

CORRECTIONAL OASIS

BECAUSE ALL ROADS GO BACK TO STAFF WELLNESS

VOLUME: 22

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FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

The tragic and preventable death of Mr. Robert L. Brooks, an incarcerated individual beaten by correctional officers while restrained, with other staff present but failing to intervene, has rightfully sparked deep outrage. The incident is under investigation, with one officer reportedly resigned and other employees suspended without pay. Allegedly, termination proceedings are underway for those involved.

My prayers and thoughts are with Mr. Brooks' loved ones during this heartbreaking time, especially as they endure the trauma of the disturbing video footage of the beating.

Such incidents cast a shadow over the entire corrections profession, undermining public trust and the reputation of the many dedicated professionals who serve with integrity. This tragedy may also affect recruitment efforts, as potential candidates may hesitate to join the field due to concerns over the actions of a few individuals.

As we await further developments, this incident serves as a stark reminder of the need for transparent leadership, thorough staff selection, comprehensive training, and strong support systems. These efforts are essential to foster a culture of professionalism, accountability, humaneness, and respect. While we cannot undo the harm caused, we must reflect on this tragedy and work together to build a safer, more just, and compassionate correctional system. May Mr. Brooks' death not be in vain, but may it inspire meaningful reform at every level.

1 *Caterina Spinaris*



STAFF RETENTION IN CORRECTIONS: IS CULTURE THE MISSING PIECE?

BY CATERINA SPINARIS, PHD, LPC

High rates of staff turnover have long been a challenge in corrections. However, since the onset of COVID-19, staffing shortages have become widespread across many professions, with correctional agencies now grappling with an unprecedented crisis.

To address this issue, we must consider the multiple factors contributing to the high turnover and low retention rates in correctional settings.

The Problem

Low pay, inadequate benefits, mandatory overtime, job-related dangers, and ever-shifting policies are all likely contributors to high turnover rates. However, a closer look at staff experiences and research into Correctional Officer (CO) stress reveals another major issue that is often overlooked: the toxic workplace culture. Strained relationships between staff members—including supervisors, coworkers, and administrators—are a significant driver of staff dissatisfaction. Research indicates that factors such as organizational support, justice, leadership style, communication, and decision-making autonomy are strongly linked to job stress and organizational commitment among COs.¹ In fact, the organizational climate has been found to be the most consistent contributor to CO burnout and stress.¹

Acknowledging the significance of workplace culture may seem daunting at first, but it can also be empowering, as organizational culture *can* be changed. While the process is complex and long-term, creating a healthier work culture and environment is absolutely achievable.

In unpublished surveys conducted by Desert Waters, staff consistently reported that the majority of their stress originates, not from justice-involved individuals, but from negative interactions with other staff. (Please see the article on “bullying” in corrections featured in the **October 2022** issue of our Correctional Oasis.) Here’s an example from a former CO:

“I don’t work for the Department of Corrections anymore, but I ran into what others had warned me about: long-term employees create their own problems. They backstab and sabotage new hires. There’s a ‘good ol’ boys’ mentality. It’s not the inmates you need to watch, it’s your coworkers. Maybe if DOC addressed this, morale would change.”

Another CO, quitting after only seven months on the job, told us, bluntly, that it wasn’t mandatory overtime or difficult interactions with incarcerated persons that led to his decision (to resign)—it was his coworkers and supervisors.

Veteran employees aren’t immune to this type of stress either. One CO shared:

“I’ve been a CO for 13 years, a Lieutenant for over 4. When I started, I loved my job, but things have changed. Management no longer has our backs, and staff can be harder to deal with than inmates. Even when use of force is 100% within policy, we’re criticized by upper management. Why don’t we hear ‘Glad you’re safe?’ Instead, it’s always negativity. How can we change this? We need to support each other, not tear each other down.”

