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Rehabilitation Programs Will Help Offenders Change — And Enhance Public Safety

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Safety and security are two words used more than any others in the corrections field; oftentimes they are used interchangeably. They form the core of mission statements, goals, philosophies, department regulations, state statutes and much more. Practically everything that is experienced on a daily basis in corrections plays a part in the overall safety of our correctional environments and communities.

Public safety is at the top of all our lists. Correctional facilities and community corrections offices must always operate in a manner that provides optimum protection to the public. While we cannot prevent all adverse behavior, there are many ways we can gauge risk for those under supervision, whether it be in our prisons and jails or in our communities. One of the more successful ways to do this is through risk assessment tools for offenders. Many states have implemented risk assessment to successfully manage offender populations and to properly utilize limited resources, including money and staff. Offender risk assessment also promotes staff and offender safety. Knowing previous crimes, mental health history, education level and other important details about an offender helps prison staff determine housing and work assignments and placement in certain types of programming and group therapy. Updating the offender

risk assessment on a regular basis and having that information follow the offender to community supervision gives community corrections staff a good picture of the type of offender they are dealing with and what will lead that offender to reentry success.

ACA accreditation is another major contributing factor in overall correctional safety. Standards protect offenders and staff by describing the conditions to be achieved and sustained relating to physical plants, injury prevention, environmental conditions, crowding and emergency management, among other things. Training standards further contribute to safety and security through training requirements designed to create the skilled staff needed to meet security challenges. In Louisiana, this training has been particularly important during natural disasters. Training and emergency preparations truly enhanced our ability to implement emergency evacuations, provide services to those evacuated and sustain operational security.

Sharing best practices helps spotlight success stories. It is safe to say that when we find something that works, it is in our best interest to spread the knowledge and training to others. Arguably, no one in the corrections profession did a better job than Reginald Wilkinson, former director of the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction. In his tenure as president of the American Correction-

al Association, Wilkinson promoted the best practices concept regularly. His innovative programs in Ohio no doubt are reflected in many operations within our own departments today. In a January 2000 interview with *The Corrections Connection*, Wilkinson accurately predicted “a revitalization of rehabilitation in prisons,” explaining that there would be a heavy focus on programming and treatment in the years to come.

Indeed, we should not underestimate the role offender programming plays in overall safety and security in our prisons and communities. Reentry initiatives play a crucial role in changing the behavior of the population we serve. For most of us, the focus on reentry is a culture change — for management, staff, offenders and communities. It is also difficult for most law-abiding citizens to swallow because they believe prison should be punitive, not an opportunity for advancement. What we should keep reminding everyone is that most people currently behind bars will eventually return to their communities. It is in everyone’s best interest that they return with the education, skills and access to services that will ensure success. There will be some people we can never change, no matter how hard we try, because they will not allow change to happen. But there are many individuals who haven’t had the opportunity for change, and strong reentry programming, whether

it be educational, vocational, faith-based or a combination thereof, provides that opportunity for change.

Positive change for offenders will lead to change with their families as well, especially their children. According to a 2000 Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) study, there were 1.5 million minor children who had an incarcerated parent in 1999, compared to 936,000 children in 1991. Given the offender population has risen since 1999 from 721,000 (state and federal) to nearly 1.6 million (state, federal and some local facilities), according to BJS, the number of potential minor children at risk of becoming incarcerated as they get older is not only mind-numbing but a sad commentary on our failure as a society to address the cause, effect and correction of criminal behavior.

With incarceration and recidivism rates what they are today, we do not have the luxury of maintaining the status quo nor should we be satisfied in doing so. All of us are trying to turn the corner and have our department, our employees, the offender population and the communities we serve truly reflect what corrections is all about.

Maintaining safety and security goes way beyond razor wire fencing, and it goes way beyond what we can do in corrections alone. We are a starting point, however, for many offenders who haven't had the opportunity for change. Continued efforts combined with successful reentry initiatives will lead to a reduction in crime and fewer crime victims, thus enhancing public safety in our prisons and communities. ♦