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Managing Gangs and STGs: Proactive Approaches for Safety and Success

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Welcome to the February issue of *Corrections Today*. Our theme this month is gangs and security threat groups (STGs), a correctional subculture that influences our overall operation as we perform the basic functions of our jobs. But, what is a subculture? According to the dictionary, a subculture is an ethnic, regional, economic or social group that exhibits characteristic patterns of behavior sufficient to distinguish it from others within an embracing culture of society. A correctional subculture, then, is any of the various groups we deal with every day including gangs, inmates with mental illnesses, substance abusers, juveniles and females. In this issue we examine how managing gangs and security threat groups impacts our daily operations and how we do our jobs. Managing these various groups adds additional operational concerns and challenges, not to mention financial constraints, whether these groups are in our jails, prisons, juvenile facilities or on probation.

Taking a proactive approach to managing correctional subcultures, such as gangs, helps us deal with individual members of the subculture. Philosophically, we need to approach members of this subculture with the attitude that they are not bad people but people who made bad choices. We need to provide them with programs and opportunities that give them options upon their return to our

communities. While the programs can range from intense therapeutic options to volunteer-run alcoholics/narcotics anonymous meetings, the inmates are being given a choice to move to a new subculture.

As we approach our growing gang population, we need to identify who these individuals are and think about how we are going to manage them while in our custody. Once they are identified, what educational opportunities are being offered to inform them that being in a gang is not a good thing? Can we get them to find ways to meet the unfulfilled needs in their lives that led them to a gang in the first place? And, how can we glean information from them that can be beneficial in eradicating gang activity? We have discovered that once a dialogue is cultivated with gang members, a wealth of information can be obtained and passed on to police and prosecutors. By assisting in prosecuting these cases, we can help eliminate gang activity in our communities.

STGs can be defined as a group, gang, or organization that poses a threat to the safety, security and orderly operations of the facility, staff, public and our community. Depending on their level of sophistication, the risk they pose can be quite serious. Terrorists usually fall into this category of offenders and like gangs, their reach affects small communities as well as large nations. And the multileveled

efforts to protect against terrorism represent the tightest security practices any of us have ever seen. Most notably, the Alexandria (Virginia) City Jail continues to provide detention for suspected terrorists. The Arlington County Detention Facility and other jails near the nation's capital have been called upon to assist in housing these high-security threats as well. How you identify, classify, supervise and share information on these individuals or groups are just the beginning considerations.

As I am writing this, we too are experiencing the financial crisis and budget cuts. What's important to remember is certain initiatives cannot be replaced by saving money. Several years ago we dedicated resources for a deputy to coordinate our gang and STG efforts, which then led to the establishment of our Sheriff's Intelligence Unit. I think we can all agree that if you are not proactive in managing these groups then you are likely to see a rise in incidents of misconduct or violence.

In conclusion, I hope you find the articles on gangs and STGs interesting and beneficial. I am very appreciative of the work my staff does with these different — and sometimes very difficult to safely manage — groups of offenders. I commend each of you as well on your work and the contributions you make to your system and community. ♦