Correctional employees have many challenges in the workplace. One of the biggest challenges is creating and maintaining an environment that promotes total well-being. Their stress in the workplace is exceptionally high and results from sudden physical events, work schedules, hypervigilance, etc., while they continue to carry out their primary responsibilities of custody, control and rehabilitation of those in their care. These stressors are compounded when you consider that correctional staff are often dealing with the most serious, violent and even mentally ill individuals. As a result, correctional employees today struggle to successfully alleviate the stressors affecting their health.

Here’s a warning: The next time you come across the phrase “health and wellness,” make sure you don’t make the critical mistake of seeing it as a familiar, common, yet ponderous phrase that encourages all of us to merely “eat more green vegetables” and “get plenty of sleep.”

In fact, corrections professionals would be wise to see the phrase as a way of life and, perhaps, the difference between life and death. Stress has long been shown to increase the risk of heart disease, obesity, diabetes and a number of mental health problems. The director of the Oregon Department of Corrections and chair of the American Correctional Association’s Staff Wellness Committee, Colette S. Peters, summarized the impetus behind what has clearly become one of the foremost issues facing corrections professionals today:

“Our corrections professionals have one of the toughest public safety beats out there!”
While we do not get assaulted every day, we come to work every day knowing that is a real possibility. We are asked to engage, help rehabilitate and return successfully to the community some of our country’s most difficult individuals. These are stressful jobs and, unfortunately, the data proves it (early death rate, high suicide rate, high divorce rate, etc.). We must continue to educate, prepare and support the well-being of our most valuable resource … our corrections professionals!

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the specialized health agency of the United Nations, “health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO director-general, said, “I envision a world in which everyone can lead healthy and productive lives, regardless of whom they are or where they live.”

In corrections, we know very well that Ghebreyesus should add four words at the end of his stated vision: “or where they work.”

A tough business

The U.S. Department of Justice, which is responsible for running federal prisons, has called corrections a “tough business.” We know that; none of us who work in corrections would argue against the toll it takes on individuals who work in such highly stressful and potentially dangerous occupations.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor Statistics, plainly stated on its website, “Working in a correctional institution can be stressful and dangerous. Correctional officers may become injured in confrontations with inmates, and they have one of the highest rates of injuries and illnesses of all occupations.”

In 2016, Desert Waters Correctional Outreach, a nonprofit organization that touts its specialization in the health and well-being of corrections professionals, conducted a staff wellness study: “The Prevalence of Trauma-related Health Conditions in Correctional Officers: A Profile of Michigan Corrections Organization Members.” The study revealed information applicable to corrections everywhere. On the state of Michigan’s website, Caterina Spinaris, executive director of Desert Waters, said, “The study’s findings reinforce a growing perspective among researchers that corrections officers suffer health detriments due to high stress and potentially traumatic occupational experiences.

You can’t have health without wellness because the melding of both synergistically creates a happy and healthy life

Photo: iStock.com/wutwhanfoto
comparable to those more widely known to occur for police officers, firefighters, and combat military personnel.”

Meanwhile, the Associated Press (AP) reported late last year that researchers at the University of Nebraska Omaha (UNO) also look at this important area; UNO plans to study “a potential link between the stress correctional officers experience in prison and their long-term mental and physical health.” AP said Benjamin Steiner, who has a doctorate in criminal justice, and Assistant Professor Joseph Schwartz, who has a doctorate in criminology and criminal justice, will measure stress among correctional officers working at three prisons in Minnesota. Work on the study will begin in 2018 and run through 2020. They hope the study will “break new ground and exciting ground,” as AP reported. Whether it does or not, one thing is clear: “Health and wellness” is paramount and a vital concern to corrections now and will be for the foreseeable future.

“For the Health of It!”

We often define “health” as the overall mental and physical state of a person and the absence of disease. “Wellness,” on the other hand, differs a bit. It encompasses emotional stability, clear thinking, the ability to love, create, embrace change, exercise intuition and experience a continuing sense of spirituality. In reality, you can’t have one without the other — you can’t have health without wellness because the melding of both synergistically creates a happy and healthy life.

If you have been keeping abreast of important issues affecting corrections these days, then you know one of the most urgent concerns revolves around health and wellness. At the 147th Congress of Correction,
ACA responded to that concern and launched what is sure to be a conference mainstay for the future — the ACA Health and Wellness Expo.

Dubbed “For the Health of It!” and presented under the leadership of Dr. Lannette Linthicum, ACA’s 105th president, ACA’s Office of Correctional Health, the Staff Wellness Committee — chaired by Peters — and congress sponsors “did the honors” by cutting the ribbon and officially welcoming attendees into the expo.

