

The Changing Role Of Wardens: A Focus on Safety And Security

By Rick Ruddell and Tommy Norris

It has long been recognized that wardens have a demanding job that often places them at odds with different stakeholder groups. As far back as 1932, wardens were said to be responsible for “economy of management, making escape impossible, administrative management for guards and officials, supervising a building program, and keeping in touch with the state legislature to avoid being strangled to death financially.”¹ Although institutional missions and terminology have changed over time — especially using the term “guards” to describe corrections professionals — the core duties of wardens today are similar to that early description. As the chief executive of the institution, the warden plays an important role in ensuring that the mission of his or her federal, state or corporate headquarters is carried out. Increasingly, that focus has shifted to ensuring the safety and security of the community, staff and inmates.

Not unlike the mayor of a small city, prison wardens require a broad set of knowledge, skills and abilities in order to successfully lead hundreds of employees and manage multimillion-dollar budgets while ensuring a safe and secure environment. Making the job even more challenging are increasing expectations for rehabilitation; a greater number of difficult-to-manage inmates; difficulty recruiting, training and retaining officers; and an era of diminishing budgets.

Similar to other leadership positions, the role of warden is strongly influenced by changes in the internal and external environments. In some cases, the goals of the employer may be in sharp contrast to the views of community activists, inmates’ families and other stakeholders. Furthermore, due to greater media coverage, inmate litigation, and active unions and associations of correctional officers, the role of wardens has received increased attention. As Stephan Kaftan noted, “Wardens and superintendents operate in highly political and complex environments.”² Given these realities, two important questions are: What types of duties do wardens carry out, and how have these duties changed over time? Change in any public or private endeavor is constant, but the ability to adapt to changing environments is the key to being a “true winner” in corrections.³



Photos courtesy Eastern Kentucky University

Competency Profiles for Corrections

During the past two decades, the National Institute of Corrections has funded the development of competency profiles for different correctional positions, from correctional officers to commissioners of corrections, for both juvenile and adult corrections. These competency profiles outline a list of job duties in order of importance and prioritize a set of tasks that constitute each duty. Examining a competency profile gives the reader a fundamental understanding of the main tasks of the position. Newer versions of these competency profiles also include a list of what tasks are most important in terms of criticality (tasks that are seen as most important) and frequency (tasks that consume a disproportionate amount of a worker's time). They also highlight the training needs of new and veteran workers. Altogether, a competency profile provides a comprehensive overview of different positions and is an excellent starting point for developing education or training.

One limitation of this body of knowledge, however, is that some competency profiles are several decades old, and may no longer accurately reflect all of the changes experienced within the field. The 1988 *Competency Profile of Wardens and Superintendents*, for instance, was the very first one developed for the field of corrections. In recognition of this shortcoming, the North American Association of Wardens and Superintendents (NAAWS), NIC, and the Correctional and Juvenile Justice Studies Department at Eastern Kentucky University (EKU) collaborated to conduct a job task analysis of wardens and superintendents (hereafter "wardens" will be used to mean wardens/superintendents) at the April 2008 NAAWS training conference. Because there was an existing job competency profile for wardens, the two documents can be compared to see how the job duties and training needs of wardens have changed — especially in terms of safety and security.

From an academic or research perspective, the authors of this study were also curious about whether there is a common set of job tasks for correctional executives. So in addition to updating the competency profile for wardens and superintendents, investigators from the Correctional and Juvenile Justice Studies Department at EKU are also updating the competency profiles of jail administrators, community corrections administrators and juvenile training school superintendents. If there is, in fact, a common core of job tasks and duties for correctional executives, it expands knowledge of correctional administration and management, as well as enables universities to develop more relevant educational curricula. Thus, such studies are relevant to both departments of correction and corporations developing training for aspiring correctional managers and executives, as well as to universities and colleges.

Developing a Curriculum

In order to create a competency profile for wardens, facilitators used a process called Developing a Curriculum, or DACUM. In order to conduct a DACUM, six to eight high-performing incumbent workers — in this case, wardens — were gathered. They developed a brief job description, identified duties and tasks associated with each duty, and

sequenced and prioritized these duties and tasks.⁴ A neutral facilitator is used to help funnel the focus group's input using a storyboarding method. According to Wolford and Cramer Brooks: "In the DACUM storyboarding process, panelists are encouraged to develop duty and task statements that include a verb, modifier and a noun. The storyboard cards are temporarily attached to the wall or board to allow for rapid changes, sequencing and modification. The storyboard process is very fluid, flexible and visual — all of which helps maintain the group's focus on describing their job duties and tasks."⁵

In the case of the wardens' DACUM, the job was simplified by the existence of the original competency profile produced in 1988. This document was used as a starting point, but the panel members quickly realized that many of the duties identified two decades ago had changed and priorities had shifted.

