

CORRECTIONAL OASIS

BECAUSE ALL ROADS GO BACK TO STAFF WELLNESS

VOLUME: 22

IN THIS ISSUE:

- From The Director's Desk
- Why Administrators Should Address Chronic Sleep Deficits and Mandatory Overtime
- Is It Too Glib to Say that Everything About Excessive Mandatory Overtime Is Difficult?
- Sleep Matters: What Science Tells Us
- What Is Voluntary Overtime Really Costing You?
- Chasing Overtime
- Quote of the Month

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FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

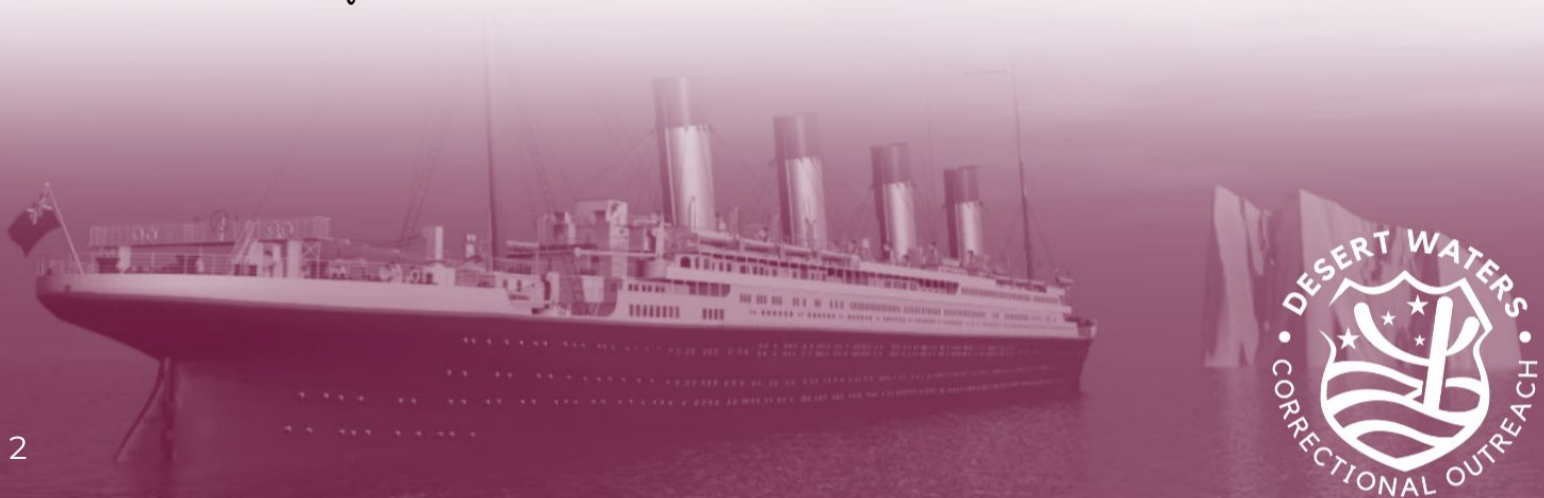
You may already know that for over a year, Desert Waters has been offering a no-cost monthly webinar series on a range of staff wellness topics. One of our most well-attended sessions focused on the critical importance of sleep for overall health. Due to high demand, this issue of the Correctional Oasis includes two articles summarizing key points from that webinar, along with additional insights. You can also watch the recorded session, [here](#).

This is not a new concern. In 2022, I wrote [The Iceberg That Could Sink the Correctional "Titanic"](#), warning about the chronic partial sleep deprivation caused by excessive mandatory overtime. That trend has not slowed—in fact, it appears to be worsening, with no end in sight.

Many underestimate how essential sleep is to both physical and psychological well-being. Because the effects of poor sleep aren't always immediate or obvious, it's easy to assume we can get by without harm. But a growing body of research paints a much more sobering picture.

As the push for staff wellness continues—especially amid critical staffing shortages—it's time to seriously consider how to safeguard staff's personal time for rest and recovery. The solutions are not simple, but this issue can no longer be ignored.

Caterina Spinaris



Why Administrators Should Address Chronic Sleep Deficits and Mandatory Overtime

By Caterina Spinaris, PhD, LPC

Public safety agencies face serious risks and consequences due to the well-known and predictable impacts of excessive mandatory overtime on staff health and functioning.

Below are key points to consider:

Public Safety | Performance | Legal Liability

The consequences of sleep deprivation among public safety workers, particularly correctional and law enforcement officers, are profound.

Risks Increased by Staff Sleep Deficits

- *Motor vehicle accidents after leaving work*
- *On-site errors due to attention lapses, microsleeps, or memory malfunction*
- *On-site accidents linked to slower reaction times*
- *Misuses of force due to impaired self-regulation and executive function*
- *Elevated risks of mental illness and suicide*

Performance Issues and Agency Liability

A study of U.S. police rosters found that public complaints were significantly more likely among officers who:

- *Slept less in the 24 hours before a shift*
- *Worked back-to-back night shifts*
- *Reported greater physical fatigue and sleepiness (Riedy, Dawson, & Vila, 2019)*

Real-world tragedies have demonstrated the dangers:

Wrongful death lawsuit: Excessive overtime blamed in the suicide of a Los Angeles County jail deputy (ABC7, 2024).

