

CORRECTIONAL OASIS

BECAUSE ALL ROADS GO BACK TO STAFF WELLNESS

VOLUME: 23

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

FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

Like schools and hospitals, corrections is unequivocally a “people business.” Accordingly, it should come as no surprise that the quality of relationships within and across ranks and job roles—and the effectiveness with which interpersonal skills are used—can either strengthen or undermine correctional workforce cultures and staff well-being.

In this issue, and in future ones, we will examine these dynamics from multiple angles, with a particular focus on the pivotal role of supervisors. As the primary shapers of day-to-day work climate, supervisors—across all ranks and titles—have both the power and the responsibility to foster psychologically safe, respectful, and supportive environments that protect their subordinates’ mental and physical health, and, in turn, improve retention.

Caterina Spinaris

Let's remember: When correctional staff are adequately supported, institutions operate more safely, humanely, and in alignment with public safety and rehabilitation goals.

Rx for Ailing Systems

Stopping the Bleed: Reducing Staff Turnover in Corrections

By Caterina Spinaris, PhD, LPC

It is no secret that correctional systems are in crisis, groaning under the burden of chronic underfunding and understaffing while being tasked with maintaining safety, security, and infrastructure, and promoting rehabilitation. One major consequence is that, in a snowball manner, persistent understaffing becomes the source of additional high turnover, due to the relentless stressors of mandatory overtime and work overload. And the cycle keeps repeating itself.

The Problem

Under these conditions, staff chronically battle **high job demands, low control, and low social support**—which constitute the perfect breeding ground for burnout: demoralization, emotional exhaustion, disengagement, and feeling “de-skilled.”

In addition to this stress overload, staff are continually exposed to significant traumatic content, both direct—in real time, and indirect—at a later time, sometimes including threats to their own lives. This creates ideal conditions for the emergence of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress.

These work conditions arise repeatedly—sometimes all at once—from:

- **Operational stressors** (shift work, overtime)
- **Organizational stressors** (staff conflict, lack of procedural justice)
- **Traumatic stressors** (violence, injury, death)

Together, burnout and post-traumatic stress form what at Desert Waters we call Corrections Fatigue—gradual, cumulative negative changes in staff identity, worldview, spirituality, emotions, behaviors, health, and functioning.

Staff experiencing Corrections Fatigue may become irritable, impatient, rude, hostile, or aggressive—or conversely, indifferent, numb, and withdrawn. All too often, they suffer from moral injury and symptoms of mental health conditions, such as anxiety, depression, PTSD, sleep disorders, and substance misuse. As symptoms accumulate, destructive behaviors inevitably “leak” into the workplace, eroding culture, weakening team cohesion, and increasing stress for everyone.

Staff on the receiving end of unprofessional behavior may try to cope by attempting to de-escalate, changing shifts, filing complaints, or ultimately leaving the profession.

Below are a few examples we've received by email:



I don't know what to do anymore. My supervisor acts like he hates me... I'm getting physically ill before work. IBS, high blood pressure, sleep problems... I'm rattled and angry. If nothing changes, I may have to leave before I lose it and hurt the man.

I work as a deputy sheriff in a county jail. My sheriff is a complete A____. I hate the environment... I already have more duty assignments than anyone and now they want more. If I say no, my chances of advancement go down... I know I'm depressed. I've even thought about having 'the ultimate oral sex with my .45.' I know I won't do it, so don't worry. But I have nowhere to run.

Please take me off the Correctional Oasis list. I'm quitting tomorrow. I try to follow policy and treat people decently, but a gang of COs treats me with ridicule and veiled threats... 'If we don't like someone, we run a little slower when they hit their alarm.' I can't take it anymore. It's scary. ADIOS corrections.

Solutions

It is clear that correctional systems are ailing. Among the major stress-related conditions—**high demands, low control, low social support, and high trauma**—social support is the most amenable to improvement. It is also one of the most protective components of well-being.

