



A dog program session.

Can Corrections Heal?

Reducing Recidivism and Increasing Public Safety in Virginia

By Scott Richeson

When discussing recidivism reduction plans within U.S. correctional agencies, many ideas surface. Some ideas are tried and true; some are progressive and cutting edge; some are recycled and restructured; but all are hopeful. In 2010, the Virginia Department of Corrections (VADOC) began thoroughly examining its security measures, programs, human resources and their combined effectiveness in reducing recidivism. Instead of focusing solely upon what resources could be attained from secondary and tertiary sources, internally reconstructing the culture of the entire organization became a main focus of VADOC's mission.

Starting with Robert Martinson's 1974 article, "What Works, Questions and Answers about Prison Reform," the "nothing works" doctrine was accepted by many states and became embedded in corrections policy.¹ For decades, corrections systems reflected this paradigm in "command and control" policies where emphasis on effective programs for offender rehabilitation and

reentry was lacking. This thinking was not only apparent in corrections systems, but was also reflected in a public that had started to view offenders as inherently malicious beings who were incapable of reform.² Emblematic of this view was a particularly striking quote by James Q. Wilson — a notable figure in public administration. Wilson stated, "Wicked people exist. Nothing avails except to set them apart from innocent people."³

During this time, a primary focus of VADOC was immediate housing and "command and control" measures, while treatment and programming were secondary. The standard treatments available to most of the inmates typically included several classes of a rehabilitative nature with little to no measurability, academic courses, vocational training or substance abuse therapies. Though temporarily effective, none achieved the long-term results required as prison populations and communities were faced with the challenges of the offenders' release. Treatment had been remiss in not including components that furnished a holistic change



A classroom session.



Another classroom session.

in correctional culture. A full and multi-angled approach to assisting one's return into society as a law abiding and productive citizen needed to be provided.

This started with an introduction of a new corrections paradigm. The paradigm focused on the principles of effective correctional treatment by determining risk classification, criminogenic needs and responsivity through cognitive-behavioral approaches. It placed the emphasis, once again, on creation of long-term public safety through offender change. While VADOC quickly moved to design and implement policies that reflected evidence-based practices (EBPs), it became apparent that a sweeping organizational culture change was necessary. In 2010, VADOC began efforts to shift the department's culture in multiple ways. Consideration was given to how VADOC culture was viewed and experienced by corrections professionals; how it was assessed by external entities and the general public; and how care was dispensed to and received by the populations it served. This was no small feat considering Virginia's vast geographical differences, socio-economic inequalities, multigenerational staffs and regionally influenced attitudes toward correctional practices. "Turning a battleship" is perfectly analogous to the tremendous breadth and depth of these desired adjustments. Operational and philosophical changes needed to be made and sustained. Leadership efforts were focused on initiatives that could help accomplish this goal.

Promoting Organizational Culture Change

The first effort that started a push towards a holistic culture change at VADOC was the introduction of a new strategic plan. The director's vision for this new strategic plan was for it to be a living, inclusive document. Director Harold W. Clarke wanted a document that was created with input from stakeholders at all levels, both within and outside of VADOC. This was accomplished by means of a Future Search Workshop facilitated by Sandra Janoff, Ph.D. The main tenet of the workshop methodology was to get

the "whole system in the room," help people find common ground, and create long-lasting follow-up."⁴ During this process, stakeholders from all over the Commonwealth of Virginia and employees from VADOC were able to work collaboratively to determine the mission and goals of the agency. VADOC then ensured that all 11,700 employees received training on the purpose of the strategic plan and how each individual had a role in fulfilling its mission. VADOC created an internal capacity for this training by establishing more than 100 strategic plan ambassadors, who learned all nuances of the plan from its authors and subsequently relayed the information to all of the various VADOC sites. This all-inclusive process gave every employee of the department a voice in the mission of the agency and helped promote a feeling of purpose at the individual level, and a sense of "oneness" amidst this vastly complex agency.

