

CORRECTIONAL OASIS

HELPING CORRECTIONAL & OTHER PUBLIC SAFETY AGENCIES BUILD A MORE ENGAGED WORKFORCE

VOLUME: 21

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A NON-PROFIT FOR THE HEALTH OF CORRECTIONAL & OTHER PUBLIC SAFETY AGENCIES, STAFF AND FAMILIES

THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

If you are new to Desert Waters Correctional Outreach, you may wonder what we are about. Here is a description of our work, in a nutshell.

Desert Waters exists to promote correctional staff, and other public safety staff, wellness and agency health through:

- Raising awareness and advocacy;
- Developing data-driven wellness curriculum for staff of all ranks and job roles, and adult family members, that is destigmatizing about seeking help;
- Offering wellness training nationally and internationally, frequently using the model of instructor training and certification for sustainability, a sense of relevance, and community-building among the staff;
- Conducting wellness research;
- Offering educational resources on our website for staff and families;
- Writing and distributing a free electronic wellness periodical monthly to subscribers;
- Providing emotional, spiritual and practical support to staff and families who reach out to us;
- Networking with agency wellness points of contact; and

Developing the first-ever corrections staff wellness accreditation program with standards that are systematically organized, data-driven, comprehensive, "wholistic," and corrections-specific, with outcome measures.

Our efforts to introduce improved wellness programming include the recognition that staff wellness is essential for criminal justice reform, while also underscoring that pursuing staff wellness is a moral imperative in its own right.

Thank you for your support, and if you work in public safety, thank you for serving.

Caterina Spinaris

SERVANT LEADERSHIP – AN AID TO EMPLOYEE RETENTION?

BY CATERINA SPINARIS, PHD, LPC

A lieutenant who is respectful and available to listen and answer questions from staff. A captain who helps subordinates secure training that enhances their skill sets. A correctional officer who acts in ways that are fair, firm and consistent with both incarcerated persons and coworkers, and who informally mentors new officers, answering questions and offering encouragement. A warden who takes well-thought out steps to shape the facility's culture for the benefit of both employees and those incarcerated.¹ A retired director who volunteers to set up and run a program that improves the character development of both staff and the incarcerated.

These are examples of servant leadership.

And because much is being discussed today about improving employee retention rates in criminal justice professions, I would humbly like to offer the suggestion that servant leadership is one style of leadership that could be almost guaranteed to help increase employee retention. In correctional environments, servant

“Servant leaders keep their finger on the employees’ pulse. They have the dual ongoing focus of accomplishing the organization’s goals and promoting the well-being of the staff.”

leaders would first and foremost be known to their employees for prioritizing their physical safety. Over time, a servant leadership style will result in an increased sense of psychological safety of employees around that leader and, in relationship to their directives, more grounds to trust them, feeling empowered by them, feeling respected by

them, feeling “connected” to them by experiencing the slogan “one team, one mission” as a consistent reality, and deriving positive meaning from their work. (For those of you who have taken Desert Waters’ trainings, you probably recognized the Big 7 listed here.) These conditions will gradually evolve into increased work engagement, productivity, and loyalty to the organization—and the desire to continue being employed there.

The concept of the servant leader was first proposed by Robert Greenleaf.² Mr. Greenleaf stated that for servant leaders, service comes first. Leadership is a secondary focus, sometimes occurring almost incidentally. The primary motivation of servant leaders is to ensure that the highest priority needs of those they serve are being met. The pursuit of power, influence, fame or wealth is secondary for them—if it attracts them at all. When we think of servant leaders, persons such as Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, and Jesus of Nazareth come to mind.

Servant leaders do not emerge through a power grab. Rather, servant leaders take the helm through their passionate concern for the betterment of others' living or working conditions. People gradually grow to trust that their servant leaders genuinely have their best interests at heart, and as a result they freely choose to follow them and their vision for the future.