Why Social Support Matters

Social support reduces the toxic effects of stress and can make even seemingly unbearable situations survivable. It strengthens resilience—the ability to rebound from setbacks.

Research consistently shows that the way staff are treated by their direct supervisors has a monumental impact.

One [study](#) found that the quality of relationship between correctional supervisors and staff affects staff's work health—their morale, emotional and physical energy, and job satisfaction. This in turn affects family health, mental health, and physical health. Lack of social support among staff was found to be even more damaging than traumatic exposure. Not surprisingly, these negative outcomes increase the risk of staff turnover.

A second [study](#) found that training jail supervisors in servant leadership practices—whose foundational principles include being supportive of subordinates—had significant positive effects. Application of skills acquired during the training led to correctional officers' improved perceptions of workplace culture, and reduced their symptoms of depression, anxiety, and burnout, thereby increasing the likelihood of retention. This finding is particularly encouraging, as it highlights proactive, preventive, cost-effective, and relatively attainable approaches to improving correctional staff's mental health, and overall performance and functioning—and increasing the likelihood of retention.

A third [study](#) found that supervisors within an Australian Fire and Rescue service who received training in supportive communication skills and mental health literacy had lower rates of work-related sickness absence among their subordinates than supervisors who did not receive the training. This reduction corresponded to a return on investment of £9.98 for every pound spent on the training.

These studies provide strong evidence that **supportive leadership can proactively foster positive workforce cultures and protect staff mental health**. In other words, supportive supervisors can help prevent the erosion of workplace culture and the decline of their subordinates' mental wellbeing.

Strategies to Boost Social Support

System-wide problems require system-wide solutions. The data strongly suggest that improving staff retention requires deliberate, organization-wide policies and training designed to strengthen supervisory support. For such strategies to be effective, supervisors at every level must themselves be supported by their own superiors throughout the chain of command; otherwise, organizations risk expecting individuals to sustain others while they themselves are depleted—running on empty.

In this regard, an unpublished Desert Waters study found that correctional supervisors reported higher levels of negative impact from exposure to potentially traumatic events, shift work, interpersonal conflict, and overtime than frontline staff—highlighting the cumulative effects of unresolved work stress described in the [Corrections Fatigue Process Model](#). This finding is a stark reminder that staff do not stop needing support when promoted to supervisory roles. Supervisors, too, require ongoing support throughout the chain of command.

Effective system-wide strategies therefore rest on comprehensive, ongoing supervisor support and training that includes mentoring. Their success further depends on the consistent and proper application of the supportive skills taught, reinforced through regular review and feedback.

At Desert Waters, we advocate for three levels of intervention, each addressing staff well-being from a different angle:

- 1 Top-down (System-Based):**
Policies, supportive leadership training, resources, and statutes that prioritize organization-wide staff wellness—including being able to stay away from work long enough to get the proper amount of sleep—7-9 hours per day, and to decompress.
- 2 Bottom-up (Individual-Based):**
Resilience training to counter Corrections Fatigue, commitment to maintaining ethical conduct, and intentional practice of self-care.
- 3 Lateral (Team-Based):**
Training and accountability for professional behavior among coworkers, and for shaping a positive organizational climate.

Making It Happen

Culture change takes time, strategy, evaluation, and persistence. Desert Waters has developed training and programming to address each of these levels.

Training

- [CF2F](#) for Frontline Staff / Probation & Parole – 1 or 2 days
- [CF2F](#) for Administrators & Supervisors – 1.5 or 2 days
- [TSCS](#) for Supervisors – 5 days in person or online (over 5 weeks or 5 months)

After this foundation is laid, additional wellness education can be offered:

- [True Grit](#) – resilience-building skills for all staff (1 day)
- [IWCP](#) – trauma-informed and trauma-responsive (1 day)
- [CFW-F](#) (family-focused, half-day) & [CFW-S](#) (staff-focused, full day)

Because these courses involve skill development, we recommend establishing structures for periodic reminders and ongoing opportunities to revisit, practice the material, and discuss outcomes with colleagues.

