

CORRECTIONAL OASIS

A PUBLICATION OF DESERT WATERS CORRECTIONAL OUTREACH
A NON-PROFIT FOR THE WELL-BEING OF CORRECTIONAL STAFF & THEIR FAMILIES

VOLUME 3, ISSUE 7

Recipients of Pikes Peak CFC funds—Agency #6022

JULY 2006

From Caterina's Desk

STAGES

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I have always been interested in the way we develop new awareness and novel coping skills as we amass more life experiences whether in our professional or our personal arenas.

This past month I was approached on separate occasions by three veteran correctional staff—two men and one woman—who described to me how they changed their approach to corrections work over time. They reported that, as a result of changes they made, they became more effective at their job, more immune to burnout, and happier at home.

One of these veterans described it the best.

(Identifying details have been omitted or changed to protect anonymity.) He said, "For about my first ten years in corrections going to work was about gearing up for a fight. I remember how my muscles would tense up and my face would assume that 'I'll stare you down'

look. I certainly wanted to be imposing and intimidating to inmates. Gradually I also started finding fault with more and more of the staff, and I began to isolate myself. And this carried over to my home life as well. I *had to* be in absolute control wherever I was. Everything boiled down to a battle I *had to* win—whether managing inmates, disciplining my son, or arguing with my wife. I hate to admit it, but the truth is that I got myself in many avoidable clashes over the years, and I almost wore myself out.

After about ten years of this, I got tired of being 'the Hulk.' I realized I was trying too hard to stay in control. My 'take-them-on' attitude backfired on me

more often than not. (I came really close to losing my marriage.) So I started studying how experienced coworkers handled situations. I especially watched one of our older sergeants. He would listen well and respond in a calm, respectful, but firm voice. He knew policy inside out and he did not play favorites. And he was great at helping inmates cool down. I never told him that, but he became my role model. I started communicating his way and I soon found out that I was nowhere near as exhausted when I'd get off work. I remained vigilant, but I was no longer off-the-charts

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vigilant, cocked and ready to fire like I used to be. Little by little life at home got better also. I quit criticizing and arguing about everything. I tried harder to understand other people's point of view. What helped the most was my decision to teach Sunday school. The kids were a breath of fresh air."

The other two staff members shared essentially the same story. They found out that anger and hate are huge energy drains. When Corrections Fatigue started setting in, they knew they had to figure better ways to handle stress on the job, or their career would be miserable or even over. Through some serious soul-searching and through observing other staff, these veterans adopted more skillful ways to interact with inmates, other coworkers, and family members. Over time they also developed more effective

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tive ways to take care of their own needs. The end result was that they would exert less effort—stress themselves less—but overall achieve greater results.

It is not surprising that correctional staff, especially custody (security) personnel, may start on the job with the expectation that they have to be stereotypically “big, bad and tough” to be good correctional officers.

As time goes on, they may realize that this approach drains them and even backfires on them. They might then actively begin to seek ways to make changes.

Those who develop effective self-management skills

and interpersonal skills recapture their quality of life and rekindle the spark of engagement in their career. They also tend to become effective leaders

in their field. Both self-management and people-management skills fall under what has been labeled “Emotional Intelligence.” It seems reasonable to propose that teaching Emotional Intelligence skills in correctional

Training Academies throughout the country would ensure that the majority of the staff “get there” sooner rather than later and improve their quality of life both at work and at home.

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The Corrections Ventline™: An Update

We officially kicked off the phone branch of the Corrections Ventline™ last July (866-YOU-VENT), thanks to a grant from the Caring For Colorado Foundation. (The email branch of the Ventline™—youvent@desertwaters.com—became officially operational in April 2005.) I say “officially,” because we started receiving calls and emails in March 2005, when the word got out that we were planning on setting up a hotline for staff and their loved ones. The Corrections Ventline™ is unique in that it offers a safe place for correctional staff and those related to them to vent anonymously and confidentially and to receive support and help in a crisis. Our trained Responders are here to listen non-judgmentally, support callers/writers as they explore their options, and offer resources and referrals to them when appropriate. The Ventline™ service does not constitute professional counseling.

We are thrilled to report that as of June 23, 2006, we have had 95 contacts on the Corrections Ventline™.

However, Ventline™ users can set up one crisis intervention consultation free of charge on the phone with a mental health provider through Desert Waters.

We are thrilled to report that as of June 23, 2006, we have had 95 contacts on the Corrections Ventline™. This is reason for celebration, as anyone who knows the correctional staff culture is aware of how cautious (should I say “mistrusting”?) the staff is regarding sharing personal information with anyone, let alone virtual strangers.

