



Desert Waters

Correctional Outreach

Helping correctional agencies become workplaces of choice
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Six Mistakes Correctional Agencies Can Make When Addressing Staff Wellness

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The subject of correctional staff wellness is getting addressed increasingly frequently by correctional administrators, by unions, by line staff, and even by their family members through grassroots efforts.

As this area is uncharted waters for most correctional leaders, any one of the following 6 mistakes might be made by administrators when broaching this subject.

1. **Thinking that correctional staff wellness is an unnecessary luxury which their agency does not have to implement.** This could not be further from the truth. Research has consistently shown that corrections work has a serious and at times even dramatically negative impact on staff's physical and psychological health. And this negative impact on staff's health in turn affects staff's work engagement, performance (including excessive uses of force and other policy violations), attendance, and retention. Moreover, negative effects of work stressors on staff's work life tend to go home with them, affecting their personal life. And staff's struggles in their home life feed back into work life, again affecting work engagement, performance, attendance, and perhaps even retention. Ignoring the subject of staff wellness is like ignoring a serious bleed. Given the irrefutable evidence of the damaging effects of correctional occupational stressors, not actively promoting staff wellness will result in correctional agencies being perceived as being deliberately indifferent to their employees' well-being as it relates to work-related health impairments or even suicide. And of course that renders agencies liable.
2. **Not using a participatory approach of engaging staff of all disciplines, job types and ranks when exploring which wellness programs and resources to adopt.** A correctional agency might opt to implement a staff wellness program or offer wellness resources based on the opinions of a few decision makers. As a result, the wellness programs or resources that get adopted may not necessarily be perceived or experienced by line staff as being relevant or helpful. The use of a participatory approach eliminates some of that "disconnect." A participatory approach involves asking staff across the agency to offer their ideas about perceived and identified needs and possible solutions regarding the fostering of staff wellness in their agency. Dialoguing about these subjects with staff of all ranks and job types, and seeking staff input regarding wellness

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program approaches is in itself wellness-promoting and bridge-building. A participatory approach communicates respect of those invited to contribute their suggestions, empowers those asked to offer ideas, and builds connections among various stakeholders in corrections agencies. The end result is increased trust and increased unity among the various groups of stakeholders. This is a significant achievement, because corrections agencies are typically characterized by the presence of division, psychological walls and mistrust among various staff subgroups.

- 3. Not engaging labor unions in agency efforts to design and implement staff wellness programs or offer staff wellness resources.** Any proposed staff wellness programming must be perceived by the population for which it is intended (corrections employees) as supported by *all* leadership—both administrative and labor. Such bilateral support of wellness efforts can only help to increase the likelihood of buy-in from the ranks. It also communicates the message that staff wellness is such a mission-critical topic, that stakeholders who may not see eye to eye about other subjects nevertheless come together to pursue and support it. This type of collaboration by people of diverse perspectives also shows humility. A collective approach acknowledges that no one group or individual has all the answers, and that multi-group input is far more likely to hit the mark than efforts by a single group or entity.
- 4. Thinking that staff wellness can be addressed by using a “one size fits all” approach.** A staff wellness resource or program may be a good fit for some employees, but not for others. Yes, in the beginning of staff wellness efforts, approaches with the broadest reach will most likely be adopted to address the most commonly occurring staff concerns. Over time however, such approaches must be complemented with research-driven customized approaches which address various stakeholders’ interests and challenges. For example, interventions suitable for institution staff may not be applicable to the concerns of probation or parole community-based staff, and that is why concerns of both these groups should be addressed separately. Material that is the best fit for non-custody employees may not be the best-suited approach to address needs of custody staff. Along the same lines, what may be the best fit for female employees may not be the best-suited approach to address needs of male staff. Higher security level institutions may require a greater emphasis on programming and resources that focus on traumatic exposure than lower security level institutions. And at different phases of staff wellness programming, different materials and approaches will be called for, just as college courses are offered at different levels, such as 101, 201, 301, etc., progressively increasing knowledge about a subject. As staff wellness efforts evolve, materials must be developed that are customized to provide tools and resources to these various subgroups of employees. Including informed social scientists in the selection of staff wellness efforts can help in the development of needed materials. One size does not fit all.

5. **Thinking that it is enough to offer one program or one resource once or for only a short time period.** Learning to cope with significant challenges usually does not happen overnight or after one training opportunity. As the stressors impinging on correctional staff are relentless and ongoing, so must be the skills-based training, opportunities for training practice, and reminders that are provided to staff. Complex problems require complex, multi-faceted solutions. Offering one program or one resource only once or for a short time is akin to expecting a person to maintain a healthy weight after being shown how to eat healthy meals and portions, and then being left to their own devices regarding their eating habits. New and healthier habits and workplace culture changes require at least one essential ingredient: repetition, repetition, repetition of the message and its practice, in every way possible. That is why the mindset of decision makers regarding staff wellness programming must be that the pursuit of staff wellness is an ongoing marathon, not a once in a lifetime sprint.

6. **Implementing staff wellness approaches or resources that are not based on research evidence.** Decision makers may select a staff wellness program or resource to implement because they have heard something positive about it, or because they like it, or because it is affordable—but without having any research or theoretical basis for it. Including informed social scientists in the selection of staff wellness efforts can help eliminate this concern. Additionally, staff wellness efforts should be evaluated for their effectiveness on an ongoing basis, and then improved upon based on the evaluation results. Using methods that have a research foundation can help agencies determine how to adjust these approaches based on evaluation outcomes as they continue to build their staff wellness initiatives.

These are some mistakes that corrections agencies may make in the process of exploring options regarding staff wellness programming and resources. Carefully examining these pitfalls before launching any such activities, and also reviewing and evaluating current wellness efforts on a regular basis, can help decision makers reduce the likelihood of these mistakes or avoid them altogether. To discuss these matters further, contact us [HERE](#) for a free consultation with Desert Waters.

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Six Mistakes Correctional Agencies Can Make When Addressing Staff Wellness

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