

CORRECTIONAL OASIS

BECAUSE ALL ROADS GO BACK TO STAFF WELLNESS

VOLUME: 22

IN THIS ISSUE:

- From The Director's Desk
- The Need for Humanity in Corrections
- Training for Transformation: Building Sustainable Habits
- Just Three Things
- Sandcastle: How Shared Trauma Between Correction Officers Can Affect an Agency and Its Culture—Part 1
- Quote Of The Month
- In Memoriam

A Desert Waters Publication

APRIL 2025



DESERTWATERS.COM



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

FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

In this issue, we delve into the fundamental challenges and needs within correctional work environments. We examine the "us vs. them" correctional culture, the psychological toll of the job, the complex dynamics of traumatic bonding, and provide a range of practical strategies to mitigate their impact. These issues are often overlooked but are crucial for improving the well-being of those who work in the correctional field.

Additionally, we want to bring attention to the upcoming third celebration of National Correctional Family Appreciation Week, which will be observed from June 2-8, 2025—just one month after National Correctional Officers and Employees' Week. This initiative, which we first proposed three years ago, has gained momentum, and we are thrilled to report that several agencies have since adopted this celebration. It is a time to recognize the essential role that correctional families play in supporting their loved ones as they work in demanding and high-risk correctional professions.

Once again, we invite you to join us in honoring correctional families. Their daily sacrifices are immeasurable, and their unwavering support is crucial for those who continue to serve in corrections-related professions.

Let's come together to sincerely express our gratitude and say:

WE SEE YOU.

WE APPRECIATE YOU.

WE ARE GRATEFUL FOR YOUR SUPPORT.

WE THANK YOU.

Caterina Spinaris

For some suggestions as to how to recognize correctional families, check <https://desertwaters.com/support/familyweek/>.

We invite you to access DWCO's 2024 **Annual Report** and recordings of our popular free **webinars**.



JOIN US IN CELEBRATING THE
**NATIONAL CORRECTIONAL
FAMILY APPRECIATION WEEK**

Get on Board!

As an agency, EXPRESS YOUR APPRECIATION
to the families of your employees!

As individuals, THANK your family members!
They are carrying a very heavy load.

June 2-8, 2025



Click or scan the code to show your support!

admin@desertwaters.com

desertwaters.com/familyweek

[#nationalcorrectionalfamilyappreciationweek](https://twitter.com/nationalcorrectionalfamilyappreciationweek)

THE NEED FOR HUMANITY IN CORRECTIONS

BY STEPHANIE RAWLINGS, MSC

Recent developments in New York State’s correctional system have made one thing abundantly clear: **the focus should not be on choosing sides between incarcerated persons and staff.** Instead, **the priority must be a commitment to humanity—an overarching principle that recognizes the dignity, well-being, and rights of all individuals within the system.** The entrenched “us versus them” mentality, which has historically divided incarcerated persons and correctional staff, only leads to mutual suffering. A system that truly values reform must address the needs of both groups, acknowledging that improvements for one inevitably lead to improvements for the other.

The notion of picking sides—whether supporting incarcerated persons or staff—results in a zero-sum game where everyone loses. Poor living conditions for incarcerated persons, lack of rehabilitation programs, and inadequate mental health resources not only harm those incarcerated but also create dangerous and stressful environments for correctional officers. Likewise, when officers are undertrained, overworked, and unsupported, their ability to perform their jobs effectively diminishes, which in turn negatively impacts rehabilitation of incarcerated persons and overall facility safety. A balanced approach that prioritizes humanity ensures that both incarcerated persons and staff benefit. For instance, implementing better training, increasing staffing levels, and improving programming not only provide incarcerated individuals with a chance at rehabilitation but also create a safer and more manageable environment for officers.