The Role of Organizational Culture

Peter Drucker, the management consultant, famously said, “Culture eats strategy for breakfast.” In the correctional context, this is particularly relevant when considering how seasoned staff interact with new hires. Many seasoned COs feel “burned” by investing time in mentoring new employees who eventually leave. While their frustration is understandable, their alienating behavior often contributes to the very problem they’re trying to solve. This creates an unintended cycle of self (and others)-sabotage.

In line with this, new hires often report that veteran officers avoid helping them, sometimes “slow-walking” them or refusing to mentor them until they prove themselves. This can include hazing behaviors that further degrade morale. Research consistently points to organizational culture as a significant driver of stress for COs.

Generational gaps between seasoned and new staff are often viewed as insurmountable, but they can be bridged through meaningful training, leadership, and goodwill. Sometimes, veteran officers, having suffered through difficult initiations themselves, may take out their frustrations on new staff as a form of “payback.” This perpetuates the toxic cycle of disengagement, where both new and seasoned employees leave the profession due to stress.

Corrections Fatigue: A Cycle of Discontent

Another significant issue is *Corrections Fatigue*. This term refers to the cumulative, negative changes in correctional staff’s personality, health, and functioning over time, stemming from the unresolved, negative impacts of their job. Corrections Fatigue signs include relentless criticism and pessimism—that is, negativity, irritability, impatience, outbursts of anger, mean-spirited remarks, hostility, indifference, lack of empathy and caring, low morale, lack of engagement, hopelessness, helplessness, hypervigilance, low energy, and many more.

Over time, these individual challenges begin to infect the workforce as a whole, seeping into, and tainting the collective workplace culture. The result is a “fatigued” workforce that perpetuates stress and negativity across the organization.

How does this play out? New staff typically enter their first correctional setting with a mix of trepidation and optimism—“bright-eyed and bushy-tailed,” ready to make a difference. However, when exposed to seasoned staff’s *Corrections Fatigue*—manifesting as negativity, irritability, or hostility—they quickly become discouraged and demoralized. Their initial enthusiasm erodes, and, if no relief is offered, those with alternative employment options often decide to leave corrections for less toxic professions. They conclude that the wages and benefits do not justify enduring emotional abuse from peers or supervisors, compounded by safety concerns and a myriad of ever-changing policies and procedures.

This issue is cyclical. The fatigue experienced by seasoned staff directly impacts newer staff, often serving as the catalyst for the latter’s decline. In turn, the mounting *Corrections Fatigue* of new employees exacerbates the stress of others, creating a negative feedback loop. For example, Officer Brown’s hostility or negativity may contribute to Officer Jones’s fatigue. Officer Jones, in turn, may unintentionally affect Sergeant Smith, Officer Andrews, Educator Miles, or Nurse Hall. Unless the cycle is recognized, acknowledged, and addressed, it continues and grows, creating a collective downturn in morale and engagement throughout the workforce. Addressing *Corrections Fatigue* is essential to breaking this toxic cycle.

Initiating and Sustaining Culture Change

Transforming a fatigued and negative organizational culture is a Herculean task. It requires a combination of strong organizational values, inspirational leadership, strategic planning, and a commitment to self-care and

accountability. Leaders, at all levels, must focus on fostering a supportive atmosphere, ensuring that staff feel valued, respected, and safe—both physically and psychologically.

For staff to thrive, they need to trust their coworkers, supervisors, and administrators. They must feel that they are part of a workplace community that supports and uplifts them. Supervisors play a crucial role in shaping the work environment by demonstrating empathy, accountability, and active engagement. Simple, yet powerful, actions like checking in with staff regularly, providing meaningful feedback, and creating opportunities for mentorship can significantly improve the workplace culture.