Car accidents after shifts: Multiple correctional officers have died in post-shift car crashes attributed to fatigue (Corrections 1, 2022; KRDO, 2022; Yahoo News, 2019) or caused accidents that injured or killed others (Maine, 2019).

“We know long work hours and shift work and sleep deprivation degrades ... performance, productivity, safety, health and well-being. It can increase misconduct, accident risks, it can impair judgment and the ability to respond quickly. It can affect relationships with the community. This has been pretty well-established for several decades.”

— Dr. Samantha Riedy (2020)

Mandatory Overtime and Safety Laws

Mandatory overtime may violate workplace safety laws if it creates a health hazard (OSHA guidance; Bracken, 2022). “For obvious safety reasons, there are laws limiting the hours that truck drivers can work. Similarly, OSHA may provide some protection from long work hours and fatigue that could lead to injury.”
— Douglas Bracken, *Employment Law Attorney*

Solutions: Addressing the Sleep Crisis

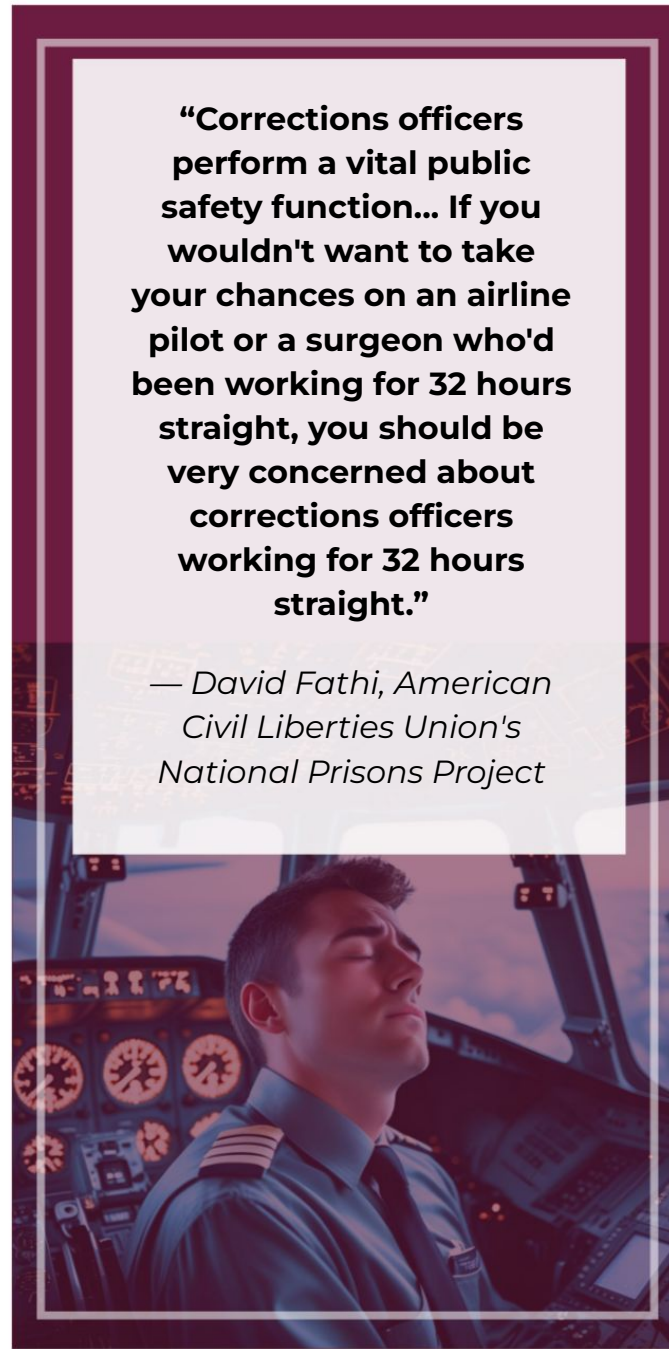
“Only radical and creative measures can address this very real and devastating iceberg of a threat to staff’s health and functioning, and to the quality of effectiveness of correctional agencies’ operations.”— Caterina Spinaris, *PhD*

Agency Solutions

- Hire additional staff to reduce reliance on mandatory overtime (We recognize that many agencies are currently struggling with critically low staffing levels.)
- Implement consistent shift scheduling to preserve circadian rhythm stability
- Pursue statutory work hour limits, similar to other high-risk professions

“Corrections officers perform a vital public safety function... If you wouldn't want to take your chances on an airline pilot or a surgeon who'd been working for 32 hours straight, you should be very concerned about corrections officers working for 32 hours straight.”

— David Fathi, *American Civil Liberties Union's National Prisons Project*



Legal Limits on Work Hours in Other Professions

Airline Pilots: Max 9 hours of flight time per 24 hours (FAA)

Truck Drivers: Max 11 hours driving within a 14-hour window, after 10 hours off duty (FMCSA)

Air Traffic Controllers:

- Max shift: 10 consecutive hours
- Break required every 2 hours
- Minimum 9 hours off between shifts
- At least 24 consecutive hours off every 7 days

Japan's Mandatory Overtime Limits on Firms and Workers

Sudden death from overwork—usually from a heart attack or stroke—has a name in Japan—karoshi. To address this poor work-personal life balance, in 2019 Japan instituted a Work Style Reform that introduced a maximum overtime cap of 360 hours per year (equivalent to 30 overtime hours in a typical month).