As the term implies that describes their leadership style, servant leaders are people-focused. They live to serve. They truly value their employees and the strengths the employees bring to their teams. Servant leaders know that without their employees' genuine engagement and loyalty, organizational goals will not be reached.

Servant leaders keep their finger on the employees' pulse. They have the dual ongoing focus of accomplishing the organization's goals and promoting the well-being of the staff who make such accomplishments happen. They do that through regular check-ins of various sorts, active listening, and seeking their staff's input.

Servant leaders are committed to their organization's goals while remaining open to employee feedback. They want to see their vision realized regardless of personal cost. They care more about the fulfillment of the dream—their mission—than about personal comfort, gain or glory.

Servant leaders are honest and humble, as they are aware of their limitations and their need for others' input and contribution. They give credit to their staff, recognizing them in meaningful ways for organizational successes, and take personal responsibility for struggles and failures. And they express gratitude and appreciation to their employees regularly.

Servant leaders give corrective feedback respectfully and humbly, with a driving force behind the feedback being their employees' growth and improvement, while also remembering that they too have made mistakes and fallen short in the past—and might do the same in the future. For servant leaders, mistakes are opportunities for lessons to be learned, and to be learned well.

One of the natural outcomes of servant leadership is the forward movement and personal growth of those around servant leaders. Through repeated exposure to their leaders' role modeling, these employees may also begin to follow their servant leaders' style and example.

Because of servant leaders' ultimate goal—the genuine desire to improve people's conditions—*servant leadership is not limited to those of highest rank or title*. Servant leadership can and should be practiced throughout institutions, agencies, families, and communities. Servant leadership stems from values, motives, vision, self-discipline, perspective, and emphasis. It is not a matter of formal position.

Daily we are given opportunities to impact others and help improve their circumstances in legitimate ways in areas where we have influence. What will we do with these opportunities? How will we use our influence?

I urge us all to pursue the vision of becoming agents of positive change by serving others. Through doing so we'll very likely discover that in serving we meet not only others' needs, but also some of our own highest yearnings for significance, satisfaction and joy.

References

- ¹ Bartollas, C. (2003). *Becoming a Model Warden: Striving for Excellence*. Lanham, Maryland: American Correctional Association.
- ² Greenleaf, R. K. (2002). *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press.



THE ARMORY

WHEN YOU FEEL VERBALLY ATTACKED

BY CATERINA SPINARIS, PHD, LPC

When you experience what to you is a verbal attack on your person, instead of verbally attacking that person back, consider the following alternative options, with your goal being the de-escalation of the situation. Such an approach will help protect your well-being and your resilience by preventing or lessening the inevitable wear-and-tear physically and emotionally that result from angry outbursts and a hostile stance. This is an example of using what are often called “soft skills”—but that are in reality skills of steel, because they can help us regain control of situations and prevail, while also preserving our health and perhaps our relationships.

1. Step back mentally and try to assess if you were truly attacked, or if you are being overly sensitive and taking the other person’s behavior personally more than warranted.
2. Display a calm and respectful attitude throughout your exchange.
3. Listen carefully. Repeat back what you heard the other party say to make sure you heard them right and so they will know that you heard them right.
4. Ask for clarification, for facts and specifics regarding what the other person objects to about your behavior or opinions.
5. Clarify your position as needed.
6. If you realize that you were in error, make amends through apologizing or through some other way of making things right to the degree that you are able.
7. Agree with whatever part of the other person’s statement you can truly agree with.
8. Acknowledge that the other person has the right to their opinion as much as you do.
9. Acknowledge that others may in fact agree with the other person and disagree with you.
10. Acknowledge that even though you hold a different opinion, there is a possibility that the other person may be right, and that perhaps only further developments will show the degree to which you may both be correct in some ways.
11. Make conciliatory, non-combative, non-aggressive statements regarding the other person’s perspective, and avoid provocative statements, such as put downs or ridicule.
12. If possible, ask for a later time to talk, so you can think things through more clearly, and so the other person can calm down also.
13. Use light humor, but cautiously, and only when you’ve tested the waters and concluded it may be safe to do so. Be ready to abandon that approach if the person’s reaction indicates that they may be mistaking your attempt at levity as you mocking or ridiculing them.
14. Negotiate as much as possible toward resolution by aiming to help the other person feel understood and validated while you also advocate for your perspective to the degree that it matters to you.
15. Make non-threatening neutral and respectful statements if there seems to be no resolution at this point. “I guess we’ll have to agree to disagree on this one. I want you to know that I respect your right to your point of view.”