As "oneness" throughout the agency was steadily being attained, the concept of the Healing Environment was introduced to the staff. This initiative recognized the importance of maintaining environments capable of supporting constructive change for staff and offenders. It is specifically defined as follows: "The Healing Environment is purposefully created by the way we work together and treat each other while encouraging all to use their initiative to make positive, progressive changes to improve lives. It is safe, respectful and ethical — where people are both supported and challenged to be accountable for their actions."

The Healing Environment is an atmosphere that helps staff manage issues and improve the quality of their workplace lives, in turn freeing them to provide more effective assistance to offenders. This directly contributes to VADOC's mission of public safety. It is a practical reality that talking through a situation or conflict decreases the negative impact of either. Offering respect has also proven to deescalate most situations. Resolving issues by talking is safer than using physical force. However, should compliance not be realized, other sanctions may be employed to address combative behaviors. Thus, the Healing Environment contributes to the continuum of



A dialog session.



A reentry training session.

response options that improves employee and offender safety. This approach minimizes the frequency of having to use physical force to gain control of a situation. It also provides real-time development in communication skills and decision making on the part of VADOC's clientele.

An important element of the Healing Environment is the practice of dialogue. The process of dialogue was introduced as a way to help people engage with each other in a nonthreatening way, allowing them to focus on issues and really listen to others. Developers Bohm, Factor and Garrett describe the process as enabling "inquiry into, and understanding of, the sorts of processes that fragment and interfere with real communication between individuals, nations and even different parts of the same organization."⁵ Dialogue is a structured way to bring people together to talk about the issues that matter most to them, to suspend judgment, to listen to others and to voice their opinions in a way that leads to the collective creation of new meaning. It is a "way of observing, collectively, how hidden values and intentions can control our behavior, and how unnoticed cultural differences can clash without our realizing what is occurring."⁶ The process is structured so that the individual does not need to lobby or debate in order to express his or her perspective, and enables everyone at the table to examine that perspective equally and without judgment. This creates an atmosphere where all staff members are encouraged to express their ideas in an effective and productive manner.

As VADOC was rapidly rolling out new initiatives, it was faced with a new hurdle. How was VADOC to ensure that all 11,700 employees, in close to 100 locations scattered across the state, received the appropriate training and learning required in order to skillfully practice these new initiatives? Unlike the strategic plan ambassadors, this type of active teaching was more specialized. It was more of a participatory "learn-by-doing activity." Therefore, VADOC developed learning teams in order to disseminate new information to all employees. The learning teams are small, intimate groups of staff that are coached by internally trained communications and dialogue coaches. Teams are typically formed around natural interdisciplinary work groups, such as staff who work in a prison housing unit.

The teams allow for cascading learning through the ranks, giving employees across the state the opportunity to practice the new modes of communication and interactions with offenders. These learning teams meet regularly in every facility and probation and parole district to help ensure the process of cultural change and learning new skills is reflected throughout the agency.

Segregation Step-Down Program

VADOC's Segregation Step-Down Program has achieved considerable success in reducing the offender population in restrictive housing in the two highest-security prisons in Virginia. Not only have the maintenance and operation of restrictive housing units proven to be exceptionally expensive, but research has demonstrated that the long-term housing of offenders in these units can be counterproductive to reforming behavior.⁷ It was noted by VADOC that by their nature of high-security and control, the assignments in restrictive housing become perpetual. Once admitted to restrictive housing, the offenders had little opportunity to learn and demonstrate new behaviors. Concerned about the growing number of restrictive housing assignments and the related culture of the two high-security prisons, VADOC introduced the Segregation Step-Down Program as a pathway for offenders to progress through a conservative step-down process to lower-security classifications. This system applies EBPs to reduce the criminal risks of offenders rather than the traditional method of only relying on external behavior controls.