This toxic “us versus them” culture in corrections is deeply rooted and pervasive, much like an invasive species that grows uncontrollably. It is a narrative that has long been sensationalized by Hollywood, where correctional officers are often reduced to the role of “guards”—a term that, in popular media, is frequently used in a derogatory manner. Such portrayals strip away the complexity of the profession and reinforce harmful stereotypes that further deepen divisions. While these dramatizations may seem exaggerated, the reality is that this conflict has existed for decades, fostering an environment where both staff and incarcerated persons become trapped in a cycle of mistrust, resentment, and institutional failure.

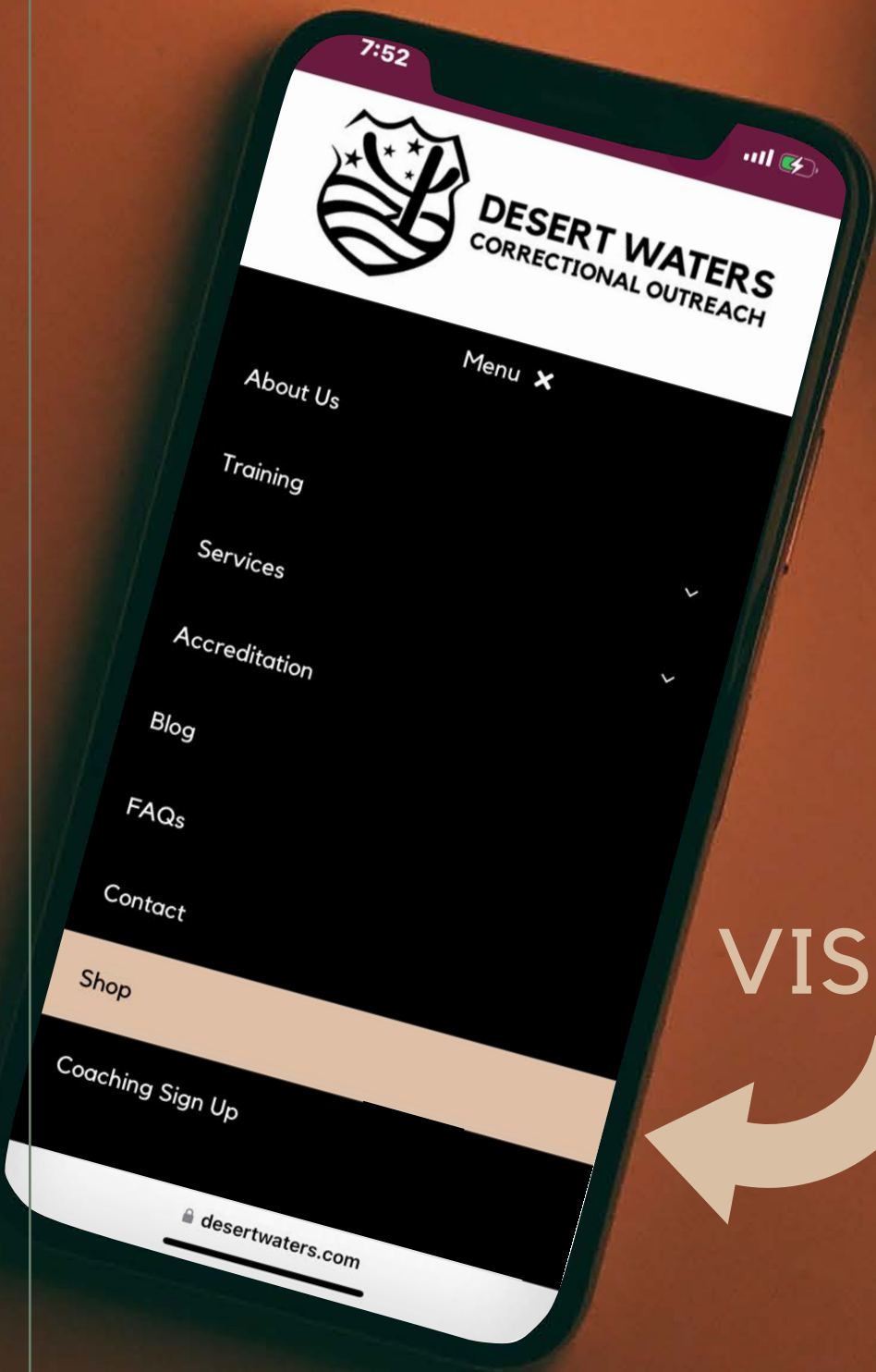
More recently, this divisive culture has extended beyond incarcerated persons and officers to a rift between correctional agencies and their workforce. Administrators are tasked with balancing safety, budgets, staffing, and programming, while also responding to public and political pressures for reform. In a system committed to true change, these administrators would also invest in the well-being of officers, recognizing that their mental health and job satisfaction directly impact prison conditions and offender outcomes. However, when labor and management are at odds, just as when incarcerated persons and staff are pitted against each other, meaningful progress becomes impossible. Instead of working toward a collective goal of a functional, humane correctional system, efforts are wasted on internal conflict.