Practical Tips for Supervisors

To create a positive work environment, supervisors should focus on the following:

1. **Develop Leadership Skills:** Pursue training in emotional intelligence (EQ) and effective leadership techniques.
2. **Hold Yourself Accountable:** Reflect on your values and ensure they promote positive outcomes.
3. **Learn and Practice Active Listening:** Express empathy and exercise self-control while engaging with staff.
4. **Apologize When Necessary:** Take responsibility for mistakes and offer sincere apologies. This is a sign of strength (not weakness) that enables you to role-model personal accountability.
5. **Regular Check-Ins:** Foster regular communication to maintain strong connections with staff. These check-ins need not be lengthy but must be meaningful.
6. **Know Your Team:** Understand your staff's strengths and acknowledge their contributions.
7. **Positive Reinforcement:** Publicly celebrate good performance to boost morale and inspire continued success.
8. **Huddle Time:** Hold regular team meetings to encourage open dialogue. Although this can be challenging in correctional settings, just a few minutes at the start or the end of a shift will still be beneficial.
9. **Support Your Team:** Be empathetic toward staff concerns, particularly regarding safety, mandatory overtime, heavy workloads, and security concerns.
10. **Be Present:** Demonstrate your commitment by visiting staff during night shifts. Routinely practice MBWA—Management By Walking Around.
11. **Advocate for Your Team:** Stand up for staff (with higher levels of leadership) to ensure they have the resources and support they need.

Conclusion

Creating a supportive, healthy culture is the key to retaining and developing staff in corrections. Leaders must be proactive in fostering an environment where all staff—whether new or seasoned—feel valued and supported. If we hope to address the crisis of high turnover rates in corrections, we must begin by changing the way we interact with and treat each other in the workplace.

¹Finney C., Stergiopoulos, E., Hensel, J., Bonato, S., & Dewa C. S. (2013). Organizational stressors associated with job stress and burnout in correctional officers: A systematic review. *BMC Public Health*, 13(1), 82-94.

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RETIREMENT: EXIT STRATEGIES AND ADJUSTMENTS

BY AN ANONYMOUS RETIRED CORRECTIONAL OFFICER

Several months ago, we hosted an online panel discussion on retirement. A retired Correctional Officer took the questions from our webinar flyer and shared his personal responses. Here they are.

1. Looking back, what words best describe your years of service? It was the most challenging career physically, mentally, spiritually, and emotionally that I had. It was also the most rewarding career, and I was honored to serve in and be a part of such a worthy profession. I cannot put into words the pride I felt as a new officer and as an officer on my last day of duty.

2. What was the biggest surprise for you when you retired? What a change it was in my relationship with my wife. I would say this time of adjustment was much like when we were first married, when we had children, and when our sons left home after college. I actually think that couples should go through some kind of counseling before they retire.

Another surprise and a huge one was how difficult it has been to lose the extra weight that I picked up over the years. I was physically active my entire career and after, but it has been a tough one.

3. What stages did you find yourself going through as time went on after you retired? One of the stages was, "I can't believe that I don't have to go to work anymore." Yea!!! Another stage was, "I wish that I had to go to work." I missed the structure, the time lines and expectations of the job, and of course—the challenges. Then another stage of "Acceptance." It was definitely time for me to go. I retired at just the right time, shortly after

turning 65. Then another stage of "This retirement thing isn't too bad after all."

4. How long did it take for your Corrections Fatigue to subside? And in what ways are you still battling Corrections Fatigue? I really don't feel it has let up much in my retirement. I am still on high alert when I go out in public. I don't like crowds much, and when I am in a crowd, I am constantly scanning the area looking for any sudden movements. I still sit in the back at church and in restaurants I always have my back to the wall. I am very suspicious of people and I hardly trust people. I still dream about working in the prison system though not very often. Few have been nightmares fortunately. I have isolated myself pretty much the way I did while working.

5. Describe any positive personality changes that you noticed after leaving Corrections work. I am pretty much the same retired as I was when I was working. Since I don't have to work anymore (although I do part time work), I have more time to serve in the church we attend and in the community where we live. The personality change would be that I am able to volunteer more. And that is such a great thing to be able to do.