Karoshi (過労死):
Death by overwork.

Acknowledging the Challenge, Advancing the Mission

Corrections work must urgently evolve to be recognized as a vital and honorable profession—one rooted in purpose, resilience, and the well-being of those who serve. Returning to the earlier analogy of the iceberg threatening the correctional Titanic, the warning is stark: without swift and meaningful reform, the system risks a catastrophic capsizing. Elevating the profession is no longer optional—it is a matter of survival.

We deeply empathize with administrators and other decision-makers, recognizing that there are no easy solutions to the serious challenge of understaffing. Tackling this issue will require a multifaceted strategy—including strengthening professionalism, improving workplace culture, and reshaping the public image of these career fields.

Norway once faced similar challenges and dysfunction in its prison system. But starting in the 1950s, the country committed to meaningful reform and innovation. Slowly but steadily, it turned the ship around. Today, Norway is recognized for having one of the most effective and humane criminal justice systems in the world. Its journey shows that even amid deep dysfunction, progress is possible.

With vision, commitment, and sustained effort, we too can change course, prevent disaster, and reduce the needless suffering of all those impacted by the justice system.

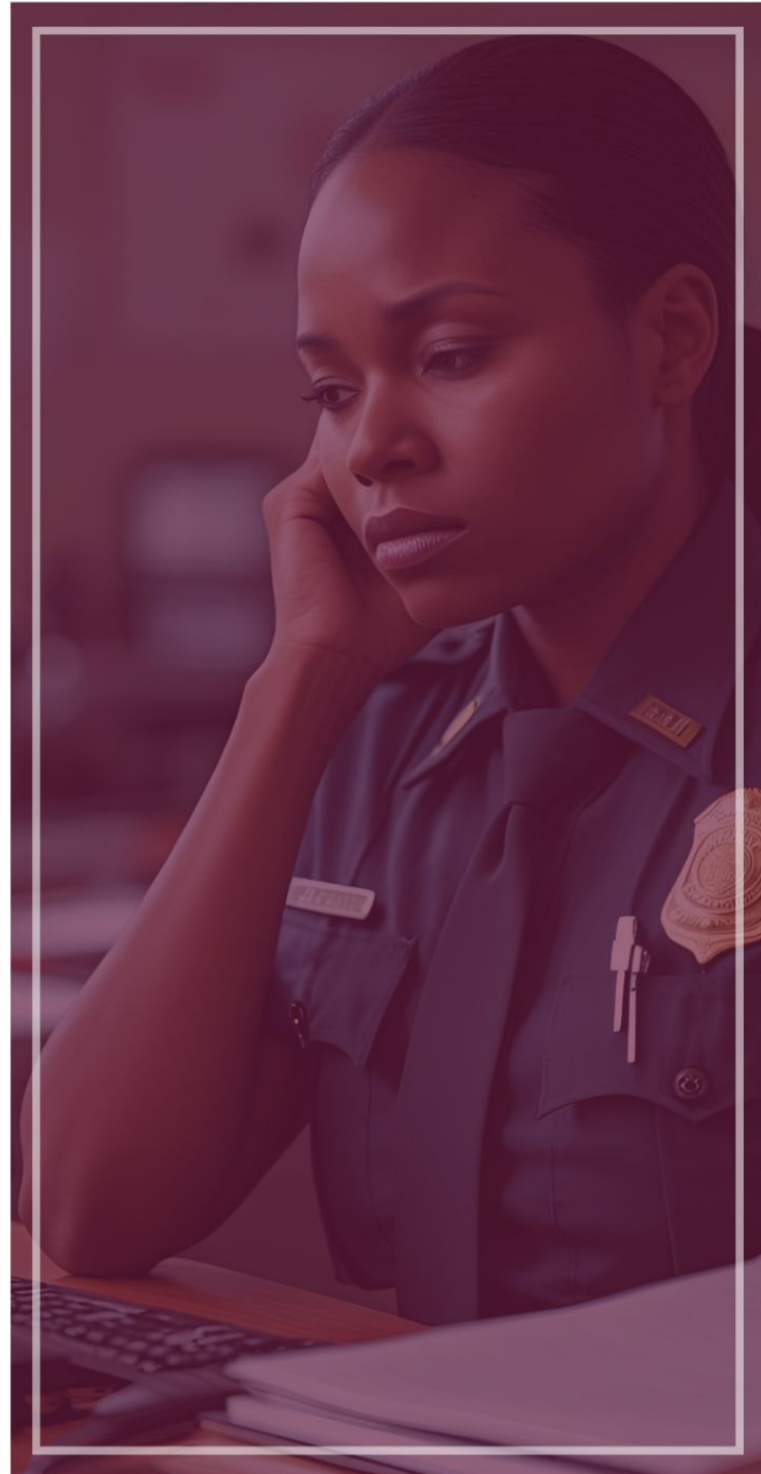
Is It Too Glib to Say that Everything About Excessive Mandatory Overtime Is Difficult?