Adapted in part from Stop Walking on Eggshells: Taking Your Life Back When Someone You Care About Has Borderline Personality Disorder, by Kreger, R. & Mason, P. T.

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SAFETYNET ACCREDITATION™

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE STAGES

BY DAVID TAYLOR

In the **February 2024 issue of the Correctional Oasis**, we addressed why we need a comprehensive staff wellness accreditation program, like **SafetyNet Accreditation™**. In this issue we look at the nuts and bolts of how such a program can be practically implemented by correctional agencies.

Corrections is in a state of crisis. If you're a reader of the *Correctional Oasis*, you already know this. Staff are severely overworked, at times underappreciated, and constantly exposed to stressors, some of them potentially life-threatening. They are physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually exhausted. Research shows that corrections staff suffer from PTSD, stress-related illnesses, and suicides at a much higher rate than the general population. In short, they are **unwell**.

While many agencies have undertaken wellness initiatives, with varying degrees of success, SafetyNet Accreditation™ is the first effort to offer a framework for a data-driven, systematically structured, and holistic wellness program that combines multiple facets of staff wellness with the rigors of an accreditation program. The process of SafetyNet Accreditation™ is divided into seven stages.

Stage 1: Exploration

The first stage is **Exploration**. This is where the agency reviews the standards and all the accompanying material, then submits their completed Agency Information form to Desert Waters. This form contains basic information about the agency, as well as the agency's current wellness initiatives. It's designed to help Desert Waters get to know the agency better.

Stage 2: Self-Evaluation

The next step is the agency's **Self-Evaluation**. The agency will look at each of the standards in depth and determine their degree of compliance with each of the elements of the standards. Agencies may find that they are already meeting some of the requirements, and others may require a great deal of work. Once completed, the agency will submit their Self-Evaluation form to Desert Waters along with a provisional timeline for the completion of the work required.

Stage 3: Action Plan Development

This Stage involves **Action Plan Development**. When the Self-Evaluation has been completed, agency staff will schedule a virtual meeting with Desert Waters to discuss the evaluation. This will allow all parties to be aware of the current strengths and weaknesses of the agency concerning their wellness practices. This is one area where SafetyNet differs from most accreditation programs. We believe that our ongoing involvement in the process and interactions with the agency in a coaching/consulting capacity enhances an agency's ability to implement standards. Our goal was to not only develop wellness standards, but to incorporate the idea of wholistic involvement in the entire process.

The action plan development will include what policies and procedures the agency needs to develop or enhance, what training curricula need to be incorporated, and what services and resources need to be developed. It will be a road map for the agency to follow to achieve accreditation.

Stage 4: Action Plan Implementation

After the action plan has been approved, the agency moves to the **Action Plan Implementation** phase. This is probably the most complex part of the process as well as the longest. Agencies implementing SafetyNet will start in very different places. Some may already have robust wellness programs in place, and some may be starting from scratch. For SafetyNet, it's not about where you start, but about where you finish. This is another area where Desert Waters will be available to help guide agencies as they go about implementing the plan.

When agencies reach the point of wanting to demonstrate compliance with the standards, they will create an assessment through PowerDMS and attach their documented proofs of compliance with the standards. For agencies already using PowerDMS, this will be a matter of subscribing to the SafetyNet standards in the Standards Manual Community and paying the associated fee. For agencies not currently using PowerDMS, a fee for a limited site license will be included in the fee paid to Desert Waters.