6. What did your Department do to prepare you for retirement? If nothing, what should be done? My Department didn't do anything to prepare us for retirement. I personally don't believe that they had an obligation to do so, though it certainly would have been nice. It would have been very nice of them to give us a class of two in our yearly training. They could have brought in retired people to help with the class and give real life situations and

answer any questions. That would have been very helpful.

7. What do you miss about working inside? I miss the challenges of the job and the structure. That career stretched me in ways I never imagined, and being able (most of the time) to overcome those were incredibly gratifying, and I miss that. I also miss the camaraderie of the job. I worked with some of the finest people that I have ever known. I also miss very much the training of new officers that I did and the occasions that I was able to teach classes at our academy.

8. What are some potential retirement pitfalls? You can get lazy and complacent. I've seen people retire and think they had all the time in the world, and then one day the body/mind starts to deteriorate or break. I have to be very vigilant of that. You put off things you wanted to do, and then you reach a point that you are unable to do those things. Another pitfall is lack of setting goals for yourself. One career ends and then another begins —retirement.

9. What about working after retirement? I worked as an officer, but I had a background in food. I have served my church in this area for many years, along with other opportunities. When I retired, I signed up to substitute in our local school district in the Food Services Department. I just wanted to get back in a kitchen and work, not because I needed the money, but because I love it. My point is that in retirement, if you choose to work, do things that interest you and that you love. Our local school district needs substitute people to help out, and it is great to be able to do this. My wife has worked for several years for the school district in another area, and she absolutely loves it.

10. What advice would you give to staff preparing for retirement? I read several books about retirement in the months before I retired. I gained a little knowledge from each one of those books and I

would highly recommend doing that. One book talked about how we spend so much time focused on making sure we have enough money put away and that is very, very important. But this book talked about what does being retired actually look like for you? What are you going to do each day? It caused me to look deeper and in more detail. One of the exercises advised the reader to make out what a week would actually look like, and I did that...in detail. That was a big eye opener for me. My spouse and I had conversations about when I retired and what I planned to do. She was concerned that I would get bored. Looking back, I wish that we would have had more in-depth conversations as far as details. That one is on me, I'm afraid. Lay out your goals, your dreams and your expectations. Communicate!!!

Also, I think it is important to keep setting goals and learning new things. This can be a great time of growth. You have worked incredibly hard during your career, and now can be a great time of doing things that just make you happy in whatever that looks like.

11. If you had to do your career over again, what would change, if anything? There is very little I would change. I wanted to promote up the ranks, but my wife and I decided that family came first. If I would have promoted, that meant going to the bottom of the seniority list and that meant lousy shifts and days off until I could move up. That was a huge disappointment for me not to be able to promote. But again, family came first.

12. If you had to do your retirement planning over again, what would change, if anything? I was so focused on the financial piece of my retirement, and I should have spent more time and energy on what it would look like on a daily basis. I should have had more conversations with my wife about this. When I was late in my career, I was so focused on crossing the finish line. I didn't look at the big picture as much as I should have.



