Last year at the Winter Conference in Houston, Christopher B. Epps, commissioner of the Mississippi Department of Corrections (MDOC), became the 102nd president of the American Correctional Association. Epps is the longest-serving commissioner of MDOC, having served since 2002 under Democratic and Republican governors. He has become a nationally recognized correctional leader.

Epps has worked in corrections since 1982 when he was hired as a correctional officer at the Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman, the state’s maximum-security prison. He worked his way up the ranks holding various positions including: chief of staff, deputy commissioner of institutions, deputy commissioner of community corrections, director of offender services, deputy superintendent, chief of security, corrections case management supervisor, director of treatment services, case manager, director of records, disciplinary hearing officer and investigator. Epps holds a bachelor’s degree in elementary education from Mississippi Valley State University and a master’s degree in guidance and counseling from Liberty University in Lynchburg, Va.

In just one year, Epps has accomplished much as ACA president. He has written to every adult director of corrections in the country urging those with facilities not accredited to become accredited. He also wrote to every juvenile director urging them to become accredited if they were not already. In addition, Epps named his first three appointees to the Standards Committee — all women representing jails, community corrections and health care. “President Epps continues the historic trait of activism and principled leadership of the past presidents of this association,” said James A. Gondles Jr., CAE, executive director of ACA.

Epps has also made the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act’s impact on corrections a priority for the association, encouraging members to learn...
how they can comply with the act’s provisions. He has also been at the forefront on the issue of restrictive housing. He has moderated two national plenary sessions with another one planned for the 2014 Winter Conference. These sessions have questioned the effectiveness and cost of restrictive housing, and discussed the mental and physical effects it has on inmates. Epps has noted that the majority of offenders will eventually be released. Therefore, rehabilitation is crucial.

Epps has also found time to represent ACA at conferences of the Association of State Correctional Administrators, Southern States Correctional Association, the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, the Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections, and many other states and organizations. Lynn McAuley, correctional industries manager for the Wyoming Department of Corrections and chair of ACA’s Membership Committee, said, “Chris Epps is a man who has shown such excellent leadership in taking his expertise to his new role as ACA president.” She noted that when he invited her to be chair of the Membership Committee, she was honored because it was an opportunity to be part of his team and help ACA membership move forward in an positive manner. “Mr. Epps visits the meetings and encourages members to participate and make a difference and thanks all for their contributions. His can-do attitude makes us want to go forth and do good.”

In his own state, Epps has personally assisted more jails in Mississippi in becoming accredited. Within his agency, all facilities have achieved Golden Eagle status (all accredited by ACA). He has also reduced the number of inmates on restrictive housing and improved benefits and pay for staff. Lannette Linthicum, M.D., medical director for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, said, “I worked with Chris for the first time when he was a commissioner on the Commission for Accreditation for Corrections. He wholeheartedly believes in the accreditation process. He has been and continues to be a powerful champion of accreditation and standards.” She continued, “Chris believes in collaboration and a multidisciplinary approach among corrections professionals that results in quality operations and management in U.S. correctional facilities.”

Epps has been involved with ACA for many years. He has served as treasurer and as an auditor. In addition, he has been a member of several committees, including the workforce development, adult corrections and standards committees. Epps served four years on ACA’s Commission on Accreditation
for Corrections. Before that term ended, he was appointed to the Executive Committee of the commission. Richard L. Stalder, an ACA past president and former secretary of the Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections, said, “It has been my pleasure to work with President Epps for more than two decades. His service to the state of Mississippi and to his country through his military service is without equal. He has instituted sweeping reforms in his department geared toward improving public safety, staff and offender safety and the productivity of the correctional environment.” Stalder added, “He has unselfishly shared his many talents with all of us who work in corrections throughout the country. Perhaps the best indicators of his proficiency are the unwavering respect and confidence exhibited by his staff, from entry level to the most senior of his management team, in his leadership abilities. It is my honor to call him a friend.”

Upon taking office, Epps told ACA’s On the Line readers, “ACA allows members and organizations to network to ensure they stay abreast of the challenges facing the corrections field. Accreditation allows organizations to ensure national standards are being achieved and is really the quality assurance program for corrections entities.” He also noted that ACA is recognized as a leader in corrections, stressing that other countries use the association to help reach out to other agencies to learn about best practices in the field.

“Chris Epps is one of the most knowledgeable and distinguished leaders in corrections today. He is one of those passionate and rare professionals who is less interested in receiving accolades and more vested in achieving outcomes through the implementation of successful programs and services,” said John Nattans, immediate past president of the Maryland Criminal Justice Association and vice president, Program Management and Quality Assurance, Correct Rx Pharmacy Services Inc. He commented that Epps is a friendly and approachable leader who is always willing to share his knowledge and experience. “Mr. Epps has a long and distinguished list of accomplishments and achievements that are well-deserved and reflective of the sacrifice and commitment he has made for the profession, the state of Mississippi, ACA, and the U.S.”

As ACA president, Epps would also like to focus on reentry programs that will further reduce recidivism rates, as well as officer safety. He strongly believes that correctional leaders must be open-minded and constantly strive to be better. “President Epps has shown time and again that his leadership and positions supporting the profession are bedrock foundations of ACA’s founding principles,” Gondles said, adding. “He never loses sight of being a professional in corrections and maintaining the responsibility of leadership as ACA’s president.”

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