Stage 5: File Review

Once the agency has uploaded proofs for all of the standards to their PowerDMS site, a **File Review** will be scheduled with Desert Waters assessors. The assessors will review each standard and its attachments to determine if they are in compliance with the standard. The reason that we do this ahead of time, and not during the assessment as most accreditation programs do, is that it ensures that the agency is on the right track early on in the process. Some agencies may wait to actually implement policies or engage in training until they are assured that their proposed policies and trainings do indeed meet the standards. We are always available to review documents prior to implementation, but this serves as a last check to make sure that the agency is in compliance with the requirements of the standards. If the assessors conclude that the agency is not in compliance with all or part of a standard, the agency will be advised about what needs to be fixed. Following this review, the assessors will submit a report to the agency regarding their findings. The report will include documentation of any ways that the agency wellness program is not in compliance with the standards.

Stage 6: Site Visit

Once the agency has implemented the wellness program, a **Site Visit** will be scheduled. It is expected that for most agencies this will involve one assessor visiting for one day. The purpose of the site visit is to see firsthand that the agency is embracing wholistic wellness. Assessors will interview staff at all levels, tour the facility itself, and get a sense of how wellness has been integrated into the agency's culture. Once this visit is completed, the assessor will submit a report to Desert Waters and the agency outlining the results of the visit and observations that were made.

Stage 7: Commission Review

This is the final stage, the **Commission Review**. Following the site visit, the report will be submitted to the SafetyNet Commission for review. The assessor will make a recommendation for or against the granting of accreditation. If accreditation is not recommended, the assessor will recommend changes that need to be made in order to achieve accreditation. We are very hopeful that accreditation is achievable for all agencies, and we are committed to working with agencies to make this happen. The final decision regarding the granting of accreditation lies with this Commission.

As you go along:

During each stage, accreditation experts from Desert Waters will be available to assist agencies in developing the policies and programs necessary to achieve accreditation. SafetyNet and the SafetyNet standards are not designed to be "one size fits all." Each agency is going to have unique needs and resources, and we expect that each agency's wellness program will be geared to address these specific issues.

Wellness programs are also not designed to be static. Ongoing data collection and analysis will help the agency see what is working and what can work better, so that wellness policies and programming are in a constant state of improvement. As with all of SafetyNet, Desert Waters is available to work with agencies through the entire life cycle of the SafetyNet Accreditation.

David Taylor retired in 2014 after a 31-year career in corrections and law enforcement. During his career, David has been responsible for policy writing, maintenance of ACA accreditation, and training design and development among other duties. Since retiring, David has worked as Lead Consultant with Pursuit of Excellence to assist law enforcement, correctional, and other public service departments in the U.S. and Canada in the areas of policy development, accreditation, and training. He remains committed to helping public service agencies and the dedicated employees who serve in them achieve excellence.



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THE IMPACT OF “IMPROVING THE WELL-BEING OF CORRECTIONS PROFESSIONALS” COURSE IN NY STATE

BY EL HADJI GUEYE, CASAC, MSW

Staff shortages have been a major challenge for correctional agencies across the United States. With the implementation of new legislation that expanded programming to all incarcerated individuals with confinement sanctions, New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (NYS DOCCS) is facing unprecedented staff shortages that have put an additional strain on its workforce. According to Acting Commissioner Martuscello, there are 3,800 staffing vacancies in the New York State prison system and 1,900 of those are correction officers. For many states, part of the solution to this staff shortage is recruitment and retention of correctional staff.

There is a direct correlation between employee well-being, job retention and productivity. Research shows that there are adverse outcomes associated with careers in corrections regardless of position, job duty or rank if adequate wellness resources and services are not provided. Agencies that prioritize employee well-being create a better work environment that is conducive to fulfilling the agency’s mission.

NYS DOCCS recognizes that its greatest assets are its employees and is committed to preserving and enhancing the health and well-being of all staff members. In 2021, the agency partnered up with the New York State Office of Victim Services (OVS) and Desert Waters Correctional Outreach to offer a train-the-trainer course in *“Improving the Well-Being of Corrections Professionals: Understanding, Acknowledging and Overcoming Traumatic Stress”*

Staff quotes gleaned from the training evaluations:

“The Desert Waters program is comprehensive and well thought out. Trauma informed training is 100% relevant to the DOCCS mission.”