By Greg Morton, MSc

Is it too simplistic to say that everything about excessive mandatory overtime is miserable, complicated, and difficult? Is it too obvious to say that chronic sleep deprivation damages careers, families, physical and mental health, and even agency missions?

The physical consequences of lack of sleep are increasingly well known. It affects our central nervous system, impacting how our bodies send, handle, and remember information, and reducing our reaction times to those equivalent to driving while intoxicated. It affects our immune system, the mechanism that fights off bacteria and viruses. It affects our respiratory and digestive systems.

It lowers our bodies' tolerance for glucose, which if overlapped with poor eating and/or drinking habits, can contribute to diabetes. It affects our cardiovascular system, both to our blood pressure and our ability to repair damage to blood vessels. The repair of other cells and tissues are impacted as well, largely due to the depletion of growth hormones. Alzheimer's risk increases through plaque accumulation.



The emotional consequences are apparent in our everyday lives. This includes moodiness, shortness of temper, reduced problem-solving ability, increased anxiety and depression, and increased suicidal thinking. These impact our off duty lives as well as our teamwork while on duty. In the latter case, unprofessional decision making can follow, thereby creating a safety liability for both offenders and staff.

Further, asking a corrections professional to engage in Motivational Interviewing or implement his or her Role Model, Reinforce, and Redirect offender interactions skills in a challenging one-on-one situation—when all we really want to do is put our head down and sleep—is death by a thousand cuts to the agency’s public mission each and every shift. The extent to which outcomes cause moral injury by violating employees’ sense of professionalism will vary.

And whether any of these concerns may rise to the level of a staff, justice-involved person, or even public safety rights violation is something to be decided by a court of law sometime in the future. Any of us can imagine how the above consequences of chronic insufficient sleep can lead to horrible outcomes for all involved.

All it takes is the playing out of the physical and emotional consequences listed above to their tragic endings. Even more likely perhaps is a rights violation based on the employer abridging labor laws regarding cumulative working hours. We all know that mandatory doubles and even triples are commonplace these days. Imagine if corrections administrators ordered their staff to limit the amount of sleep incarcerated individuals are permitted to get on a regular basis.

We realize how sensitive it is to even mention this topic. Correctional facilities can’t close and send students home for virtual services like schools can. Correctional facilities can’t triage offenders like some medical facilities may be required to do. Facilities must stay open, must feed, clothe, and shelter offenders. Facilities must provide medical and mental health care. Facilities must keep safe those confined during the period of their sentences. These services are not optional. Not offering them creates problems for which solutions are mandatory.

Solutions need those responsible to take action. If action is insufficient, blaming frequently follows. It is not our intention to blame anyone for the current state of affairs. The problem is too multidimensional for blaming to be a useful strategy.

In fact, if anything, our intention would be to charge all parties involved to focus on their individual duties, look around, and make sure you are rowing the boat in the same direction as your partners.

- *If you are a line employee, don't call in, thereby making a colleague work a mandatory, unless you truly can't work.*
- *If you are a formal or informal leader at the work site, contribute to a culture that reduces emotional or physical fatigue so as to increase retention.*
- *If you are an institutional upper manager, take a shift every once in a while. Besides allowing someone else to stay home and recuperate, you are signaling your awareness of the problem and genuine care for your staff. The morale boost might be even more than you expect.*
- *If you are a program administrator or executive, analyze your policies and your staffing patterns to see where unexpected OT requirements are hidden. And heck, if you can effectively work a shift, don't be shy.*
- *If you are a newer employee, one hired to help us fight through the thicket of difficulties we currently face, work to achieve meaning, not just money.*
- *If you are responsible for recruitment in any form, work as if people's lives depended on it.*
- *In all cases, remind each other that the duties you perform are important, profound, and socially consequential. It is not a little thing what we do, and therefore requires us to be at our best to succeed. Rested, refreshed, and restored.*

But while we are doing that, we need to recognize the biggest picture of all: as members of a governmental structure we operate under the color of law. Laws are developed to clarify the rights of the populace.

When our actions impinge on the human rights of others, whether justice-involved persons' right for safety or treatment; employees' right for safety, scheduling, and humane work conditions; or the public's right for safety and agency accountability, we need to take a deep breath and call a boiling pot of water exactly what it is. Especially if we are sitting in it.



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Sleep Matters: What Science Tells Us

By Caterina Spinaris, PhD, LPC

“Sleep... is a biological requirement for human life. We sleep for the same reason we breathe and drink. It's an imperative. Yet we live in a society that devalues sleep.”

— Michael A. Grandner, PhD

Sleep: A Biological Imperative and Public Health Priority

Sleep is not a luxury—it is a fundamental biological necessity. Defined as a recurring, reversible state of perceptual disengagement, reduced consciousness, and relative immobility, sleep enables the brain and body to restore and maintain health (Grandner & Rosenberger, 2019).

