections  
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## Recidivism Rates

At 23.1%, in FY2015 the VADOC reported the lowest recidivism rate in the country among the states that report three-year State Responsible (SR) re-incarceration rates. VADOC has also reported the lowest rate in each of the past four years. This is a reflection of the agency's commitment to their vision to improve long-term public safety by successfully reintegrating offenders into our communities and effectively supervising parolees and probationers through a culture of respect, ethical behavior, and accountability.

Part of the cultural shift addresses the decision making process as VADOC adopted a Data Driven Decision (3-D) model. Part of the 3-D approach involves not only measuring recidivism, but also looks at why people recidivate. Since 2010, VADOC has developed statistical models to examine the various risk factors, which explain why some recidivate and others do not. During this time, there were fiscal challenges with the closing of three VADOC facilities in FY2014. As a result, an increasing number of offenders sentenced to SR incarceration were unable to come to VADOC facilities and therefore, not exposed to the agency's cultural shift. Since all are included in the recidivism rate, the model considers this fiscal constraint.

Consistent with other studies, higher recidivism rates are likely among those who are younger male offenders, as well as those with prior incarcerations. In addition, other factors influencing recidivism in Virginia includes a non-violent offender (more likely), those with a known mental health impairment (more likely), those who serve their entire incarceration in a jail versus a VADOC prison (more likely), and those with a history of illicit opioid use. The most recent study on FY2015 SR Releases also shows increased recidivism among those who tested positive for cocaine.

Since the implementation of the Healing Environment and Dialogue initiatives, the VADOC has promoted a culture that is respectful, supportive, and caring. When VADOC employees develop their dialogic skills, they increase their ability to think together especially in critical moments. Both the Healing Environment and Dialogue initiatives work together to provide effective incarceration, supervision, and evidence-based re-entry programs to offenders.

## Recidivism Rates Continued...

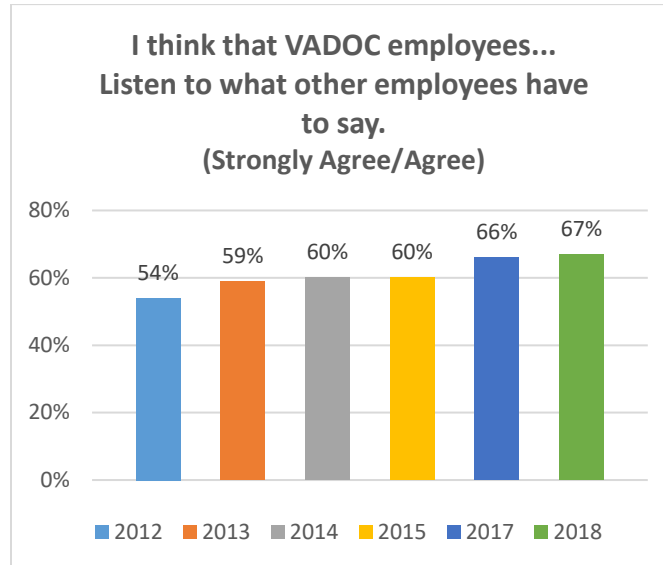
The following tables report 3-year re-incarceration rates based on specific factors that potentially influence recidivism in FY2015.

<b>By Location Type</b>	
<i>VADOC Facility</i>	<b>21.1%</b>
<i>Jail Only</i>	<b>25.7%</b>
<b>By Mental Impairment</b>	
<i>Mentally Impaired</i>	<b>26.2%</b>
<i>No Known Mental Impairment</i>	<b>22.4%</b>
<b>Of VADOC Facility Offenders by Mental Impairment</b>	
<i>Mentally Impaired</i>	<b>24.4%</b>
<i>No Known Mental Impairment</i>	<b>19.8%</b>
<b>Of Jail Only Offenders by Mental Impairment</b>	
<i>Mentally Impaired</i>	<b>36.3%</b>
<i>No Known Mental Impairment</i>	<b>25.0%</b>
<b>By Opioid Use</b>	
<i>Opioid History</i>	<b>34.9%</b>
<i>No Opioid History</i>	<b>21.7%</b>
<b>By Opioid Use History and Mental Impairment</b>	
<i>Opioids, Mental Impairment</i>	<b>32.5%</b>
<i>No Opioids, Mental Impairment</i>	<b>35.7%</b>
<i>Opioids, No Known Mental Impairment</i>	<b>25.2%</b>
<i>No Opioids, No Known Mental Impairment</i>	<b>20.9%</b>

