

# CORRECTIONAL OASIS

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

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## Why DWCO Exists

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Ofentimes people ask us what DWCO is about. We usually have to repeat a couple of times that DWCO exists to promote the mental health of correctional **staff** and their families.

No, we do not deal with offenders or their families.

DWCO came into being to specifically address mental health needs of correctional workers at the individual, family, and organizational levels. Our desire is for correctional workers to serve in their workplace safely and sanely, with the least fallout possible at home, at work and in their communities. In a nutshell, our mission is to increase the occupational, personal and family well-being of this “forgotten” branch of law enforcement.

Our four-year-old organization is unique in its focus on this population.

Why focus on them? Because *this* is the population we were called to serve. Aren't other professions challenging? Absolutely. Corrections is not the only work environment where staff end up altered by their job. (Although I cannot think of any other profession, apart from soldiers in combat, which requires the degree of exposure to danger and horror that corrections work does, especially in high security institutions.) *These* are the people who have gripped our hearts, and *these* are the ones we want to support. Every one of them—YOU—matters, from line staff to administrative, executive, medical, education, laundry, kitchen, or maintenance staff. You all have to deal with highly demanding situations, and you all pay a price for it, even when you are not aware of it. (Your spouses and children usually are.)

Why do we care? The answer is, just because we have witnessed the broken hearts, the destructive coping patterns, the untreated anxiety, panic attacks, depression and post-traumatic stress—to name some of the most common mental health problems that keep cropping up again and again in this group. We've heard enough about shockingly high rates of divorce, substance abuse, family violence, and suicide.

How does DWCO aim to fulfill its mission?

Mental health needs of corrections staff and their families are addressed in the following key ways:

1. We maintain the Corrections Ventline, a 24/7 anonymous and confidential phone and email hotline. Ventline users are provided with a safe place to vent and be “heard,” are supported while exploring their options, and are offered community-based resources and referrals. They are also offered a free phone consultation with a mental health provider. The Ventline is operated by lay volunteer Responders trained in corrections staff's concerns and culture, and by retired corrections peer supporters.

This anonymous, free and 24/7 service is intended to be a lifeline for staff, as seeking mental health help carries a big stigma among corrections workers. The Ventline's anonymity, easy access and free use encourage staff to seek support and professional help. It offers staff and their families a safe place to confide and “connect,” information, and a free anonymous phone consultation with a counselor. Most critically, the Corrections Ventline enables us to intervene in the case of suicidal Ventline users. (We are thankful to report that since 2006 we successfully helped eight suicidal staff and three concerned about suicidal others.) A corrections employee we were privileged to help through severe suicidal ideation later emailed us the following: *I appreciate all of your time. I'm not sure I would still be here if it weren't for you all.*

2. Going to a “shrink” is looked down upon in corrections. Also some employees give up their health insurance due to high premiums or they avoid using it due to high deductibles. They also shun free Employee Assistance Program services out of fear of being identified by

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## Why DWCO Exists

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their employers. We at Desert Waters offer cash-based, corrections-sensitive professional counseling at a reduced fee. This eliminates fear of identification through health insurance records. It also helps to reduce financial barriers and financial burdens.

Thanks to the Ventline and the cash-based corrections-sensitive counseling, people who would otherwise never think about seeking mental-health help find themselves open to the idea, or they even access such help. To us every step in the direction of receiving help, no matter how small, is a victory for that person.

3. We publish a monthly newsletter, and maintain a website and blogs. These are vehicles for psychoeducation, information, self-expression by staff and family members, and peer teaching and mentoring.

4. Our focus is not only on treating mental health challenges, but also on teaching people how to take preventative and proactive steps to build their sense of well-being. We offer coping skills trainings that teach staff self-management and interpersonal skills, and use tools from the domain of Positive Psychology. For example, we help people learn how to think more optimistically.

5. We have started to provide seminars for mental health providers on the subject of treating correctional workers and their families. To most therapists, the corrections workplace is a mystery. As they know virtually nothing about the culture (apart from what is shown in movies), they are unable to factor in the workplace context and its influence when they treat individuals, couples, or their children. And the staff feels not understood by the therapists, which reduces their willingness to open up to them. Receiving our training helps therapists diagnose and address issues in a culturally-sensitive way. We hope to offer many more such trainings in the future.

6. We aim to educate the general public about the service correctional workers provide in our communities and the challenges they face. We do that through the media, such as newspapers, radio and ezines. We hope that this raising of awareness will be reflected in increased respect and appreciation of corrections staff.

So this is what DWCO is about, and why. We are on an adventure. Everyday we form new connections and learn invaluable lessons from the people we serve. So we too are being changed through what we do, and the changes are good!

THANK YOU for allowing us to enter your world. And THANK YOU to you all who support us in our mission.

### From the Old Screw

## The Man Next Door

The man next door was a strange one. He was quiet and on the outside appeared to be the same as you and me. Yet there were signs that he was different.

When I talked to him he never looked me in the eye. Instead, he kept looking all around him, checking out everything that was going on.

I wondered about this man with the guarded look and some sadness in his eyes. We went out to eat one time. He was almost rude in making sure he sat with his back to a wall where he could see all entryways.

