A Marathon, not a Sprint: 
Systematic Action Is Essential 
to Reduce the High Costs of Corrections Fatigue

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Corrections employees of all ranks and disciplines are repeatedly exposed to a multitude of occupational stressors throughout the course of their careers, including operational stressors, organizational stressors and traumatic stressors. The large number of stressors corrections workers face are formidable and their effects dire for individuals and groups immersed in unhealthy corrections workplace cultures. Well-documented consequences include pervasive and contagious negativity, hostile work environments, abusive behavior among staff and toward offenders, high sick leave and health benefits use, high turnover, and off-duty law-breaking behaviors. In addition, corrections staff often suffer serious physical and psychological health issues, and potentially shortened life expectancy.

During the past few days we were informed of two more corrections officer suicides that occurred. We also recently read news reports of expensive lawsuit settlements—into the millions—due to physical abuse of offenders by corrections personnel. Results of nationwide research conducted by Desert Waters Correctional Outreach estimate that 27% of corrections professionals meet criteria for Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, and 26% demonstrate moderate to severe depression symptom severity. Using a data-driven and research-supported assessment tool, the Corrections Fatigue Status Assessment (CFSA-v5), it has been estimated that 20% of corrections staff typically demonstrate a high level of Corrections Fatigue, accounting for 36% of reported sick days. These figures, together with other corrections research, consistently indicate that corrections workers’ health and functioning is seriously affected by occupational stressors, with significant negative outcomes.

Desert Waters’ research-supported Corrections Fatigue Model illustrates the causal factors, process, and consequences defining Corrections Fatigue. The model helps us understand the mix of circumstances that tend to produce dysfunction in corrections workplace cultures, and sometimes severe health and functioning consequences for individuals.

Countering the trajectory of Corrections Fatigue’s development is a difficult yet critically needed undertaking. Effective interventions require a customized, comprehensive and data-driven approach that addresses the needs of each agency while considering its specific issues and characteristics. One size does not fit all. Taking into account the unique nature of Corrections Fatigue and corrections workplace environments, a six-stage approach for addressing Corrections Fatigue systemically was recently published.
The recommended six-stage approach to improving corrections workplace health and functioning includes the following component stages: (1) Inform (i.e., educate on the nature of Corrections Fatigue), (2) Assess (i.e., measure the extent that Corrections Fatigue permeates the workplace culture using validated workplace health assessment tools), (3) Evaluate (i.e., compare identified problem areas to the content of existing programs, structures, and resources for promoting staff health and functioning), (4) Plan (i.e., prepare for implementation of new or modified programs, structures, and resources), (5) Implement (i.e., roll out planned changes or improvements), and (6) Re-Assess (i.e., periodically and systemically re-assess workplace health and functioning using validated assessment tools).

Desert Waters Correctional Outreach offers a variety of data-driven and research-supported assessment tools designed specifically for addressing Corrections Fatigue (i.e., the CFSA-v5) and additional critical areas such as corrections staff suicide risk (i.e., the DDS), and average exposure to life-threatening events or critical incidents (i.e., the VIDES). A Corrections Staff Resilience Inventory (CSR-I), currently in beta, allows for identification of resilience-promoting behaviors that staff are effectively using (or not using sufficiently). Results from the CSR-I provide highly specific and concrete recommendations of behaviors to be increased through workplace culture improvement efforts for the purpose of raising the resilience of the workforce against Corrections Fatigue.

The aim of interventions for staff health and functioning is to educate staff of all ranks and disciplines on healthy adaptations to work-related challenges, ways to increase resilience to stress, and ways to reduce preventable and avoidable stressors, such as staff conflicts or staff-offender clashes.

It cannot be emphasized enough that enduring change of ingrained negative or dysfunctional patterns requires systematic, ongoing, culture-wide efforts within organizations. Over the decades, dysfunctional behaviors become self-sustaining and self-reinforcing patterns in corrections environments, where new recruits are vulnerable to “contamination” through unhealthy indoctrination as they assimilate into the affected workplace culture. Interventions involve gradually “deprogramming” and “reprogramming” staff’s thinking, beliefs, and behaviors in response to challenging corrections workplace experiences, situations, and circumstances, and learning to adapt successfully to occupational stressors. Culture improvement is a slow, laborious, but deeply critical process. It is a marathon, not a sprint.