Somewhere along the way, in this constant battle between different factions within the system, we have lost sight of the core issue: that corrections is, at its heart, about people. It is not about incarcerated persons

versus officers, management versus labor, or policymakers versus social justice advocates—it is about human beings coexisting within a system that has historically dehumanized everyone it touches. Until there is a collective recognition that all individuals within prison walls—whether incarcerated or employed—deserve to be treated with dignity, common decency, and fundamental human rights, true prison reform will remain out of reach.

If we continue to ignore this reality, we will remain trapped in a cycle where violence, injury, and death within prisons become routine headlines. The world prefers to consume these stories through the lens of television dramas rather than confronting the raw, unfiltered truth of what happens behind prison walls. But **prisons are not entertainment—they are institutions that hold real people with real struggles. Only when we begin to prioritize humanity over division will we be able to create a system that is not just functional, but just.**





VISIT OUR SHOP



Books
Posters
Workbooks
Merchandise
and More!



TRAINING FOR TRANSFORMATION: BUILDING SUSTAINABLE HABITS

BY CATERINA SPINARIS, PHD, LPC

In addition to delivering valuable information, Desert Waters' trainings focus on teaching essential emotional intelligence skills, resilience-building techniques, and wellness-promoting practices. These tools are designed to enhance participants' ability to navigate challenges with confidence, manage stress more effectively, and foster a balanced mindset. By equipping participants with these capabilities, the training empowers them to respond to personal and professional demands with emotional agility and resilience.

The Process of Developing Lasting Change

However, the development and sustainability of these behaviors is not instantaneous. It requires consistent practice, repetition, and reinforcement. Like any meaningful transformation, integrating these skills into daily life relies on creating opportunities to rehearse and apply them in real-world scenarios. Over time, this deliberate effort solidifies these practices as new habits, eventually transforming them into automatic, default behaviors.

Creating a Ripple Effect of Positive Change

This transformative process not only enhances individual well-being but also fosters a ripple effect, cultivating a more supportive, emotionally intelligent environment in both personal and professional spaces. By equipping individuals with resilience and emotional intelligence, organizations

can promote a culture of wellness and collaboration, benefiting all stakeholders.

Sustaining Long-Term Behavioral Change

Achieving and sustaining transformation requires more than a one-time training session. It demands ongoing reminders, structured reinforcement, and a balance of both external and internal motivation to ensure these practices remain consistently applied in daily routines. Without these key elements, meaningful change is unlikely to take root.

The Need for Follow-Up Measures

An agency cannot realistically expect its staff to adopt lasting behavioral changes from a single training session without follow-up measures. These measures should include regular reminders, opportunities for practice, and consistent reinforcement of the concepts taught. Without such interventions, the ongoing demands and stressors in corrections and public safety can quickly undermine the progress made through training. Continuous support is essential to embedding these changes and realizing their full impact over time.

Partnering for Effective Behavioral Integration

DWCO is committed to working with agencies to implement practical strategies that promote the integration of new information into staff behavior.

This includes providing consultation on creating opportunities for practice through micro-trainings, interactive sessions, and innovative approaches.