SafeHaven Wellness Programming™

Through [SafeHaven](#) Wellness Programming™, we partner with agencies to build or enhance sustainable, data-driven wellness programs with long-term support and continuous evaluation.

SafetyNet Accreditation™

We assist systems in developing or expanding their wellness programs to meet the 18 standards required for [SafetyNet Accreditation™](#) for Correctional Staff Wellness.

Long-Term Treatment

The challenges facing correctional systems are deeply entrenched. Improvement requires equally entrenched, data-driven efforts—and significant investment of time, energy, and funding.

Is it worth it?

The millions of people whose lives intersect with the criminal justice system—now and for generations to come—will answer with a resounding **YES**.

Contact us for a consultation about your next steps in supporting and retaining your workforce.



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“Why Can’t They Just?”

By Stephanie Rawlings, MSc

I’m a little ashamed to admit that it took me until my mid-forties to finally understand how working in a corrections environment had been shaping—and often sabotaging—my daily functioning. And for the record, I didn’t even know what “functioning” meant at first. It’s a simple concept, yet I managed to make it so complicated that I couldn’t wrap my head around it.

But maybe that’s exactly the point.

When the easy things slowly become hard — sometimes impossibly hard — that’s when Corrections Fatigue starts showing up in ways people outside the profession can’t begin to imagine. And not only people outside the profession—many people inside it, who are deteriorating themselves, often deny what’s happening because accepting the impact feels too threatening, too real.

To really understand what this looks like, let me take you back to a particular phase of my life in my early thirties: a young mom, working full-tilt in corrections, and trying to keep up with expectations that made no sense for any human being with a pulse.

I had just been appointed my agency’s first Staff Wellness Program Administrator—a brand-new role with no roadmap. By day, I was a jail inspector responsible for 34 county jails across the largest geographic region of the state, plus 134 municipal lock-ups for juvenile inspections. I was answering grievances, investigating incidents, fielding consultation calls, and trying to build a wellness program from scratch.

I had a four-year-old toddler, a preemie newborn, and a husband. And because I didn’t know how to say no, I was showing up at nearly every major incident at our 30 prisons “for staff wellness support.”

There was one day in particular I’ll never forget: I left for work at 7:00 a.m., worked eight hours, drove 3.5 hours to a facility for midnight-shift incident response, drove 3.5 hours home, got back around 4:00 a.m., and returned to work at 7 a.m.

What’s funny about any of that?

Well...

I got pulled over for speeding—with an expired driver's license.

I found a fully intact fast-food sandwich under my state car seat, and had no idea how long it had been there.