While a good program offered once can help to temporarily modify individual responses to occupational stressors, unless other resources are applied as well, and repeatedly over time, that one-time program is unlikely to produce sustained cultural changes. The continuous stressors impinging on corrections staff, if not offset by continuous countermeasures, will most likely wash away the effects of sparsely offered positive countermeasures, and fairly quickly.

Desert Waters’ signature course, From Corrections Fatigue to Fulfillment™ (CF2F), represents an ideal starting point for initiating a program of sustainable change and deterrence of Corrections Fatigue. It helps increase staff awareness of how and why occupational stressors can shape staff’s emotions, thoughts, and behaviors, while also validating staff’s struggles. The course provides participants with information about self-care skills, cognitive repairs to damaged core beliefs, and
strategies to impact the work environment constructively. The programming also helps staff identify ways in which THEY can make a positive difference in areas where they have influence.

In seeking organizational culture improvement, staff’s habitual ways of responding—both en masse and one staff member at a time, must be constrained to health-promoting parameters through targeted skill-building and repetition, repetition, repetition. To use a couple of analogies, one does not become a sharp shooter by firing their gun once in a while. Nor does a body-builder achieve and maintain success by working out only a few times. Corrections staff also require ongoing instruction and role modeling from higher-level staff in order to continue honing their self-management, interpersonal, and resilience-boosting skills. Continual reminders of effective strategies and structured opportunities to practice them are needed. Corrections organizations as a whole need to be genuinely invested in this pursuit for improvement to take root and grow.

Several questions can be asked about motivations that drive improvement efforts. “Is it to simply check a box to confirm or substantiate that a certain training has been provided?” “Is it to maintain the status quo while biding one’s time to retire?” Or, “Is the goal to breathe new life into staff by bringing enduring and sustainable solutions to corrections workplace problems?”

It is helpful to bear in mind that improving workplace culture health and functioning also requires defining goals that reach to the heart of problems, which is critical in the formulation of effective solutions. At times, what may be perceived as a problem may actually be a consequence of a cause that is more deeply rooted or embedded in a broader context. For example, high sick leave use may be the outcome of a hostile work environment or of staff’s fears for their physical safety. For this reason, effective and validated assessment tools, such as the CFSA-v5, can be seen as particularly advantageous. The CFSA-v5 results allow organizations to objectively pinpoint critical areas of need and facilitate optimal and efficient channeling of improvement efforts.

Other useful questions for corrections administrators to consider include: “How big will a problem become if systematic steps are not taken to counter the negative effects of ongoing occupational stressors?” and “What is it costing an agency in the long term to ignore Corrections Fatigue within their organization?” What is the actual price of turnover, sick leave days, overtime, substandard job performance due to low morale, and lawsuits for staff misconduct—to name a few of the consequences of corrections work malaise? What is the impact on the workforce of another staff suicide?

Given tight budgets, administrators may hesitate to embrace the idea of investing in staff well-being in a focused, systematic and long-term fashion. Yet the actual price tag of avoidance may be extremely high. In fact, empirical evidence is in hand that supports the high costs. Click here to obtain a no-charge estimate of the costs of just one component of Corrections Fatigue—use of sick leave, using Desert Waters’ online Corrections Fatigue Annual Costs Calculator.

In summary, significant and enduring positive improvements in the quality of corrections workplace culture require serious, long-term and ongoing commitment to change, including routine and periodic scientific assessments, monitoring of scores, and programming and training adjustments.
A road map that is in-depth and solutions-oriented needs to be drawn up and *permanently installed*, becoming “the way we do corrections” from now on, while also incorporating data-driven, evidence-supported modifications over time. This includes planning ahead for ways to deal with obstacles and bumps on the road that inevitably crop up during the journey toward healthier staff and healthier workplace cultures.

An approach that emphasizes prevention steps and proactive game-planning is invaluable, as it reduces risk, loss and liability, and it increases the likelihood of safety and security.

We at Desert Waters bring a data-driven, comprehensive umbrella approach to counter corrections agencies’ personnel problems and address their legitimate needs. We desire to take the journey with you and your agency, and to design the best-fitting road maps for you, and with customized solutions to match the unique needs of your particular organization—while also engaging the unique strengths of your organization.