INSTRUCTOR TRAINING



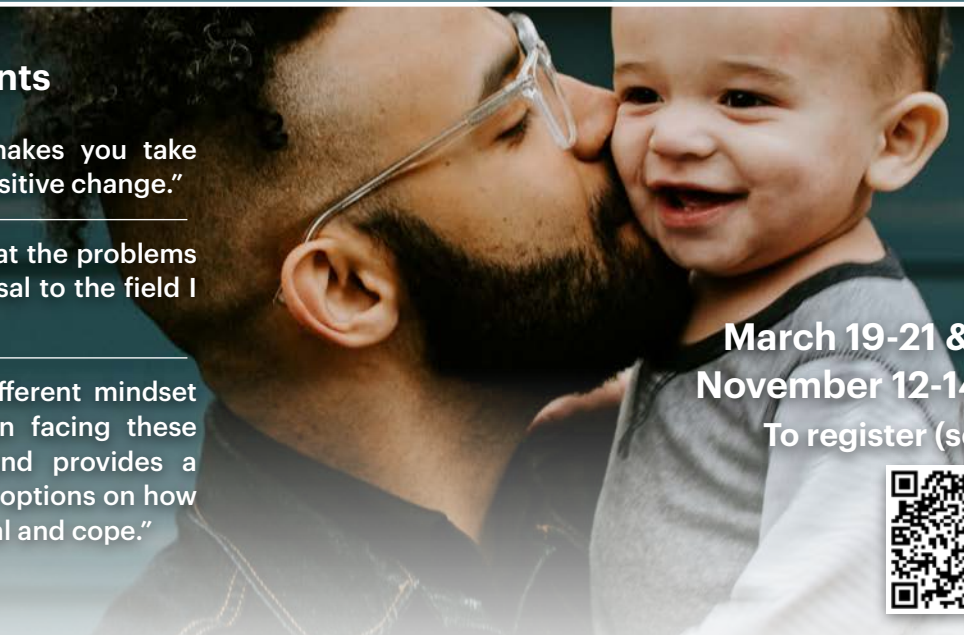
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New and seasoned correctional employees (jail, prison, probation or parole) of all disciplines and job roles.

COURSE TOPICS

- When Family Members Enter Our Corrections World
- How Our Families May Be Impacted When Job Requirements Affect Family Life
- Work-to-Home Stressors
- Help for Our Families: Issues and Suggestions
- Helping Our Families Understand Our Negative Changes
- Family Care Practices



Desert Waters' 6-hour proprietary course "Correctional Family Wellness - For Families™" (CFW-F) presents information to adult family members about how corrections work realities can impact family life, and provides suggestions for dealing with scenarios commonly experienced by correctional families. This highly interactive course is designed to be offered to adult family members of seasoned correctional employees (jail, prison, probation or parole), and also to adult family members of new staff. A 2-hour version is available for families of new staff.

TARGET AUDIENCE

Adult family members of new correctional staff and adult family members of seasoned correctional employees (jail, prison, probation or parole) of all disciplines and job roles.

COURSE TOPICS

- Corrections Work Realities
- When Work Comes Home
- What Might My Loved One Face at Work?
- Help for the Family
- The Basics of Self-care
- Family Scenarios



IN THEIR OWN VOICE—ADVOCATING FOR PEER SUPPORT

BY AN ANONYMOUS CORRECTIONAL OFFICER

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I am a Correctional Officer with the ██████ Department of Corrections. In ██████ of 202█ I was involved in an inmate stabbing. One inmate stabbed his roommate when I and others responded. It was one of the worst scenes I have been involved in. I was provided help right after, but it kept affecting me. I was barley sleeping, I was snapping at everyone, and more. I was getting mad when asked “How are you doing?” All I could think of was, “How is a person supposed to feel after that? What is the right answer?” I was hurting, and too “man” to ask for help.

I came into work one day, and was sent to the supervisor’s office to get some help. In the end I broke down and was sent home with a referral to a local trauma counselor. I did feel somewhat better after talking to the counselor, but I still find myself thinking of the incident at times. This is my story.

I have a suggestion that can help. The Academy is the only time we covered mental health, and yes, there are programs, but some people feel like they’re less of a person if they asked for help, if they admitted they are breaking. That is why I think having established groups and having officers the newer staff can talk to, if they choose to talk, will help them understand that they are never alone, and that there are others that have been in similar situations.

Our Thoughts:

This courageous Correctional Officer’s message sheds light on the profound and lasting effects of exposure to violence, injury, and death in the line of duty. Such experiences take a significant toll on mental health and well-being, impacting not only the officer directly involved but also the broader workplace environment.