The Foundations of Sleep

Sleep is essential across the lifespan. It involves complex interactions between neural circuits and endocrine signals. Adults generally require 7–9 hours of sleep every 24 hours to function optimally. After about 15–17 hours awake, the body builds an urge to sleep—a process driven by homeostatic mechanisms.

Insufficient sleep compromises every aspect of well-being:

- **Physically:** Impairs cardiovascular, metabolic, and immune function.
- **Cognitively:** Slows reaction time, reduces attention, and impairs memory.
- **Emotionally:** Destabilizes mood and increases anxiety, depression, and irritability.

The Functions of Sleep

During sleep, the body engages in critical maintenance:

- *Reduces sympathetic nervous system arousal and activates parasympathetic recovery*
- *Strengthens innate and adaptive immunity*
- *Regulates inflammation via cytokine production during deep sleep*
- *Repairs neuronal DNA and mitigates oxidative stress*
- *Clears metabolic waste via cerebrospinal fluid "brain flush"*
- *Consolidates memories and primes the brain for learning*
- *Synchronizes circadian rhythms and regulates hunger hormones (ghrelin/leptin)*

Sleep also enhances mood, creativity, decision-making, and physical resilience. Regular, adequate sleep has been linked to reduced risk of heart disease, stroke, obesity, and Alzheimer's disease.

The Cost of Short-Term Sleep Restriction

Even short-term sleep restriction is harmful. “Like our physical well-being—mental and emotional health rely on a delicate balance,” says researcher Eti Ben Simon. “Even a single sleepless night can therefore do damage.”

- *After one night of sleep deprivation, cognitive and motor performance declines to levels comparable to a 0.10% blood alcohol concentration—worse than the U.S. legal driving limit of 0.08% (Dawson & Reid, 1997).*
- *Blood pressure increases (Krause et al., 2023).*
- *Prefrontal cortex activity drops, impairing executive functioning and emotional regulation (Ben Simon, 2023).*

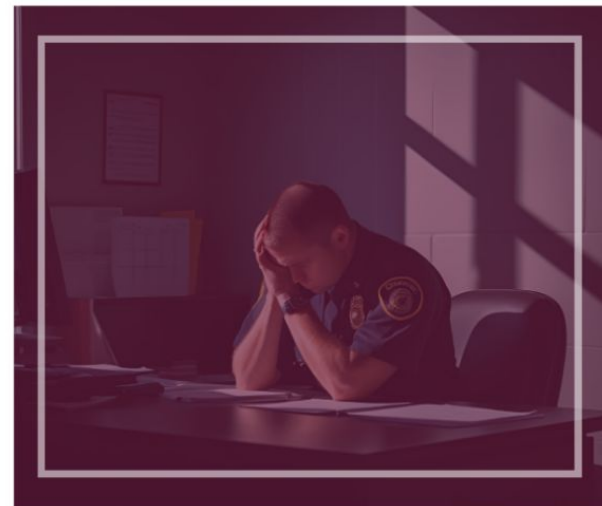
Short sleep duration is strongly correlated with worsening mental health. A study of healthy young adults by Ramsey, Grandner, & Verma (2019) found that each additional night of insufficient sleep increased:

- *Depressed mood by 21%*
- *Hopelessness/anger by 24%*
- *Anxiety/self-harm thoughts by 25%*
- *Functional problems by 28%*
- *Suicidal thoughts by 28%*

Another study found that three nights of partial sleep deprivation (4.25 hrs/night) significantly increased inflammatory proteins in the blood—many of which are linked to a higher risk of cardiovascular diseases.

These changes were observed in healthy young adults, highlighting that the negative effects of poor sleep can begin early and quickly. While physical exercise still triggered some beneficial protein responses regardless of sleep levels, the results showed that exercise cannot fully offset the harmful impact of inadequate sleep (Brandão, Zhang, Grip, et al., 2025).

Microsleeps are brief episodes of involuntary sleep (15 seconds or less) that can occur when sleep-deprived. Parts of the brain temporarily stop processing incoming information while the person is unaware that they have fallen asleep. These lapses significantly increase accident risk, including drowsy driving crashes, which cause an estimated 91,000 crashes, 50,000 injuries, and nearly 800 deaths each year (NHTSA).



“Alertness in the brain, even under normal circumstances, carries with it penalties... if you ask your cells to stay active 30 percent longer each day, cells die.”

— Fabian Fernandez, PhD

Chronic Sleep Deprivation: Long-Term Risks

Over time, partial sleep restriction leads to:

- *Cognitive decline and memory impairment.*
- *Hormonal dysregulation (e.g., reduced testosterone).*
- *Increased risk of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation.*
- *Higher risk of metabolic disorders, cardiovascular disease, and certain cancers.*

A study of adults aged 50–70 found that sleeping 5 hours or less per night increased the risk of multimorbidity (two or more chronic diseases) by 30–40% (Sabia et al., 2022).

Diseases linked to chronic sleep restriction include:

- *Heart disease, stroke, and arrhythmias*
- *Type 2 diabetes and insulin resistance*
- *Alzheimer’s dementia and Parkinson’s dementia*
- *Inflammation-linked cancers*
- *Depression*

A 15-year study (Cavailles et al., 2024) found that people reporting frequent sleep problems had brain aging equivalent to 2.6 years older, independent of other health factors.