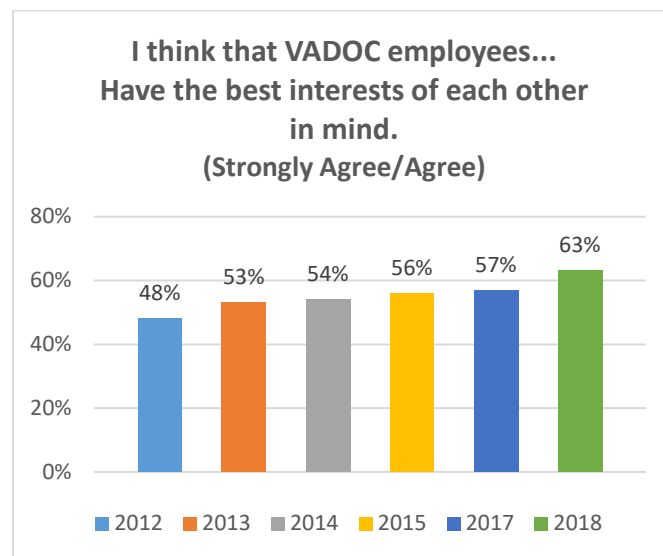
<b>3-Year Re-Incarceration Rate</b>	
<b>FY2007</b>	26.1%
<b>FY2008</b>	23.4%
<b>FY2009</b>	22.8%
<b>FY2010</b>	22.8%
<b>FY2011</b>	23.0%
<b>FY2012</b>	23.4%
<b>FY2013</b>	22.4%
<b>FY2014</b>	23.4%
<b>FY2015</b>	23.1%

## Findings from the VADOC Annual Employee Survey

In order to gauge the shift in culture, the VADOC has invited employees to participate in seven anonymous and voluntary surveys since 2012. The findings from the Annual Employee Survey allows agency leadership to analyze the changing culture at the VADOC.

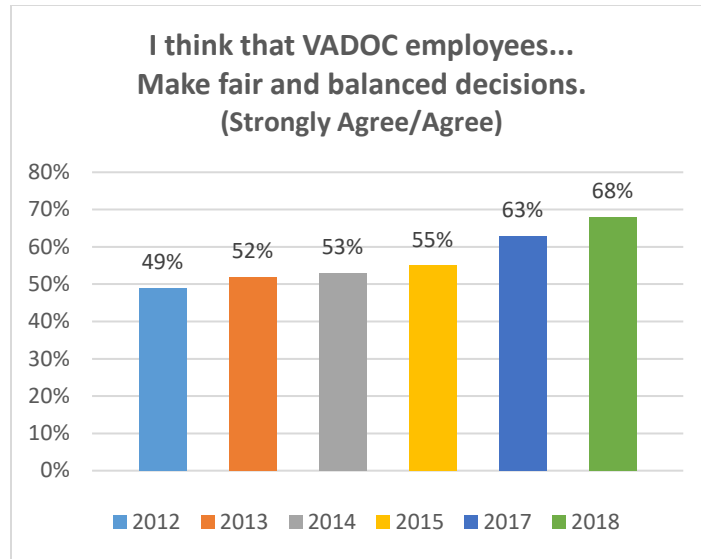


- From FY2012 to FY2018, respondents who Strongly Agreed/Agreed that VADOC employees listen to what other employees have to say, increased by 13 percentage points