Micro-Trainings: Consistent, Manageable Reinforcement

These micro-trainings are concise, targeted, and easily incorporated into daily operations, allowing staff to consistently reinforce and apply what they've learned in a manageable way. By providing continuous opportunities to revisit key concepts, agencies can help staff move beyond understanding to actively embedding new knowledge into their daily behaviors and interactions.

Tailored Approaches for Continuous Growth

DWCO's expertise ensures that these practices are tailored to the unique needs of each agency, fostering a culture of continuous learning and growth. Through this approach, staff can build confidence in their new skills, adapt to challenges effectively, and contribute to a more resilient, cohesive, and supportive work environment.

Yes, these efforts require time, energy, and resources. However, if we do not cultivate people for positive and skillful growth, we are likely to continue to reap undesirable outcomes—often at a far greater cost than investing proactively in coaching and prevention.



JUST THREE THINGS

BY JULIE TAFT, LCSW

I was in a training last year with others who work behind the walls when I heard something that stuck with me. When talking about staff wellness, an officer shared that, on days that he comes home and complains and complains about all the difficult things that officers now have to face at their jobs, his girlfriend lets him vent for a bit and then says, “Ok, give me three things that went well today.” When I heard that, something shifted in my brain and I caught onto this idea. Yes, I have attended other trainings that presented the same or a similar idea. But for some reason, that suggestion clicked for me on that day.

I think we have all had those days where we can't sleep all night but then decide to get the best sleep of our lives an hour before we need to wake up. Then we push snooze one too many times and are a touch behind. We start getting ready for work and look over at our laundry pile and growl because we realize that we have to wash clothes sooner than later (this might just be a me thing, growling at my laundry). We hop into our car and start our trek to work, only to get stuck behind a person that has no place to be and is driving about the same speed as our 96-year-old grandma. We get into work and the best parking lot is full so we have to park in the one that we have to hike what feels like five miles just to get into the building. We step into the building and the officer at the front gate is in a mood. We walk through the facility and we hear everyone talking about how much things suck. Then we finally make it back to our office and get ourselves situated only to find email after email of people complaining about one thing or another. This is how our day goes, on and on, with everything sucking and everyone around you feeling the same way. Does this sound familiar? Or is it just me that has days like this, where it feels like as soon as I open my eyes my day is in the toilet?

Something that I have realized over time is that how we see the world around us is how we are going to interact with it. If we walk around and think of everything in the world as being crap, then our world is going to be crap. But our worlds are not black and white, either all unicorns and rainbows or all doom and gloom. When we tell ourselves we are having a good day, it doesn't mean that everything in that day is perfect. It just means that our focus on that day is on the positive aspects. Most of what we choose to notice and highlight in that day tends to be good. The same goes for when we're having a bad day. It's likely that not everything is truly horrible, but in that moment, our focus is on the negative.

So, I started using this idea of just three good things in my life each day. There are days where I come home and I feel like the horse from the Never-ending Story that is stuck in the quicksand (definitely showing my age here—if you know, you know), where I am being swallowed up by all the stressful stuff surrounding me. When I find myself in that place, I make myself identify three things in my day that did not fall into this stress. Some days, it's just as simple as there was a bird tweeting outside my window, and, for me, that means that it's the end of winter and warmer days are coming.

At first this mental exercise was a bit difficult to do, because in a day where nothing seemed to go right, where do you find something that did? So that is where you need to dig to really look at the small pieces of your day to find something to put on this list. The fun thing is, if you do this over time, you have to dig a lot less to find something. Your brain is already used to this exercise and starts cataloging your good moments throughout your day.

It's gotten so I have started making others use this tool too. One of these people is my mom. Lately, she has had a lot on her plate and can get overwhelmed with it all. I can tell when she is having one of those overwhelming days when she calls me at night and starts telling me what has been happening in her day. And every single thing she gives me is negative. She does not mention one single positive thing from her day. She's in the quicksand and it's gobbling her up by the minute. So, after it feels like she has vented enough about her day, I will say to her "So, tell me, what are three things that went well today, because it sounds like you had a stressful day." I give her time to think and come up with a few things. At first, I'm pretty sure she thought I was crazy and was probably rolling her eyes, but now she will sometimes give me three things without me asking because she knows my question is coming. Heck, sometimes when I have had a rough day she even flips the script and will ask me, "Tell me three things that went well today." The other day she even showed me a journal that she is getting for herself and for my 8-year-old nephew where each day you record three things that went well in your day.