Shift Work and Mortality

Long working hours and shift work compound sleep loss. In 2016, 745,000 deaths from stroke and ischemic heart disease were linked to long working hours—a 29% increase since 2000 (WHO & ILO).

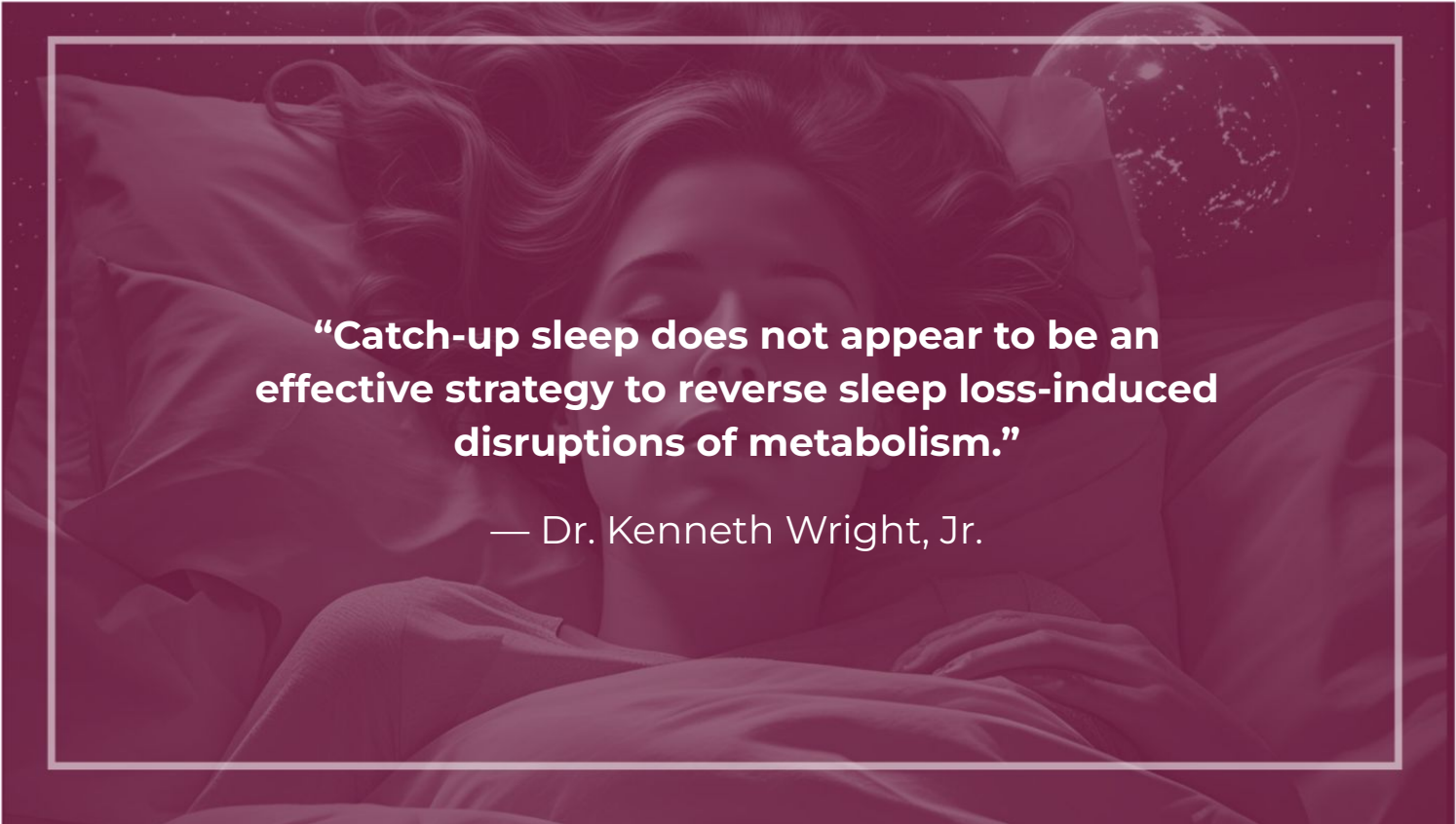
Shift workers face increased risks of cancer, cardiovascular disease, mood disorders, and cognitive impairment due to disrupted melatonin production and circadian rhythm disruption.

The Myth of Catch-Up Sleep

Weekend recovery sleep may slightly reduce cardiovascular risk (Song, 2025), but it does not restore cognitive function or improve insulin resistance (NIH, 2019). Alarming, individuals may feel better after catching up on sleep while remaining cognitively impaired, dangerously misjudging their capabilities (Zamore & Veasey, 2022).

In animal studies, brain inflammation, neuronal death, and Alzheimer's markers persisted long after sleep deprivation—possibly permanently (Zamore & Veasey, 2022).

For decades, researchers and practitioners have noted the reduced life expectancy of correctional and police officers (see FL paper), often attributing it anecdotally to chronic high-stress work environments. But what if this shortened lifespan—and even some suicides—are also linked to the chronic sleep deficits experienced by custody and security staff due to mandatory overtime and shift work?