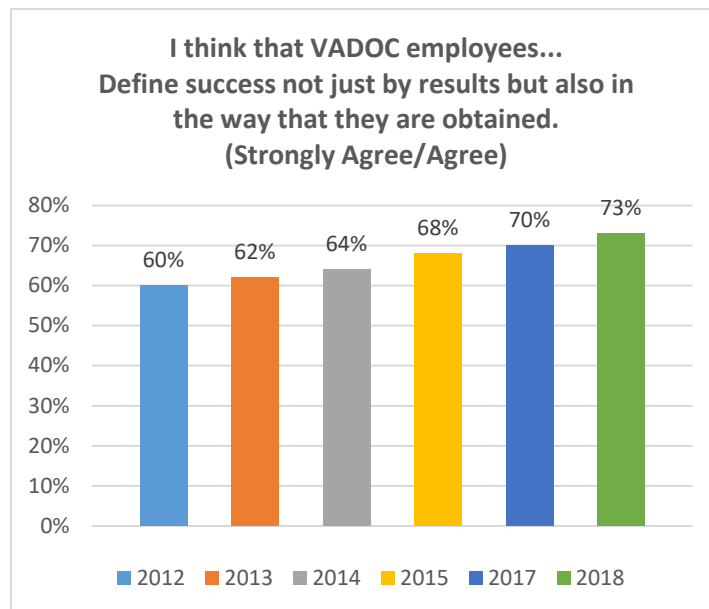


*Note: There was no employee survey in 2016*

- From FY2012 to FY2018, respondents who Strongly Agreed/Agreed that VADOC employees have the best interests of each other in mind, increased by 15 percentage points



- From FY2012 to FY2018, respondents who Strongly Agreed/Agreed that VADOC employees make fair and balanced decisions increased by 19 percentage points



*Note: There was no employee survey in 2016*

- From FY2012 to FY2018, respondents who Strongly Agreed/Agreed that VADOC employees define success not just by results but also in the way that they are obtained increased by 13 percentage points



## Conclusion

Under the leadership of Director Harold Clarke, the VADOC has undergone major cultural shifts in order to improve offender behavior, reduce recidivism rates, and increase employee engagement. Beginning with the implementation of the Healing Environment and Dialogue initiatives in 2012, the agency collaborated with Dialogue professionals in order to move forward with the Director's vision to improve the culture at the VADOC. By 2016, all employees were required to attend regular Learning Team meetings in order to learn how to think and speak together, especially in critical conversations. As previously stated, how individuals in an organization communicate will have a direct impact on their effectiveness as a whole.

The preceding report examined the possible contributors to improved offender behavior at the VADOC. With 23.1% in FY2015, the VADOC reported the lowest recidivism rate in the country, which is a positive indicator of staff engagement. After developing statistical models in 2010, the VADOC analyzed the various reasons why some individuals recidivate and why others do not. The findings reported that individuals were more likely to recidivate if they were non-violent offenders, had a known mental impairment, served their entire incarceration in jail versus a VADOC facility, and those with a history of illicit opioid use. Another factor of recidivism was the closure of three VADOC facilities in FY2014. The closure of these facilities meant that offenders were not able to benefit from the agency's cultural shift and various programming. Overall, after exploring the possible factors affecting recidivism rates, it is clear that during the cultural shift at the VADOC, SR offenders were less likely to recidivate.

The report also examined the possible connection of offender behavior and employee engagement. In order to determine these connections, the report analyzed findings from the VADOC Annual Employee Survey since the implementation of Director Clarke's initiatives in 2012 through 2018. Overtime, there have been significant increases in employee's perception, communication, intent, and decisions. The positive impact of improved staff engagement becomes clear throughout these findings.

The aim of this report is to highlight the positive impact that Director Clarke's initiatives have on the agency as a whole. Specifically, how the introduction of Dialogue has positively influenced offender behavior at the VADOC. By analyzing trends seen in the Annual Employee Survey and recidivism rates prior to and after Dialogue implementation, the impact of the cultural shift inspired by Director Clarke becomes clearer. Overall, the VADOC has made major strides in improving the quality of life in the Commonwealth.