Thanks to the Ventline™, we have had the privilege to assist precious people struggling with various types of challenges—from workplace frustrations to divorce to life-threatening illness to serious suicidal thinking. By the grace of God, we be-

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Corrections Ventline™: An Update

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lieve we have made a positive difference in these people's lives. Just knowing that someone is there to listen and to care has been of help to several individuals.

Someone asked me why we focus on individuals when we are involved in training large groups of staff and possibly whole institutions. My response is that reaching out to the individual and the whole facility are both essential. We want to be able to offer solutions that impact the organization, but we also want to keep our finger on the pulse of the individual. If we cannot understand and have compassion for the individual, we shall have difficulty relating to the large group.

At this time we are working to enlist therapists throughout Colorado who can offer counseling to corrections and detention staff and their families. Our plan is to provide them with information on mental health issues relating to the corrections culture so we can refer to them people who contact us on the Ventline™ seeking counseling.

A Sad Day

On Wednesday June 21, a correctional officer (CO) opened fire at federal agents serving arrest warrants on six COs charged with alleged conspiracy to swap contraband for sex with female inmates at the Tallahassee Federal Correctional Institution. An agent with the Department of Justice's Office of Inspector General and the shooter were killed, and a prison official was injured. Sadly, the shooter essentially committed "suicide by cop" by opening fire at the federal agents. Regrettably, he also chose to take someone else with him, a federal agent who was simply doing his job.

Our sympathies go to the bereaved families. This grievous incident draws attention once more to the importance of addressing ethical issues of staff persistently, and on an ongoing basis.

The Call to Connection

This email was sent to us recently to share with staff. The writer wishes to remain anonymous.

At a meeting this morning I was challenged by someone who appeared distressed. This individual sent a message of inner turmoil and bitterness, with little desire to actually speak with me. As I reflected on it later, I thought about the environment in which he spends most of his day. This person is assigned to a very secure lockdown unit within the institution. It was easy for me to see how even the layout of his confined work space can help create negativity.

Where might some of that negativity go? It can either be internalized—held in and allowed to leak out periodically—or it can be processed, shared, understood and let go with or without accompanying changes. The choice to internalize or process negativity is ours. Obviously, I would recommend the later. We must

first recognize the negative energy within us and then make the decision to process it, share it, release it, or somehow change it, so it does not change us.

I grew up in a family system where to be seen and not heard was reinforced. Many of us try to keep our emotions in check as this tends to be the most socially acceptable behavior and, on the surface, easier and less complicated. The downside is we "stuff" the negativity with which we come into contact each day in a correctional setting. This can change us, not only for the short term but the long term—and not for the better.

I would encourage all of us to find a safe space to process the impact of the work on us and find hope. If we seek such an outlet, we can find it. I believe Desert Waters is an awesome option. Try it!

Desert Waters

Correctional Outreach



*a non-profit organization
for the well-being of correctional
staff and their families*

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BLOGS

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our services possible!**

The Corrections Ventline™
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AJA Training—Officer Suicide

Dr. Spinaris and Master Deputy Christopher Toske of Johnson County Sheriff’s Department, Olathe, Kansas, had the privilege to co-teach the first of its kind two-day class on *Officer Suicide: Prevention, Management and Aftermath* in Charlotte, NC. Twelve jail administrators and line staff attended this much-needed regional training offered by the American Jail Association. The training focuses on methods to “suicide-proof” correctional staff as much as possible by being aware and proactive in a multitude of ways.

Is correctional officer suicide a problem that needs to be addressed? We believe so. In addition to anecdotal evidence, a study by Stack & Tsoudis¹ draws attention to this subject. These researchers reviewed re-

ports from the 1990 National Mortality Detail File (U.S. Public Health Service, 1994) from 21 states which report occupation of the deceased. They found that 7.14% of correctional officers were reported to have died of suicide in 1990 compared to 4.51% of the general working age population. Controlling for marital status, gender, age, race, and educational status, a multivariate logistic regression analysis showed that correctional officers are 39% more at risk of death from suicide (vs. natural causes) than the rest of the working age population.

¹ Stack, S.J., & Tsoudis, O. *Suicide risk among correctional officers: A logistic regression analysis*. Archives of Suicide Research, 1997, 3, 183-186.

MANY THANKS!

Individual donors: Todd & Joellen Brown, Carl Emerson, H.J. & Becky Hutson, Henriette Hutter, Judy Myers, Revs. Clint & Dr. Margie Pollard, and Russell & Cheryl Scharf.

Corporate donors: Janice Barnett, C.P.A., and Kenneth King Foundation.

Special thanks also go to: Chris & Cathy Bergquist, Judy Myers, The Old Screw, and the Ventline Responders.

Ventline Sponsors: Aquila, Inc., City of Cañon City, and Colorado State Employees Credit Union.

A donation has been made to DWCO in memory of James A. Meyer of Leavenworth, Kansas, son and stepson of Jean and Wes Connett.