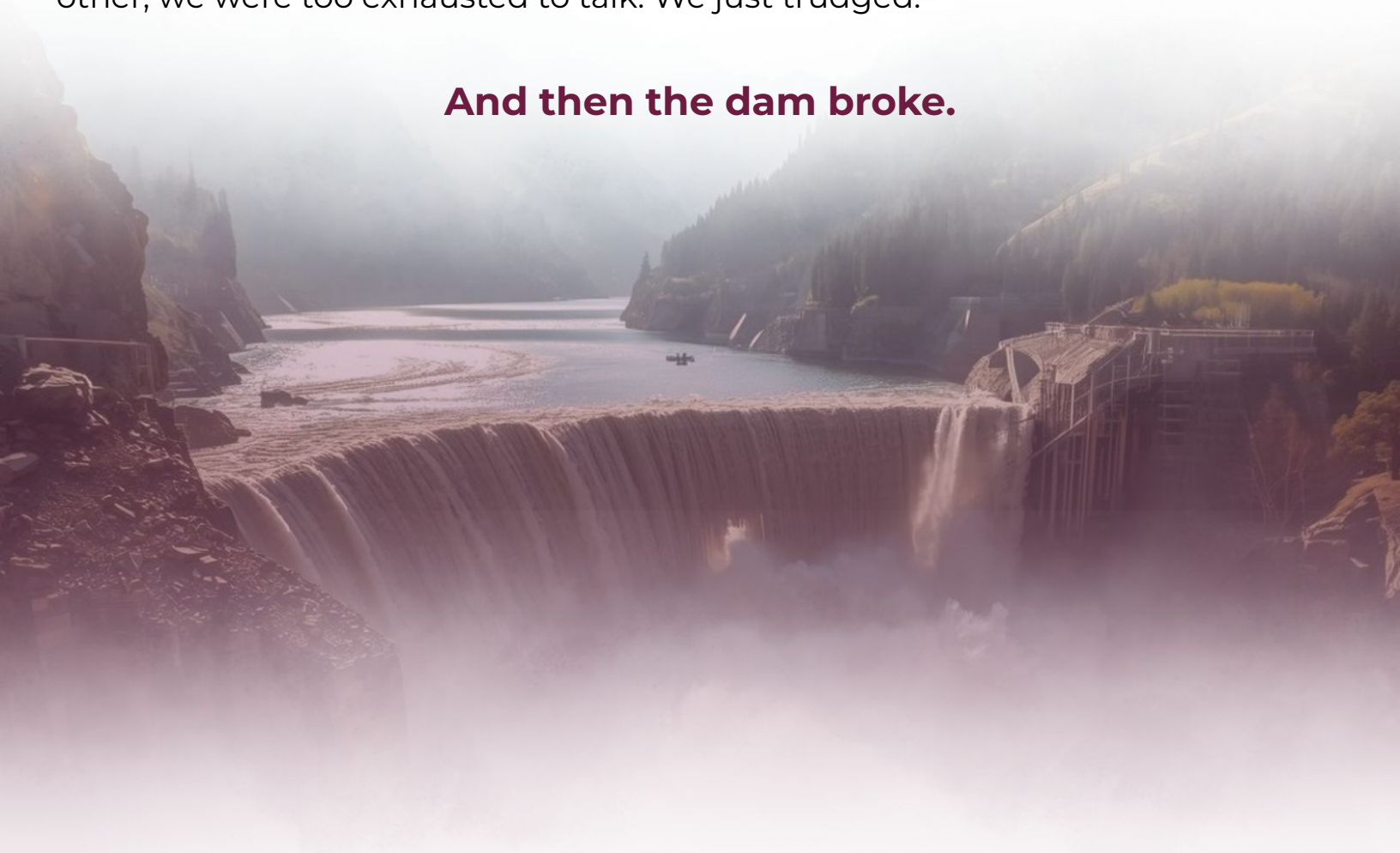
I hadn't been to the dentist in who-knows-how-long.

I got turned over to collections—not because we didn't have the money, but because I was too exhausted to open mail, let alone pay bills.

Once every two months, I batch-cooked sixty freezer meals because the idea of preparing even one real meal after work was overwhelming.

My husband was doing his best—working full-time, getting up with the baby during the night—but we were ships passing in the fog. When we did see each other, we were too exhausted to talk. We just trudged.

And then the dam broke.



One Sunday, sitting in church, my work cell—never more than an arm's reach away—buzzed in the middle of a sermon. I grabbed it, ran to the bathroom, and instead of answering it, I stood in that empty restroom and sobbed.

Everything in me finally collapsed. I was drowning, and even the “simple” things like eating right, paying bills, getting the oil changed, attending a one-hour church service felt like mountains I couldn't climb.

Over my career, I've sat with countless administrators who, in the face of undeniable evidence that their staff were declining under chronic overtime, sleep deprivation, and the “normal” stressors of corrections work, still asked:

“Why can't they just pack a healthy lunch?”

“Why can't they just pay their bills?”

“Why can't they just go to the doctor on their day off?”

“Why can't they just come in for a monthly training?”

Why. Can't. They. Just...?

Because when you're barely holding yourself together, even the simple becomes impossible. Because when you can't catch your breath, everything—everything—wears you out.

So, What Can Leaders Do? Small Acts Make a Big Difference.

