Within every single area of corrections, the average age of the executive leadership is getting older.¹ The “graying” of the criminal justice population has been discussed in the field, but not as it relates to criminal justice professionals. This crosses over so many disciplines of corrections — prisons, community corrections, jails, courts, prosecutors, probation/parole, etc. I am concerned that as the current generation retires, we will either lose that experience entirely, or it will only be available for those who can afford to hire consultants.

How are we — as professionals who are deeply invested in this work — planning and preparing for the impending changes? As corrections professionals, we are well aware of the seismic changes that have occurred in this field during the last several decades. These have included:

- A 400 percent increase in the number of people under correctional supervision from 1975 to 2005;²
- Science (e.g., DNA evidence) and technology (e.g., GPS monitoring systems) have made for more accurate prosecution and better management of individuals in the system;
- A cultural shift away from “three hots and a cot” to research-based practices that embrace individualized assessment and treatment tools rather than “cookie cutter” approaches;
- A national trend of justice reinvestment and sentencing reform programs that are implemented by policymakers who once only spoke of punishment; and
- A decrease in the total U.S. correctional population (probation, parole, prison or jail) for four consecutive years (2008-2012).³

There is a tremendous wealth of information and experience among corrections professionals who have managed and led their respective systems, agencies and programs through these changes. As I look around the rooms at our professional conferences, I am often in awe of the expertise that surrounds me, and am correspondingly apprehensive about what will happen as those individuals move on to other endeavors. There are succession plans in place. However, many only address the needs of individual agencies and/or individual positions, such as an executive director. The graying of criminal justice system professionals is not an agency issue, a state issue or a community corrections issue; it is a systemic issue that needs to be addressed at multiple levels. We need to prepare for the knowledge gap that will occur with retirements at the top levels as well as at the levels of the program officers, research officers, statisticians, probation officers, jail administrators, etc.

At Alvis House, we have a succession plan for my position, and we also have a strategic plan to guide agency operations, regardless of who is leading the organization. Our succession plan includes processes for short-term leaves (up to three months), long-term leaves (more than three months) and permanent change at the CEO level. The plan includes a process for the Executive Committee of the Board of Trustees to shift the leadership, as well as a process to communicate the change. When it comes time for me to retire or leave the agency, our succession plan also provides guidance regarding the training and support I need to provide to my successor to ensure the continued vitality of the agency.

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In our Staff Training Academy, we have added and expanded competency-based leadership training and are working hard to prepare the people who report to us to be successful. These competencies include business acumen, managing diversity, organizational agility, building effective teams, problem-solving, presentation skills, etc. Across the agency, we are creating a culture that accepts the departing of its leadership, embraces the professional development of emergent leaders and builds organizational capability.

I love my agency and this profession. I am proud of the steep learning curve we’ve all been through to get where we are today, and do not want to see best practices become fragmented because of a lack of preparedness. Succession planning is the ongoing process of identifying, assessing and developing talent to ensure leadership continuity. It should not occur in isolation, but rather it should be interwoven into long-term strategic objectives. I am asking corrections professionals to work together to strategically create the structures that will leave our profession in the best position possible for the future.

ENDNOTES