“Now that I have experienced this training, I feel it is important to spread the word there is no one in the department that could not benefit from this training. Thank you for bringing it to us.”

“This was highly recommended to me and even though it was mandatory, it was the very best and honest coverage of this topic that has been previously and briefly presented as part of our annual DOCCS training.”

(IWCP). A total of 156 staff members were certified as trainers and since the rollout in April 2022, almost 3000 employees have received this 8-hour course. The feedback from both civilian and security staff has been overwhelmingly positive and the demand for this course has increased drastically.

With the shortage in security staff, one of the challenges for NYS DOCCS is to make officers available to attend this course without affecting the required operation of its facilities. DOCCS Bureau of Mental Health worked with Desert Waters to obtain a 4-hour condensed version of the IWCP to use for the 2024 rollout. The goal is to reach over 4,000 employees in 2024 by offering this training simultaneously in all 44 correctional facilities during Training Enhancement Days in September and December. Additional trainings will be scheduled outside of those two dates upon request from the correctional facilities as well.

Given the high demand for this course, there is a plan for NYS DOCCS, NYS OVS and Desert Waters to certify additional trainers and master trainers to ensure the continuity and sustainability of this wellness initiative.

The IWCP course is contributing to a positive shift in culture in NYS DOCCS with correctional officers recognizing the effects of traumatic stress and what steps and strategies can be utilized to manage it. A significant number of participants during our post-training surveys indicated that this course has been very helpful, and they would recommend it to colleagues.

El Hadji Gueye is the Director of DOCCS Bureau of Mental Health, and the CISM Coordinator.

“Excellent, Excellent, Excellent! This training, this movement is so overdue. The Department is finally taking legitimate steps to address staff wellness. It is no longer lip service, it’s real. We need to continue to move forward in changing the culture in a positive manner.”

Do you want comments like this from your staff?
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IF I COULD JUST NOT FEEL

BY A RETIRED OFFICER

One morning I was walking down the main corridor in our institution and was having a rough day, possibly a rough week. All of a sudden the thought popped into mind, "I wish that I just could not feel. This job would be a whole lot easier if that were the case."

Maybe you have felt the same thing. If you have not, trust me, one day you will. This profession can be awfully draining at times, both physically and emotionally. It truly tested me for everything that I was worth. The situations we find ourselves in, and the things we see can be pretty hard, right? Even very disturbing. And then we go home and try to act normal when we're around our families and other people. Over time this drains us.

But let me tell you, because you and I feel, that made me, and will make you, better corrections professionals. Though it is hard feeling all this bad stuff at times, it can also help make us more in tune when one of our fellow brothers or sisters go through the same or worse, and hopefully we can reach out and help them. And it will help us stay in tune with what inmates may be going through, so we deal with their situations with skill and sensitivity, hopefully preventing conflict, violence, or self-harm. I encourage you to do the same. Be safe out there.

THE MAN NEXT DOOR

BY THE OLD SCREW

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.

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QUOTE OF THE MONTH

“If you want to make a stand,
help others make a stand, and if
you want to reach your goal,
help others reach their goal.
Consider yourself and treat
others accordingly: this is the
method of humanity.”

Confucius

IN MEMORIAM

Paul Robitaille

Detention Deputy
Highlands County Sheriff's Office
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MEET THE CORRECTIONAL OASIS TEAM



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Mission

Advancing the well-being of correctional and other public safety staff and their families, and the health of correctional and other public safety agencies, through data-driven, skill-based training

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Desert Waters Correctional Outreach is a non-profit corporation which helps correctional and other public safety agencies counter Corrections Fatigue in their staff by cultivating a healthier workplace climate and a more engaged workforce through targeted skill-based training and research.

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