The reality is that we are all dealing with a lot behind the walls. Add that to the stressors of everyday life, and life can get overwhelmingly negative. A lot of people are miserable and are feeling like they do not have much control over their lives. But one thing we do have control over is where our focus is. We can choose to be stuck in all the negative that so many of those around us are stuck in. Or, we can choose to find the good stuff still passing by us, no matter how simple, in order to not be swallowed up by everything happening around us. The world is not all good or all bad, there is good and bad in each of our days. And you can choose to only focus on the bad, but you can also choose to find and acknowledge the good in your day.

To the officer that shared this story about his life, thank you for sharing that with others. It truly has made a difference in my world. And to the girlfriend of this officer, thank you for finding a way to support your significant other during tough times, enough so that he felt it was useful to share your words of wisdom with others.



FROM CORRECTIONS FATIGUE TO FULFILLMENT™

Online Instructor Training

Send your vetted staff to become certified CF2F instructors to offer **staff healthy, research-based, career-long coping skills.**

May 13-16 & 19-21, 2025

October 21-24 & 27-29, 2025

Seven 4.5-hr days

[MORE INFORMATION](#)



Click or scan the code to register.



SANDCASTLE: HOW SHARED TRAUMA BETWEEN CORRECTION OFFICERS CAN AFFECT AN AGENCY AND ITS CULTURE —PART 2

BY SAMUEL RAPOZA, CCS, NCCS

Continued from the **March 2025** issue of the **Correctional Oasis**.

Shared Trauma and Loyalty

Shared traumatic experiences can also have effects on the social welfare of the workforce. Correction officers are often fiercely loyal, which can be attributed to the bonds of trust that are built between them, and are strengthened through each shared experience. This loyalty and trust can be productive as camaraderie is something that often needs to develop naturally. Understanding one's role on a team, as well as the common goal of that team can only go so far in bringing everyone together as a successful unit. The collective focus and drive of the group can be pushed further than that of just a "cohesive" team, which is where shared traumatic experiences can often introduce a sense of trust and loyalty that cannot be simulated, taught, or artificially introduced. This is why such

bonds are often referred to as a "brother or sisterhood."

For the officers working within this system, "brotherhood" is an appropriate way to demonstrate the deep-rooted connection they share. The term suggests that the connected parties have a shared background, experiences, hardships, and collectively overcoming adversity - much like a family. Also, like with a family, that bond is not dissolved by petty fights or arguments. Although the parties did not select each other to bond with, they have a deep connection from their shared experiences. This can instill a sense of loyalty that is unachievable through conventional team-building techniques.

However, blind loyalty can certainly present some negative outcomes. As with any familial connection, loyalty often

persists despite the actions of one of the parties. "Never turning your back on family" may seem to be an admirable quality, but when that loyalty supports the negative behavior of one party, it can present some moral dilemmas and be used to excuse ethically questionable behavior.

Toxic loyalty between officers often manifests itself when an officer acts improperly and others are reluctant to report or testify as to what that officer did. This "code of silence" puts an officer's "loyalty" into conflict with their "duty". This can be observed when an officer's wrongful actions are supported and reinforced by others who maintain their silence, viewing it as loyalty. This can be extremely damaging for an agency as the view may be that *all* of their officers approve of that behavior. The conflict between duty and loyalty can be

addressed by consistent reinforcement of the officer's sworn oath and duties. This can help officers to remember that their first loyalty should be to their oath and the integrity of the agency, and thus, to their fellow officers.