In the case of the current study, representatives from NAAWS identified the participants in the DACUM as examples of high-performing incumbent workers — wardens who were regarded as leaders. The panel included representatives from the Federal Bureau of Prisons; the Indiana, Iowa, Ohio and Michigan departments of correction; and the Management Training Corp.⁶ The panel members had a diverse range of career experiences in corrections and a total combined experience of 72 years as wardens.

The Changing Role

Table 1 shows the main job duties identified by wardens from 1988 and 2008. The tasks that make up the duties are summarized in Table 2, and the entire document can be viewed at <http://dacum.eku.edu/archivist.php>. Despite the fact that two decades had passed, there were clearly similarities in the job duties. The most striking changes, however, were the increased emphasis on safety and security, which moved from sixth position in 1988 to most important in 2008, and the management of critical incidents, which was a new category and was perceived to be the third most important set of duties in 2008.

The management of human resources was listed as the most important job duty in 1988, but dropped to the second in 2008. This drop signifies a change in priorities; however, all of the 2008 panel members reported that human resource issues took up a great deal of their time, especially in terms of monitoring employee evaluations, providing incentives for staff members, facilitating labor relationships, managing staff grievance systems and monitoring/implementing staff corrective actions. In addition, the participants noted that many human resource issues were key or critical tasks, including staff development, promoting the career advancement of subordinates, facilitating labor relationships and promoting equal employment opportunities.

Another notable change was the elimination of the set of duties identified as managing the external environment and the relabeling of these tasks as administering public relations. Many of these tasks remained the same, but the name change reflects a slightly different set of priorities. More noticeable is the decreased emphasis on external factors by the 2008 panel members.

Table 1. Competency Profiles for Wardens/ Superintendents, 1988 and 2008

Priority	1988 Competency Profile	2008 Competency Profile
1	Manage human resources	Administer safety and security operations
2	Manage the external environment	Manage human resources
3	Manage the budget	Manage critical incidents
4	Develop short- and long-term goals and objectives	Manage the budget
5	Manage litigation	Foster a healthy institutional environment
6	Manage security processes	Preside over the physical plant
7	Manage emergencies	Administer public relations
8	Manage inmates	Maintain professional competence
9	Review and inspect institutional operations and physical plant	Execute strategic planning process
10	Manage change within the institutional environment	Other tasks as assigned
11	Manage the office	
12	Maintain professional competence and awareness	

There is a growing acknowledgment of the risks to institutional safety from internal and external threats.⁷ The possibility of terrorism, for example, has forced all correctional managers to develop extensive emergency plans and conduct realistic training scenarios, which were associated with the management of critical incidents. Tasks such as reviewing and approving emergency plans and commanding intelligence information were seen as key skills for new wardens. Yet the panel also placed a priority on training needs for veteran wardens, which included ensuring the readiness of emergency response teams and implementing emergency plans. In terms of prioritized tasks, reviewing after-incident reports and ensuring the readiness of emergency response teams were seen as jobs that were frequently completed by wardens.

Consistent with the 1932 example reported at the beginning of this article, managing the budget is just as critical for wardens in 2008, although it had slipped in the order of importance from third to fifth place. Many of the participants reported that budget tasks had a high degree of frequency in terms of the time invested. These tasks included managing budget shortfalls and unforeseen events, submitting and justifying budget requests, and monitoring and controlling overtime expenditures.

The 2008 panel collapsed into a single category several duties and tasks that were related to inmate management, which they referred to as fostering a healthy institutional environment. This duty encompasses activities that are often called “management by walking around”⁸ and includes maintaining frequent and direct contact with inmates. It also includes tasks such as providing meaningful inmate programs and quality inmate support services and managing institutional change. Fostering a healthy environment also includes maintaining inmate behavior management systems and grievance systems. Ultimately, these activities are built on safe and secure institutional

environments, but keeping inmates actively engaged in meaningful activities also reduces idleness, which in turn enhances safety and security.

The sixth most important set of job duties in 2008 was presiding over the physical plant, which had a less significant role in 1988. Several of these items were perceived as being critical in the participants’ work duties, including administering the physical plant maintenance plan and ensuring facility safety and security (which included sanitation inspections). Furthermore, activities such as ensuring compliance with policies, performance standards and life safety conditions, as well as monitoring the allocation of space and resources, were seen as tasks that took up a significant amount of time. Maintaining the integrity of the physical plant is also associated with security, and to that end, many jurisdictions are now conducting comprehensive vulnerability assessments.⁹

Implications for Wardens

In addition to the development of training, job competency profiles can be used for a number of other purposes. First, they can help aspiring wardens determine task criticality — the tasks that are perceived as the most important to master. Using this knowledge, correctional supervisors can seek assignments, training or education that will better prepare them for the position of warden. Second, incumbent workers can use job competency profiles to better identify tasks that take up a disproportionate amount of time, which may help them develop better ways to manage or delegate these tasks. Furthermore, incumbent correctional managers can compare their experiences with the results reported in this study, perhaps identifying areas where they need to focus their attention. Altogether, these research-based job profiles provide corrections professionals with another tool to better understand correctional leadership.