Since the inception of the Segregation Step-Down Program in 2011, the number of offenders in restrictive housing has been reduced by 68 percent, while the number of serious prison incidents has been reduced by 33 percent. Most dramatically, the number of grievances from offenders in the restrictive housing units has fallen from 10,476 to 2,197 — a reduction of 79 percent. Reduced staff stress and improved morale have also been evidenced by a decrease in sick leave and correctional office shift call-ins. This program could not have achieved the success it has without the support of staff who have fully embraced the culture change of the agency.

Transforming an agency to better focus on recidivism reduction outcomes and reforming the behavior of offenders is best achieved by transforming the staff's cultural paradigms.

The Integrated Model for Reentry

The Integrated Model for Reentry aims to prepare offenders for successful reentry beginning at the time of sentencing — as has been the case historically — and not immediately before the offender is to be released from prison. When the offender has made initial contact with VADOC, collaborative efforts are made with state and local partners to commence usage of a continuum of services and supervision. The principles of this model are that reentry begins when the offender is sentenced and continues through release from community supervision. Offender case plans are based on an actuarial risk and needs assessment, involving offender input and building on offender strengths. Care is used to ensure the services provided address transitional needs, often involving collaboration with nonprofit organizations, local governments, communities and other state agencies.

The Integrated Model for Reentry also requires the dedicated cooperation of staff at prison facilities and community corrections. It is this unified force that helps ensure successful reintegration. While adhering to the Healing Environment's promotion of "oneness," great strides were taken to eliminate the separation of information flow between staff working in the prisons and those working in community corrections. Both fluidly share information and techniques with one another. The cognitive behavioral program, Thinking for a Change, and the substance abuse therapeutic program, Matrix, are offered in facilities and during community supervision. Both programs assist offenders in objectively defining the feelings that lead to their behaviors and providing methods for achieving positive, pro-social actions. This continuance of consistent care supports the process of change and healing that commenced upon their entry into a prison facility or assignment to community supervision. Outstanding reintegration results require staff to embrace a culture that promotes communication and collaboration, which is achieved, in great part, through the Healing Environment and the practice of dialogue.

Conclusion

Without widespread organizational culture change and employee commitment, none of these initiatives and programs could have been implemented nearly as effectively and successfully. VADOC is comprised of individuals who perform sound correctional practices achieved through collective professional beliefs of what is effective and evidence based. All employees' commitment at all levels is needed in order to accomplish VADOC's mission to reduce recidivism and increase public safety. Transforming an agency to better focus on recidivism reduction outcomes and reforming the behavior of offenders is best achieved by transforming the staff's cultural paradigms. The battleship continues to turn, slowly but surely, and it has developed thousands of Virginia's corrections professionals to support positive and compassionate change for those in their care. It is from this culture that true public safety is realized and maintained. Large scale staff surveys conducted by the Urban Institute about efforts to create a healing environment within VADOC indicate that the staff perceptions of the change are positive. The agency's recidivism rate has dropped from 27.3 percent with the 2010 cohort to 22.8 percent with the 2013 measure, ranking VADOC as the second lowest in the nation among 38 states that measure recidivism similarly.

ENDNOTES

¹ Martinson, R. 1974. What works? Questions and answers about prison reform. *Public Interest*, 35(1):22-54.

² Phelps, M. 2011. Rehabilitation in the punitive era: The gap between rhetoric and reality. *Law and Society Review*, 45(1):33-68.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Weisbord, M. and S. Janoff. 2010. *Future search: Getting the whole system in the room for vision, commitment, and action*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

⁵ Bohm, D., D. Factor and P. Garrett. 1991. *Dialogue — A proposal*. Retrieved from http://www.david-bohm.net/dialogue/dialogue_proposal.html.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Vera Institute of Justice. 2014. *Segregation reduction project*. Retrieved from <http://www.vera.org/project/segregation-reduction-project>.

Scott Richeson is the director of reentry programs for the Virginia Department of Corrections.