“Catch-up sleep does not appear to be an effective strategy to reverse sleep loss-induced disruptions of metabolism.”

— Dr. Kenneth Wright, Jr.

Protecting Your Sleep and Health

The only true solution to sleep deficit harms is prevention—by ensuring regular, sufficient sleep.

What You Can Do:

- *Aim for 7–9 hours of sleep each day.*
- *Stick to consistent sleep and wake times—even on days off.*
- *Create a quiet, dark bedroom (use blackout curtains or eye masks).*
- *Reserve the bed for sleep and sex only.*
- *Avoid alcohol, gaming, and screens before bedtime.*
- *Practice relaxation techniques before sleep.*
- *Consult a physician about safe sleep aids (some antidepressants may help).*
- *Avoid habit-forming drugs like benzodiazepines or barbiturates.*
- *If you are considering non-prescription sleep aids, including herbal or other supplements, consult a medical provider to discuss potential side effects and interactions with any prescribed medications.*

Other Health Strategies:

- *Monitor heart health: blood pressure, cholesterol, weight.*
- *Participate in workplace health screenings.*
- *Practice stress management (mindfulness, prayer, breathing exercises).*
- *Maintain a healthy lifestyle:*
 - *Eat a balanced diet (fruits, vegetables, legumes, nuts, whole grains).*
 - *Stay physically active.*
 - *Avoid smoking and limit alcohol intake.*
 - *Cut caffeine at least 4 hours before bedtime.*

“Inevitably we all miss out on sleep from time to time. But our societies should critically examine structures—such as work norms—that prevent people from getting enough rest. The science of sleep and mental health suggests that failing to address those problems will leave people vulnerable to serious harm.”

— *Eti Ben Simon, PhD*

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"Useful for myself but will be very useful for new hires to try to prevent fatigue, or if it does happen, some ways to bounce back from it." – Corr. Sgt.

What Is Voluntary Overtime Really Costing You?

By Stephanie Rawlings, MSc

When I used to teach Desert Waters' course *Towards Correctional Fulfillment: For New Staff™* to cadets at the academy, I always gave a warning about voluntary overtime:

“Some of you are heading to facilities where, for various reasons, you’ll be able to write your own paycheck with the overtime available. Just make sure you don’t come to depend on that overtime to pay your bills—because one day, it’ll dry up, and you’ll still have that truck, house, or motorcycle payment.”

That part about the overtime drying up? Turns out, I was wrong. Since 2021, staffing shortages in corrections have become a persistent, near-universal issue. Many agencies are still waiting for the light at the end of the overtime tunnel—and it hasn’t come. In fact, for many, overtime has become less of a temporary measure and more of a lifestyle.

And that brings us to an important question: What is voluntary overtime actually costing you?

Not in dollars—but in physical, mental, and emotional health. As other articles in this issue have pointed out: a lot. Maybe even years off your life, if you trust the science.

But let’s set aside the studies for a moment. Let’s make it personal.

- *How many “healthy” coworkers have you seen suddenly pass away? A heart attack in their sleep. A stroke out of nowhere. No signs—just gone.*
- *How many were killed in car accidents, nodding off on the drive home after a double?*
- *How many bad decisions—small or serious—have been made on the job because someone was exhausted?*

We already know working a regular 40-hour week in corrections for 20 years can cut your lifespan short. The old study that estimated the average life expectancy of a CO at 59 didn’t even account for overtime. Now add another 20, 30, or 40 hours on top of that each week.

Then, factor in the **family impact**. Corrections is already hard on relationships—odd shifts, high-stress environments, minimal support. Now throw in sleep deprivation and a calendar that never lets up. What starts as a “temporary sacrifice” can turn into chronic absence, strained relationships, and missed milestones. That’s not just impact anymore—that’s a **risk factor**.

In 2019, a corrections officer caused a rear-end crash that killed a 9 year old girl. The police said he fell asleep behind the wheel on his way home after working consecutive 16-hour shifts. Allegedly, in the four weekly pay periods prior to the accident, the lowest number of hours worked was 94 and the highest was 110. He was convicted of manslaughter in 2022. A life gone, a man ruined, families left shattered.

I remember two similar instances in my own department, particularly one in which I interviewed a young officer for our peer support team and found him to be a light in his workplace. He was a young father, about to be married, a recent college graduate, so much ahead of him. I was devastated to learn a few months later he had been killed on his drive home following multiple overtime shifts. A horrific tragedy.

Desert Waters has even received inquiries from concerned facility administrators asking about research that addressed limiting voluntary overtime, as they could see that staff who elected to work excessive amounts of overtime was not functioning up to par. This exemplifies the urgent need to address risk management and liability associated with staff allowed to work overtime unchecked. But money is stiff competition to personal wellbeing and scientific research identifying risks to health and safety.

So what’s the message? Stop working voluntary overtime? Not exactly. We’re not saying don’t ever take voluntary overtime. We all know the job and its demands. Some overtime is unavoidable. Some of it may even be necessary, depending on your goals.

But this is about awareness.

It’s about recognizing that you are paying a cost, even if it’s not visible right now. And if your agency is mandating on the regular anyway, then maybe it’s time to step back and draw a line.