As I grew to know and understand this man I couldn't help but think, "He sure acts strange, yet he seems to be so nice!" He was gentle with children and animals. With grown-ups he was sometimes short, gruff.

Then one day I found out why this man was the way he was.

He told me some things about his work and I thought, "How can he go into that place every day and do his job? How can anyone do that job?"

He was the first Prison Officer I had ever met. He told me that even women worked in there around killers and rapists. I wondered, "How can they do that and remain human?"

That day I knew then that I had met a unique person. Not some fake who brags about having a dangerous job, but one who did his job with no fanfare or glory. And it made me proud to call that Corrections Officer my friend.

# Use Teamwork

*Anonymous contribution from a community corrections employee.*

**T**ake responsibility for your own actions instead of blaming others or looking to bolster yourself by diminishing fellow employees.

**E**liminate from your vocabulary the word “I” and focus on “we.” This will promote greater team achievements. There is no “I” in teamwork. Yes, you do contribute, and you deserve recognition for your hard work. However, the more a person promotes the team, the better the individual will be appreciated and noticed as well.

**A**ctively promote the notion and belief that corrections personnel are overall good people, instead of focusing your efforts on pointing out the flaws of each individual. Yes, mistakes happen. In your mind as a supervisor or a staff member *first* have faith and belief your people will act appropriately, and, secondly, administer to the errors that surface. Focus on determining facts, instead of listening to mythical assumptions about events.

**M**ind your manners. Be careful not to get bogged down in idle gossip and the pitfalls of the “wagging tongue,” because this will invariably come back to haunt you.

**W**isdom comes from experience. The mistakes made along the way contribute to the experience base of the seasoned and respected senior staff. Lessons learned are then passed on to newer personnel. The solutions for avoiding those pitfalls are presented in the policies and procedures of the organization. Remember to give practical explanations for the necessity of specific policies and procedures. Whether mistakes were made by the

senior staff or by others is irrelevant. This wisdom through experience can enhance the performance of the individual, and consequently the whole organization.

**O**bservations of individual staff members by all other staff are a necessary precaution for the protection of the individual and to reduce the possible liability of the organization. *We must* be watched. It goes with the territory. However, being watched and monitored are a far cry from being automatically assumed guilty. Observations coupled with staff communication can provide credible responses to allegations, regardless of the source.

**R**espond to any and all informal inquiries about your actions or participation in an event in a positive manner. Permit the continued monitoring of your actions, and volunteer information about events to supervisors and peers to eliminate the possibility of assumptions being blown out of proportion.

**K**now what is going on around you both in terms of the inmates/clients we are monitoring and with other staff. Knowledge of facts counters innuendoes and rumor mongering. Knowledge about events, no matter how trivial, tends to prevent misunderstandings and the semblance of inappropriate behavior. If everything is seen in the light of day, then no one can successfully construe an event as less than professional, unless of course the unprofessional act really did occur. Too often incidents are misconstrued because someone ran with only one side of a story and *others were willing to believe in the worst about a person before they considered or remembered the best about them.*

## Faith Corner

### Pluses of a Healthy Faith

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*This section is for readers who embrace a faith perspective to help them “do life” at work and at home.*

What are some advantages of a healthy faith?

- ◆ Knowing that the greatest power in the universe is Love, not hate or fear
- ◆ Knowing that there is an-all powerful Judge who will have the last word
- ◆ Knowing that we are accountable for all we do

- ◆ Knowing that mercy and forgiveness are available whenever we mess up
- ◆ Knowing that we are never alone or abandoned
- ◆ Knowing that strength and wisdom are available to us for the asking
- ◆ Knowing that we are loved unconditionally, and even sacrificially

# Desert Waters

Correctional Outreach



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

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### BLOGS

<http://desertwaters.blogspot.com>  
<http://womenincorrections.blogspot.com>

### Guess What's Coming in October!

**The Corrections Ventline™**  
**1-866-YOU-VENT**  
**(866.968.8368)**  
[youvent@desertwaters.com](mailto:youvent@desertwaters.com)

## Connecting With Your Passion

*Anonymous contribution by an ex-Correctional Officer.*

In the past I touched on the importance for those in the field of Corrections to seek hobbies, volunteering, mentoring, coaching, and other extra-curricular activities. The reason for that is to be exposed to realities beyond the prison walls. It's too easy, the longer you work in Corrections, to convince yourself that life is something to be feared. This can cause you to withdraw from people and life in general. I urge you to get out and begin to "feed your passions" (anything that brings you joy), because not doing so will only create an imbalance in your life.

If we can bring passion to our work we've got it made. Passionate work brings joy. Retirement isn't the focus. I have been exposed to people who live passionately, and they have become my source of motivation. If you know such persons, spend time around them because it is contagious!

Your well-being is important. Begin to value yourself. Own your actions. Don't play "The Victim." (I know that one).

The best to you all, and please be a creator, not an instigator, within those walls.

### Rx for Prison Environment

*Anonymous contribution by an ex-Correctional Officer.*

The prison environment needs to have more humility, compassion, and kindness within it. Everyone benefits when an organization, from top to bottom, operates in a way that its employees feel valued (this requires more than lip service), when it's realized that "the whole is the sum of its parts." Being kind and considerate is as much a habit as being mean and hard, but the effects are vastly different.