Structured Decision Making Framework for Parole Hearings

What is the Structured Decision Making Framework?

The Structured Decision Making Framework (SDMF) is a structured professional judgement model; that is, a systematic compilation of key factors reflecting best practice in risk assessment and parole release decision-making. It combines both research-supported factors and relevant legal considerations, providing a template for the Board of Parole Hearings’ panel members to follow that is consistent with the law governing parole decisions in California. The resulting analysis forms the basis for a parole decision. Use of SDMF will yield decisions that are structured, transparent, and focused on an offender’s risk. Additionally, following a structured approach typically increases consistency among the panel and is likely to result in more efficient parole hearings and decisions.

What the SDMF is not.

The SDMF is not an arithmetic scale; there is no need for norms or cut points. It is not scored; rather it guides the Board’s commissioners and deputy commissioners in completing an analysis of key factors to consider when arriving at a decision. It does not limit panel members’ discretion in arriving at a release decision.

Why is the Board of Parole Hearings proposing to use the SDMF?

The SDMF has been implemented in seven states (Connecticut, Kansas, Kentucky, Ohio, South Dakota, Utah, and Washington) and is used by the National Parole Board of Canada. Initial findings include reductions in rates of parolee failure and satisfaction by board members who use it regarding efficiency and confidence. Currently, the Board has very good performance indices in terms of grant rates and recidivism rates for long-term offenders, but it is always striving to be at the forefront of effective correctional practice.

Notwithstanding excellent selection and training of current Commissioners and Deputy Commissioners, and high-quality Comprehensive Risk Assessments by the Board’s Forensic Assessment Division, the Board believes adopting a more structured and transparent decision model will be positive and will maintain current high performance standards. Initial research on the use of the SDMF by other paroling authorities...
suggests board members find it a useful strategy for summarizing cases and focusing on relevant factors when reviewing file information and conducting hearings.

**How is parole decision making different from risk assessment?**

The Board’s Comprehensive Risk Assessments by the Forensic Assessment Division identify whether certain risk factors are currently relevant and indicate an individual’s potential risk of committing violence in the future. Hearing panels are responsible for determining whether the individual poses a current unreasonable risk to public safety. As a result, parole decision making is a more holistic approach that balances risk to public safety with legal obligations regarding release and the individual’s performance while in prison.

**How does the SDMF contribute to public safety?**

Transparency in decision-making improves public confidence regarding parole decisions, and assists offenders in understanding any changes that are needed to improve the likelihood of a future grant of parole. Transparency in parole decisions instills hope for offenders and provides a meaningful incentive for them to engage in rehabilitative programming, making our prisons safer for staff and offenders. In contrast, ambiguity in parole decision-making leads to concerns regarding bias and capriciousness, which can minimize incentives for offenders to engage in rehabilitative programming and could lead to prisons that are less safe.

By incorporating an evidence-based approach, the SDMF ensures that Commissioners and Deputy Commissioners will consider the most salient factors in determining parole suitability. Such an approach also means that the Board will not base its decisions on extraneous factors that might be unrelated to current risk.

**How does the SDMF relate to current policy and legislation?**

Parole release for long-term offenders in California is presumptive by statute, unless the Board determines the inmate continues to pose a current unreasonable risk to public safety. In arriving at this determination the Board is required to review all relevant and reliable information, analyze factors of suitability and unsuitability listed in the Board’s regulations, and determine parole suitability in a manner consistent with governing case law. The SDMF is consistent with these requirements.

The SDMF distinguishes between risk relevant factors and legal factors the Board must consider, such as youth offender and elderly parole factors. Such approach is consistent with due process and will be helpful in situations where the applicant’s release decision is reviewed.

For additional information concerning the Board of Parole Hearings, you may visit [http://www.cdcr.ca.gov/BOPH/](http://www.cdcr.ca.gov/BOPH/) or call (916) 445-4072.