Officers who are seen to betray the "code of silence" are often treated as a pariah – an outlier from the circle of trust to which the other officers belong. Sometimes this is an unfair result of officers choosing their duty over the bonds they formed with their co-workers and to some officers, this is seen as an affront to the trust they once shared. However, it should be noted that there can exist some officers who are themselves toxic and foster a sense of distrust within the agency. They can often be seen to seek out the mistakes of other officers, regardless of whether they have any involvement in such acts, and appear to take joy in reporting them. Whether this is to boost their own sense of self-worth, a symptom of their lack of confidence in their own abilities, or whether they aim to make themselves look better by making others look worse, the result is that they are similarly viewed as a "wolf in sheep's clothing".

Trauma bonding can also support the forming of social cliques. Though not inherently damaging to an agency's culture, these cliques can make it difficult for the assimilation of new officers into these rigid social circles. It can also make it difficult for the officers in these groups to empathize and relate to officers from other assignments, such as officers who work in behavioral units versus pre-release units. The nature of the trauma experienced by correction officers can also make it difficult for them to develop empathy for the incarcerated population. This can be challenging as the duties of an officer require that they render a level of care for the incarcerated individuals. So as officers form trauma bonds and the trust between them grows, the social gap between them and the incarcerated population widens and reinforces the "us versus them" mentality.

When a situation arises where an officer brings in contraband for an incarcerated individual or otherwise develops an inappropriate relationship with an incarcerated individual, it could produce confused feelings on the part of other officers, with whom the wrongdoer might share a deep-

rooted bond. That is not to say that an officer would intentionally cover up the potentially illegal acts of another. Rather, the circumstances require an understanding of the sometimes-overwhelming feelings of broken trust and disloyalty being felt by an officer who was, essentially, betrayed by his fellow officer. If someone has formed a traumatic bond with another officer like this, it would bring up concerns that isolation and anger would be a natural product of this betrayal.

It is an unfortunate reality of corrections that there are the occasional officers who commit ethical, moral, and legal violations. Some officers could have a personal trauma bond with that staff member, while others who lack that bond of shared experiences might only feel the less personal sense of simply being loyal to a "brother in blue". Regardless, there is usually no closure for the staff left behind. The betrayal casts a long shadow over the remaining officers who are left to navigate through the muddled moral quandary left behind. Staff may try to project themselves into their former co-worker's shoes, as a way to understand their actions and gain some perspective. This mental

exploration can bring an innocent officer into an internal ethical conflict and give birth to feelings of anger, resentment, and guilt. Most officers left in these situations will usually never know the “why” as to what happened. Naturally, this could be confusing and potentially create some trust issues for that officer towards their other co-workers.

Mitigating the Negative Effects of Trauma Bonding

There are steps an agency can take to mitigate some of the negative effects of trauma bonding. Early intervention, support, and organizational identity are three considerations correctional administrators should invest in. A proactive approach regarding the mental health of an agency’s correctional staff often begins the same as many other advancements in corrections: with staff training. Officers must consistently refer to their base training as they navigate complicated and everyday situations. Creating a solid foundation of mental health training is crucial as it provides another tool for the officers to utilize throughout their careers. Additional supportive trainings are also beneficial, whether it be a formal class conducted annually during the officer’s

regular in-service training, or multiple “micro trainings” conducted at roll call. Revisiting the topic of officer mental health renews awareness and demonstrates the agency’s commitment for the officer’s wellbeing.

Critical Incident Stress Debriefs (CISD) are used by many public safety agencies after staff experience high-stress and critical incidents. There have been discussions on the effectiveness of CISD with concern towards forcing staff to relive some of the details. However, encouraging staff to separate themselves from the situation, the scene, and the traumatic event and then following up with support resources can help identify those staff who may need further assistance from mental health professionals and provide some benefit. Other after-action services directly involve the agency during this key time for the officers can help demonstrate the administration’s support for the staff. This can be a subtle but effective way to minimize the appearance that the administration is disconnected, uncaring, or far removed from the situation.