Sit down with your family. Talk honestly about what you're doing and why. Set boundaries that protect your health, your relationships, and your future. And whatever you do—**don't build your financial life around overtime**. That overtime may not dry up, but your health might. Don't let your mortgage, car, or lifestyle depend on income that comes at the cost of your well-being.

By now, if you've read this far, you've likely realized that this entire issue of the *Correctional Oasis*—along with several webinars and training modules—has been dedicated to this topic. Why? Because it is **that** important. Chronic sleep deficits among staff may be the single greatest life-safety risk and agency liability in corrections. And yet, despite growing awareness, we've seen little meaningful progress in moving the dial toward improvement.

Hopefully you have also noticed in this issue that we are addressing this topic from the top down, bottom up, and side to side. System leaders need to be addressing staffing, recruitment and retention within their sphere of influence. Frontline staff need to have accountability for safety with overtime, be it voluntary or mandated.

If you see someone who isn't doing or looking well, give them a ride home. If they are volunteering all the time and you can see negative impact—say something! I think we can all agree we would rather have a friend or coworker mad at us than attend their funeral or another they cause.



Chronic sleep deficits among staff may be the **single greatest life-safety risk** and agency liability in corrections. And yet, despite growing awareness, we've seen little meaningful progress in moving the dial toward improvement.

Chasing Overtime

By Ron Mason
Correctional Officer (Retired)

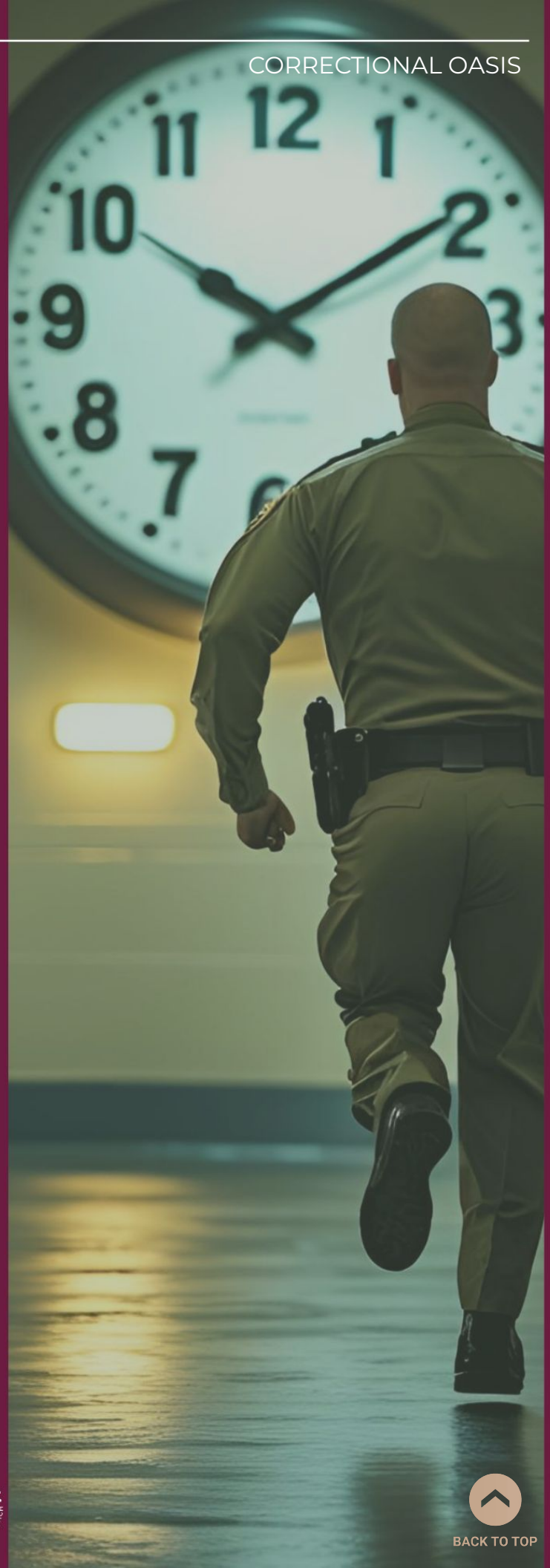
I see officers that make a fair wage chasing overtime like it is the most important thing in life. Like their life depends on it. For some, maybe it does.

Why? What do they need the extra money for? Poor spending habits to fill a void? Debt from trying to distract from the hurt? Insecurities in family life? Insecurities of self and trying to keep up with the Jones's? The list goes on and on. How much of it is brought on by PTSD and trying to keep it at bay?

My bias is apparent. My view is skewed. Saving for a family trip, working towards home ownership, saving for child's education, braces for the kid, investing for retirement, or other positive pursuits?

Needless to say—but I shall say it anyway—be it to fight/hide from the hurt that the job brings to your mind and body, or your desire to be the best provider for your family that you can, please remember to look after yourself and give yourself a moment.

**Give yourself a moment
that is about YOU.**



QUOTE

of the month

“Employees who believe that management is concerned about them as a whole person – not just an employee – are more productive, more satisfied, more fulfilled.”

Anne M. Mulcahy



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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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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.