It is clear that there has been a significant shift in the duties and priorities of wardens during the past two decades. One of the foremost changes is the increased attention toward safety and security, and this is a consequence of changing external and internal priorities. Many of these changes have been successful, as evidenced by the 93 percent decrease in prison murders from 1982 to 2003.¹⁰ Decreases in violence during an era of increasingly difficult-to-manage inmate populations is not an accident; rather, it is the product of a coordinated effort on the part of the entire correctional system — from the line officers to the central office staff who support them. Ultimately, the issues of safety and security underlie all correctional programs and make it possible to work toward a healthy institutional environment for staff and inmates.

Changes in the roles and responsibilities of wardens and superintendents have implications for corrections professionals aspiring to leadership roles in corrections. The DACUM conducted in April 2008 shows that while understanding the basics of management — such as human resource management and finance — are important, having a solid grasp on correctional security and safety are critical for today’s wardens. As such, it is hoped that organizations such as the American Correctional Association, NAAWS

Table 2. Main Duties and Tasks of Wardens, 2008

Duties	Tasks					
Administer safety and security operations	Approve security and safety policies and procedures	Ensure facility compliance	Assess safety and security systems	Oversee internal inmate classification	Manage intelligence operations	Oversee internal investigations
Manage human resources	Promote equal employment opportunities	Manage staff recruitment process	Conduct applicant interviews (if applicable)	Authorize/recommend hiring of staff	Ensure staff development	Promote career advancement
Manage critical incidents	Review and approve emergency plans	Monitor emergency scenarios	Ensure readiness of emergency response team	Authorize liaisons with emergency support services	Command intelligence information	Implement emergency plan
Manage the budget	Compile budget requests	Establish budget priorities	Submit and justify budget requests	Maintain staffing within funding levels	Allocate/appropriate authorized funds	Monitor and control overtime
Foster a healthy institutional environment	Maintain frequent and direct contact with inmates	Provide meaningful inmate programs	Provide quality inmate support services	Maintain inmate behavior management system	Provide fair inmate grievance system	Facilitate communication with inmates
Preside over the physical plant	Administer physical plant maintenance plan	Ensure facility safety, security, and sanitation inspections	Initiate and monitor special repair and improvement projects	Ensure compliance with policies, performance standards and life safety conditions	Monitor allocation of space	Monitor and allocate resources

Note: Only the first six duties and tasks are reported. To view the entire list, visit <http://dacum.eku.edu/archivist.php>.

and NIC, as well as universities, will use this knowledge to develop specialized educational programs and training for tomorrow's correctional leaders.

ENDNOTES

¹ Root, W.T. 1932. The prison warden of the future. *The Prison Journal*, 12(2):3-6.

² Kaftan, S.D. 2007. Management is not leadership. In *A view from the trenches: A manual for wardens by wardens, second edition*, ed. Pamela K. Withrow, 1-7. Alexandria, Va.: American Correctional Association.

³ Rees, J.D. 2007. How well we adapt to change is the true sign of a winner. In *A view from the trenches: A manual for wardens by wardens, second edition*, ed. Pamela K. Withrow, 9-19 to 9-20. Alexandria, Va.: American Correctional Association.

⁴ Eastern Kentucky University Training Resource Center. n.d. *DACUM: Developing a curriculum*. Richmond, Ky: ECU Training Resource Center. Retrieved May 3, 2008, from http://dacum.eku.edu/dacum/overview_files/frame.htm.

⁵ Wolford, B. and C. Cramer Brooks. n.d. Juvenile justice education administrator: An occupational analysis. Quincy, Mass: Dacum. Retrieved May 3, 2008, from www.dacum.org/documarticle.pdf.

⁶ The panel members were: Carl Anderson (Ohio), John Ault (Iowa), Michael Dempsey (Indiana), J.T. Shartle (BOP), Samuel Tambi (Ohio), Jacqueline Thomas (MTC) and Millicent Warren (Michigan).

⁷ Atherton, E.E. and R. Phillips. 2007. *Guidelines for the development of a security program*. Alexandria, Va.: American Correctional Association.

⁸ Camp, G.M., C.G. Camp and M.V. Fair. 1996. *Managing staff: Corrections' most valuable resource*. Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Corrections.

⁹ Hall, R., T. Tibbals, L. Archuleta and M.D. Klopotoski. 2008. Institutional security vulnerability analysis: A national model. Paper presented at the North American Association of Wardens and Superintendents Annual Conference, April 9-12 in Cleveland, Ohio.

¹⁰ Mumola, C. 2005. *Suicide and homicide in state prisons and local jails*. Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

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