Agencies can often feel rushed to resume normal operations at

the cost of the psychological welfare of the officers involved. Taking the time to offer after action support not only provides the clinical benefits for the officers but allows the administration to demonstrate their commitment to the officers, thereby lessening any resentment that could develop later. Imagine being an officer who finds an incarcerated individual who committed suicide and has to initiate CPR, and then once EMS removes the individual, being told to hurry up and write their report because dinner needs to be served. That essentially places the officer’s well-being below the prompt serving of dinner for the incarcerated individuals. Proper management of a critical incident should not be solely based on how quickly the facility returns to normal operations.

Continued support and access to resources, not just in the wake of a traumatic event, but also year-round, is essential for the well-being of correction officers. Peer support groups are a good way both to allow officers to volunteer and to contribute to the success of the agency, but also for officers to have someone to speak to and not feel judged. Peer support can utilize the shared trauma

bonds between officers in a constructive way and provide a formal system that ensures officers know the agency supports both the initiative and its officers. Staff wellness plans that go beyond just an EAP are also a good way to provide support and healthy outlets for the stressors they experience. Bonding with an officer who has made negative lifestyle choices could be detrimental to another officer if they are pulled into a quagmire of a fellow officer's toxic and damaging coping mechanisms.

Reminding officers of their duty and instilling a sense of pride in the agency and the role of correction officers can help bolster the organizational identity of the agency. If officers fail to remember the importance of their role in both the agency and their profession, they can become isolated and lose confidence in themselves. Finding ways for officers to become more invested in the agency and to network with other professionals can help boost the sense of pride they have in both their position and their profession. Ceremonial acts such as having officers swear their oath annually, combined with promotional, retirement, and other events

can also have a positive effect. Encouraging staff to join professional organizations or achieve certifications can also expand the officers' view of their profession beyond the walls of their assigned institution. It can also remind them that the importance of their role goes beyond the officer who sits beside them. Networking with other agencies and colleagues can be a subtle reminder that they are part of a larger group of men and women who proudly serve their communities every day.

Conclusion

Considering the nature of corrections, it is to be expected that trauma bonds will form among correction officers, although the effects of such bonds can manifest themselves in different ways. As water can be used to bond together a sandcastle on the beach, so too can the next wave wash the structure away. But skillful hands along with careful planning

can be the guiding force that builds something that is strong and able to withstand the rising tide. Every correction officer is unique and has the ability to make his or her own choices, but when administrators demonstrate an understanding of trauma and act accordingly and with forethought, they can help ensure that their own agency is strong and able to withstand the next crashing wave.

Samuel Rapoza, CCS, CCHP, NCCS is a Captain with the Bristol County Sheriff's Office in Massachusetts. He has over 20 years of experience working in corrections and is currently responsible for coordinating his agency's recruitment initiatives as well as being assigned to the Crisis Negotiation Team. He holds a certificate from Cornell University in Recruitment and Talent Acquisition.

QUOTE OF THE MONTH

"The expectation that we can be immersed in suffering and loss daily and not be touched by it is as unrealistic as expecting to be able to walk through water without getting wet."

Rachel Remen



IN MEMORIAM

George Ramirez
Sergeant
Kentucky Department of Corrections

MEET THE CORRECTIONAL OASIS TEAM



CATERINA SPINARIS, PH.D., LPC
Founding Director

CONTENT CURATION, PRODUCTION & EDITING



STEPHANIE RAWLINGS, M.S.
Deputy Director

CONTENT DEVELOPMENT, EDITING



JUDY MYERS, B.SC.
Executive Assistant

EDITING



STEVEN MAYOTTE, B.DES., LEED AP
Operations & Systems Advisor

GRAPHIC DESIGN & LAYOUT

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in the Correctional Oasis are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect or represent the views and opinions held by DWCO Board members, staff, and/or volunteers. DWCO is not responsible for accuracy of statements made by authors. If you have a complaint about something you have read in the Correctional Oasis, please contact us.

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

admin@desertwaters.com
desertwaters.com
(719) 784-4727

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.

All images are stock images or are presented with permission of the author.