Leadership has an opportunity to avoid sounding tone-deaf by acknowledging this reality. Staff are not failing at adulthood—they're navigating an environment that chips away at their capacity a little at a time.

Sometimes the most powerful step a leader can take is simply to say: **“I see why you can't just...”** And start there.

Leaders don't have to overhaul entire systems to help staff stabilize and “catch up” in their home lives. Small, intentional decisions can create breathing room and help staff regain a sense of control.

Here are a few tangible ways to start:

- Offer predictable scheduling where possible.**
 Even one or two days a month with guaranteed, protected time off can help staff finally get to appointments, repair cars, attend a child's event, or just sleep.
- Build in brief "life admin" moments.**
 Allow staff five minutes at the start or end of shift once in a while to make a needed phone call—doctor's office, pharmacy, daycare, mechanic, bank. These tiny windows prevent huge backlogs.
- Adjust mandatory trainings when staff are drowning.**
 Offer alternatives: on-shift modules, shorter sessions, or rotating schedules that don't require sacrificing the only day off they've seen in weeks.
- Create a culture where asking for help isn't punished.**
 When staff can safely say, "I'm struggling," without fear of judgment, they're far more likely to get help before their lives unravel.
- Notice and acknowledge effort—not just output.**
 A simple sentence like, "I see what you're carrying, and I appreciate you," can reduce the emotional load more than most people realize.
- Encourage healthy boundaries by modeling them.**
 When leaders unplug after hours, prioritize their own wellness, or say "no" to excessive demands, staff learn that working in corrections doesn't require self-destruction.

These small actions might seem insignificant, but for someone barely keeping their head above water, they can be the difference between drowning and finally catching a breath.

Contact us for additional information about **SafeHaven Wellness Programming™** and **SafetyNet Accreditation™**.



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“If you build it, more will stay.”

Peer Support Perspectives

Q:

Are specific policies necessary for a **Peer Support Program**, and, if so, which policies are considered essential?

A:

Using the analogy of a Peer Support program as a building, policies act as the scaffolding, providing support while defining its structure, dimensions, and key properties. So yes, policies are essential, critical in fact, for a sound Peer Support Program that can be of help to staff while promoting high-quality services, protecting all involved, and reducing legal liability to the agency.

Here's a list of what we at Desert Waters consider **key peer support team policies**, to be reviewed at least annually by all concerned and updated as needed.

A. Peer Support Team (PST) Leadership & Structure

- PST Oversight (Administrative, Legal, Chain of Command)
- PST Policy Writing
- PSTM (Peer Support Team Member) Supervision– Clinical
- PSTM Supervision–Operations

B. PST Scope

- Eligibility for PST Services
- Procedures for Accessing PST Services
- PST Procedures/Operations-Location, Time Frame, Frequency Of Use, Limits To Use, Etc.

C. PSTM Membership

- PSTM Code of Conduct Agreement
- PSTM Resignations
- PSTM Leave of Absence from the PST
- PSTM Removal from PST

D. Training

- PSTM Training
 - Initial
 - Periodic (quarterly if not monthly)
- Formal Review of Challenging PST Interactions
- PSTM Debriefing