The officer’s reflections also underscore the vital role of ongoing peer support in addressing these challenges. Peer support serves as a crucial resource for processing trauma, reducing feelings of isolation, and fostering a sense of camaraderie and mutual understanding among colleagues.

To effectively address these challenges, correctional agencies should establish comprehensive peer support teams and supplement them with other essential resources, such as Employee Assistance Programs and mental health training. These peer support teams should provide both Critical Incident Stress Management to address traumatic events and ongoing social support to help staff navigate the cumulative effects of Corrections Fatigue and personal life challenges.

Adopting this proactive approach can significantly enhance staff resilience, improve mental health and job satisfaction, and foster a healthier, more supportive work culture.

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DWCO'S PEER SUPPORTER TRAINING™

COURSE OVERVIEW

Desert Waters' **Peer Supporter Training™** (PST) is a comprehensive 40-hour program designed to prepare correctional staff with the skills and knowledge needed to provide one-on-one social support to colleagues facing distressing professional or personal challenges.

- **Course Focus:** The training emphasizes the development of formal peer support skills that align with agency policies, fostering staff well-being and resilience. Participants learn evidence-based techniques while engaging in scenario discussions and immersive role-playing exercises to ensure practical application in real-world situations.
- **Agency Integration:** The program includes agency-specific guidance on establishing and integrating Peer Support Teams within the correctional environment, ensuring seamless adoption and alignment with institutional protocols.
- **Certification:** Upon successful completion, participants receive a Peer Supporter certification valid for three years, allowing them to deliver formal peer support under their agency's supervision and quality assurance standards. Certification renewal requires passing an online multiple-choice exam and is subject to a renewal fee.

This training can be customized to meet the needs of peer support programs in other public safety professions.

TRAINING TOPICS COVERED

- Foundations of Formal Peer Support
- Peer Support Policies, Best Practices, and Recommendations
- Privacy, Privileged Communication, and Confidentiality, and Their Limits
- Maintaining Professional Boundaries
- Milestones of Peer Support
 - L.U.V. (Listening. Understanding. Validating.)
 - Providing Encouragement Effectively and Appropriately
 - Assisting Peers in the Exploration of Option
 - Offering Resources and Referrals