ACA’s inaugural Health and Wellness Expo featured free health screenings, neck massages, exercise machines, nutrition and dietary information, healthy snacks, and giveaways. The expo was made possible through an unrestricted educational grant, Aramark, CoreCivic, Corizon Health, the Kansas Department of Corrections (KDOC), TriActive America and Union Supply Group. All of the sponsors were excited and had plenty to say, and everyone agreed on one solid point: We in corrections need to take control of our health.

“We are thrilled to be able to sponsor the Health and Wellness Expo. This is exciting,” said Corizon Health leadership.

“The environment we work in is extremely stressful, so anything we can do to make our employees, our colleagues, more alert as to what is going on with their health,” Peters said.

Staff Wellness Expected Practice

All staff will have access to ongoing health and wellness education, and programs and activities. Written policy, procedures and practices encourage and support employees to participate and engage in health and wellness activities inside and outside of their institutions/agencies. At a minimum a program should include

- Education on inherit health risks
- Monitored Goals and Objectives
- Engagement surveys
- A designated committee that has oversight of activities
- Periodic Health Screenings
- Incentives to encourage employee participation
- Linkages to Support Programs (i.e., Employee Assistance Programs, Critical Incident Response Team)

The Staff Wellness Expected Practice was approved by the American Correctional Association’s Performance Based Standards Committee at the 2018 Winter Conference in Orlando, Florida, on Jan. 4, 2018.
personal health is key for being successful in this business.”

Viola Riggin, executive director of the Office of Healthcare Services at the Kansas University Medical Center, in essence said our initiative was right on time. “We have many things to think about in our day which usually does not include our own health. This new wellness program should be a reminder to all of us to slow down and take time to do self-care.”

“At TriActive America we practice what we preach,” said James Sargen, chairman of TriActive America. “Our staff is focused on living an active and healthy lifestyle. Our production staff uses our outdoor exercise equipment regularly. Our office staff has adjustable standing/sitting desks. Sugary or high-carb foods are a no-no. We know that our clients rely on us to help them, and the best help is by example. TriActive America is proud to be a part of the 2017 ACA Health Expo, and we hope that our exercise equipment will provide the corrections industry with a valuable and reliable resource for health and fitness.”

CoreCivic’s Ben Elrod, vice president of compensation, benefits, compliance and diversity, underscored Sargen’s sentiment:

“Making good choices regarding your health, taking the time to get checkups and screenings, and evaluating what lifestyle changes would improve your health status — these are all important steps in one’s journey to live a productive and healthy life, both at work and away,” Elrod said. “At CoreCivic, we promote and encourage these behaviors through different avenues, including our company wellness program. I have personally been encouraged by the impact our wellness program has had on our employees. I have seen that all steps in the right direction — big or small — can lead to lifelong change. That’s the message we want our employees to receive.”

Michelle Bang, Aramark’s associate manager of correctional services, said, “The wellness of corrections staff is paramount to many issues faced by the corrections industry. Engaged and healthy staffs are critical to the safety and security of facilities. In addition to good business, it’s just the right thing to do. We have a responsibility to ensure that staff are not only eating well, but have an opportunity to decompress in order to reduce the stress of a very challenging workplace.”

As attendees strolled through the expo, many had nothing but good things to say:

“I love the fact that ACA took the time to have a health and wellness expo,” said Cynthia Dennis, probation and parole supervisor with the Iowa Department of Corrections. “Everybody needs this, especially corrections people.”

Ed Welch, assistant commissioner of rehabilitative services at the Tennessee Department of Corrections, agreed. “For staff [that’s] often overlooked … if they don’t take care of themselves, how can we expect them to take care of anybody else?”

“It was very informative, and we wish we had some of the posters that were hanging up for our office, particularly … [ones on] what you eat, how many steps or how many miles you have to walk or how many hours you have to walk,” Maggie Agerton, government operations consultant II for the Florida Department of Corrections, added. “We’d like to put [one of those] in our break room.”

The correctional profession must make changes that actively encourage employees to be healthy and provide access to health and wellness programs. Good health is contagious and the importance of keeping our staff healthy is critical. In support of this effort, the Staff Wellness Committee, meeting at the Winter Conference in Orlando earlier this year, had a new Staff Wellness Expected Practice approved. ACA leadership and the Staff Wellness Committee challenges every correctional jurisdiction to bring a wellness program to your workplace; we will continue to promote the ongoing need for health and wellness. Let’s invest now in the health and wellness of our most critical asset — our correctional employees. We owe our very best to ourselves and to those we serve — nothing less.

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