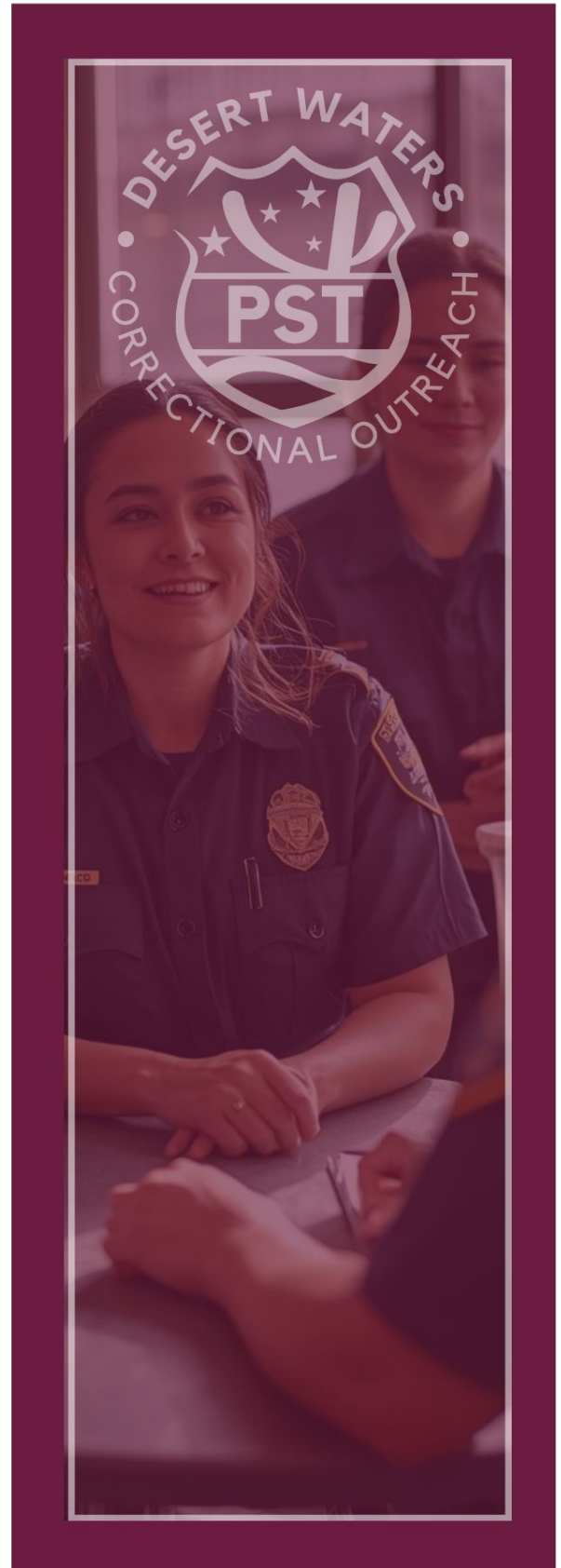
E. Privacy, Confidentiality, and Privileged Communication

- Privacy
- Confidentiality
- Confidentiality Exceptions—Mandatory Reporting (Responding to Potential Risk of Harm to Self or Others)
- Privileged Communication (if applicable)

F. Documentation

- PSTM-PSR (Peer Support Recipient) Interactions
- PST Meetings
- PST Training
- PST Staffing Decisions

Contact us for information about our corrections-specific **Peer Supporter Training™**.





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- The values and behaviors of supportive supervisors.
- How leadership impacts staff health and functioning.
- Self-regulation and self-care strategies for supervisors.
- How to respond to staff distress and mental health concerns.
- Skills for communication, de-escalation, and culture-building.

Who Should Take This Training

Supervisors in correctional, detention, probation, parole, and public safety agencies overseeing staff who work with justice-involved adults or juveniles.

Delivery Modes

In-person: 5 consecutive days

Online: 5 days—weekly or monthly

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Lives on the Line

A Jail Administrator Responds

This thoughtful and substantive feedback was provided by a jail administrator with a strong commitment to staff well-being, in response to the [article](#) “When Strength Becomes A Trap: How Correctional Culture Can Fuel Office Suicide,” published in the [December 2025](#) issue of the Correctional Oasis. Reprinted with permission.

I have reviewed your [article](#) on suicide risk and correctional culture in detail. Overall, I believe the piece is thoughtful, well researched, and clearly written with genuine concern for staff well-being. The discussion of how occupational culture can unintentionally reinforce emotional restriction and extreme self-reliance resonates strongly with what many jail leaders observe in day to day operations.

From an administrator’s standpoint, one of the strengths of the article is that it does not reduce suicide risk to individual weakness or personal failure. The emphasis on cultural conditioning and organizational norms is important and accurate. In jails especially, where staff often work in confined environments with limited backup and high accountability, traits like emotional control and decisiveness are rewarded and sometimes required. The risk, as you correctly note, is when those traits become default responses in all contexts, including after the shift ends.