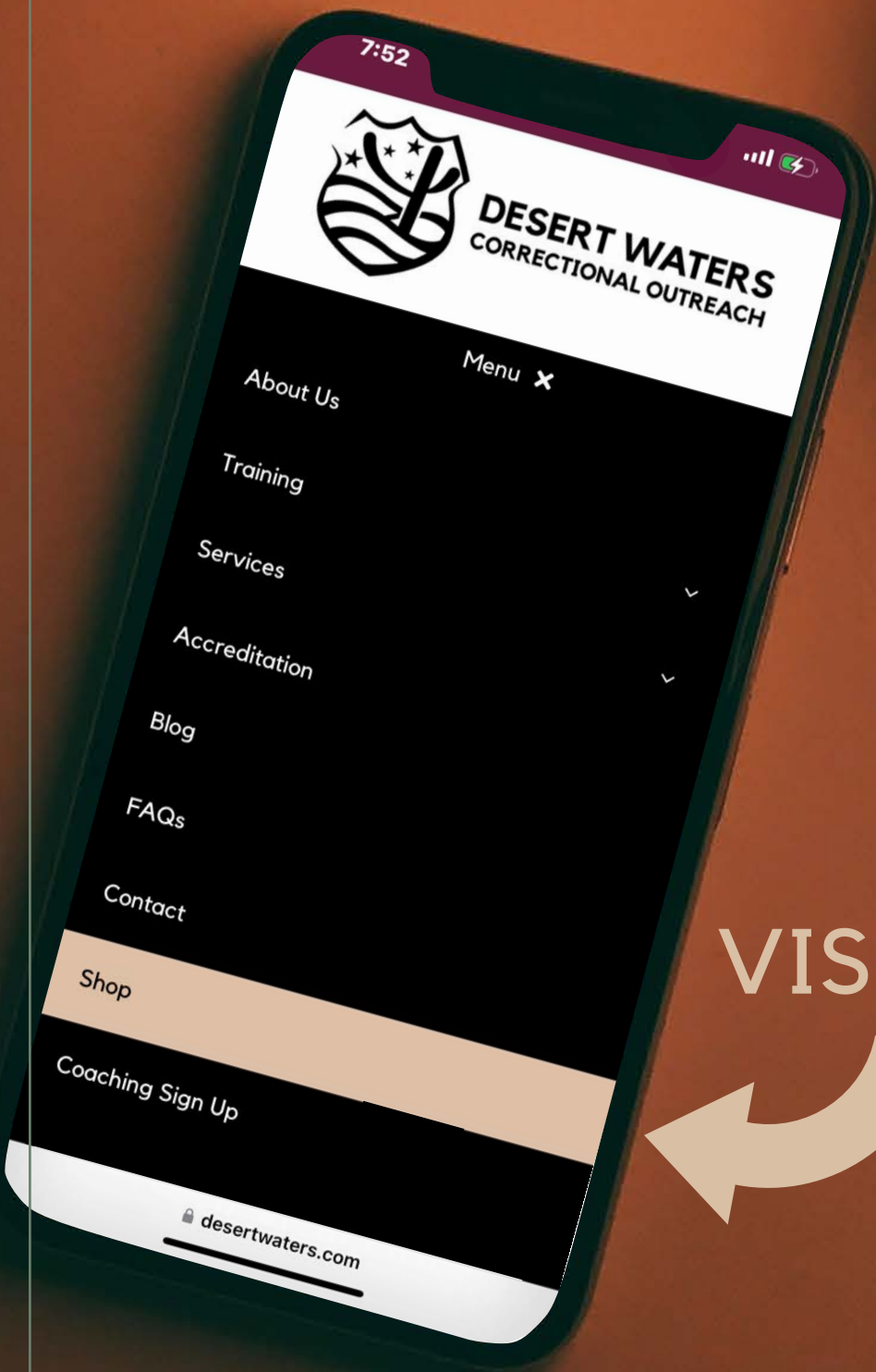
- Ensuring Continuity of Support
- Self-Care Strategies for Peer Supporters
- Introduction to Common Mental Health Conditions
- Common Wellness Issues for Public Safety Staff
- Research on Correctional Staff Mental Health Needs
- Supporting Peers at Risk of Suicide or Homicide
- Scenario-Based Discussions and Role-Playing Exercises

Please Note:

- This training does not include specialized debriefing for critical incidents, whether group-based or individual.
- Peer Supporter candidates who complete this training are not authorized to provide training to other Peer Supporters, either within their agency or externally.

Contact us for more information or to learn how to schedule an in-person or online Peer Supporter Training™ for your agency.





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QUOTE OF THE MONTH

“Forget ‘New year, New resolutions, New you.’ What we need more than possessing a bunch of resolutions in hand, is to actually be a person who is resolved. What you need more than splashy resolutions, is steady rhythms. The race isn’t won by the big resolutions, but by the slow and steady rhythms. A steady rhythm outruns all the splashy resolutions.”

Ann Voskamp



IN MEMORIAM

Jeff Reynolds
Correctional Officer
Dunn County Sheriff's Office
Wisconsin

MEET THE CORRECTIONAL OASIS TEAM



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Mission

Improving the wellbeing of corrections and other public safety professionals through training, consulting, and other essential resources to foster resilience, mental health, and overall wellness in these challenging professions

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Support Desert Waters Correctional Outreach

We are a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to enhancing the well-being of corrections staff and other public safety professionals, and to also assist their families. Contributions by individuals like you enable us to offer some services at no cost, and to keep our products affordable for agencies. Consider joining us in our mission by making a tax-deductible **donation** today. Thank you for your support!

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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