Where I think the article may be most easily misunderstood by line staff is in the discussion of masculinity and toughness.

While the analysis itself is sound, some readers may initially read this as a critique of strength rather than a warning about imbalance. As a leader, I would likely need to reinforce that the message is not about stripping officers of the traits that keep them and others safe, but about expanding the definition of strength to include help seeking, reflection, and recovery. That clarification is critical for buy in at the facility level.

I also appreciated the emphasis on systemic responsibility. Too often, suicide prevention is framed as an individual obligation rather than a leadership and organizational duty. Your call for leadership development, peer support, and culture level change aligns with what jails need if we are serious about reducing risk rather than simply reacting after a loss.

I am grateful for the work you are doing in this space and for your willingness to invite candid feedback. Thank you again for your commitment to this work.

Respectfully,

Shaun Klucznik, MA, CJM, CCHP

Watch Call Coffee

A Desert Waters Correctional Outreach Supporter

At Desert Waters Correctional Outreach, we are deeply grateful to **Watch Call Coffee** for their generosity and shared commitment to the well-being of correctional staff and their families. Their support directly helps us continue offering critical free resources to individuals and agencies across the country, including the Ventline, Correctional Oasis, and our monthly webinar series—resources designed to reduce isolation, support resilience, and foster healthier correctional cultures.

When a small business chooses to give back in such a meaningful way, especially one founded by people who truly understand the demands of this profession, it makes a real and lasting difference. We are honored to be one of the recipients of Watch Call Coffee's commitment to serving those who serve behind the wall.

About Watch Call Coffee

By David Smith

Watch Call Coffee is a small coffee roasting business based in Liberty, Missouri, that primarily sells coffee online and at craft fairs. Our company was founded on the principle of **giving back to those who serve** on the front lines and behind the wall every day.

We offer a variety of roasts, including Lieutenants Light (Light Roast), Guards Grounds (Medium Roast), and Captains Coffee (Dark Roast). All our varieties are available in both whole bean and ground. You can visit our website at www.watchcallcoffee.com.

Thank you Watch Call Coffee!



A mentally and physically healthy staff member is not only good for the individual, their family and the community but for the inmate population as well.

Both my wife and I are correctional workers and veterans, this is a side business for us. We know what it is like to work a surprise 16-hour overtime and only have coffee sludge in the office pot to make it through. We wanted to have something that correctional workers and coffee lovers would want while helping the community we not only love but are also a part of.

Both my wife and I are acutely aware of the personal toll this line of work can take, not just on the officer but on their family as well. **We truly believe that Desert Waters can help and that is why a portion of every sale will be donated as our way to contribute.**

What is a Watch Call?

A **watch call** is when the dispatch/control center or another officer calls a coworker to “check their status” or ensure the post is operational and all officers are doing okay. Many times a dispatch center will call every patrol every half hour or so. Alternatively, every patrol can call in at set times.

This procedure ensures that everyone checks in and is okay. If someone does not check in, a search is started until that person is found and their status verified.

Many first responders and veterans will use a personal watch call to check in on their loved ones and friends if they have not heard from them in a while, or they are worried about them. I know it is common in the corrections field. A simple text stating “watch call” to someone may save their life, or at least start a conversation with a friend.

(From the Watch Call Coffee website)



QUOTE

of the month

Harmonious organizational cultures where staff experience positive mental health outcomes are largely created by managers who practice servant leadership.

Frank Ferdik, Hayden P. Smith, and Jenna Cochran Tanner



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.

Disclaimer

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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.

Use of AI Tools

We use artificial intelligence (AI) tools to support editing and research functions. Any content generated with the assistance of AI is carefully reviewed, verified, and revised by our team prior to publication. By thoughtfully integrating AI technology into our workflow, we aim to provide timely, data-informed, and relevant information while maintaining the highest standards of accuracy, professional judgment, and ethical responsibility.

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