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# Changing Fortunes

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Jan. 10, 2005, was a dark day for corrections in California. It was the day correctional officer Manuel A. Gonzalez Jr. was stabbed and killed by an inmate in one of our prisons. It was the first time in more than 12 years that an officer in California had been killed in the line of duty and the first time in more than 20 years that an officer in the adult system was killed in the line of duty.

We here in California had been fortunate during those 20 years. Despite explosive growth in the adult system which saw our inmate population jump from approximately 40,000 inmates in 1984 to more than 166,000 inmates today, and the number of institutions grow from 12 to 33, no officer was killed by an inmate in the line of duty.

Our good fortune changed on January 10 and the reality of life in one of the largest correctional systems in the world came crashing upon all of us. We could have started the so-called “blame game,” looking for a scapegoat, but that would not have solved anything. So as a result of Officer Gonzalez’s death, I immediately called for a safety review of the California Institution for Men (CIM), where the murder occurred.

I asked the state Board of Corrections (now the Corrections Standards Authority) to empanel a group of national experts headed up by New York State Department of Correctional Services Commissioner Glenn S. Goord to review the condition at CIM, talk to staff and management, then report back to the board what

they found. I also asked for the California inspector general to review the incident and its aftermath so we could learn as much as possible from this tragedy and hopefully prevent it from happening again.

The issues and problems identified in the reports on the Gonzalez homicide cannot be overstated or ignored. These reports clearly point out the basic truism of the corrections profession that all of us — directors, managers, supervisors, line officers, counselors, parole staff, support personnel, teachers, nurses, doctors, the unions, everyone — have a role in identifying and fixing any safety deficiencies that we see. These reports made it very clear that silence is not an option when it comes to identifying staff safety issues and protecting your co-workers and peers.

After reviewing the initial reports on this incident, I became very concerned and asked the state Corrections Standards Authority to conduct staff safety audits at every one of the 33 adult and eight juvenile facilities in California. This is the first time such an audit has ever been conducted in our state facilities. These audits are looking at all levels of staff safety — not only the safety issues for dealing with inmates and wards, but they are also looking at how an entire facility can be managed safely. As security deficiencies are identified, the management team at each institution will be directed to refocus and restore sound correctional practices through training, mentoring, comprehensive corrective action plans, and effective tracking and monitoring.

In concert with these efforts to protect our staff, we must also prepare for the future of our department. We must prepare the leaders of the future for the challenges they will be facing. The training of our employees should not stop when they graduate from the academy or when they finish their probation training. There must be an ongoing training and development system for staff who want to take advantage of the opportunities offered to them.

Our agency just went through a major reorganization that will make it more effective and efficient. We have a centralized management structure that allows local managers to make important operational decisions, but also provides the leadership from the top when it is needed. I can tell you from personal experience that staff safety is one area of our business where the leadership must come from the top and saturate every level of the organization.

While I believe luck is important to have in this business, I also believe that training is the most important tool we can have to ensure all of our staff work in a safe environment and go home safely at the end of their shifts. Those of us in the corrections profession can no longer depend upon the old ways of running our facilities. We must be smart, innovative, creative and at times unorthodox, but most of all we must rise to the occasion and challenges that face us every day. We must also remember that our underlying responsibility is public safety — including the public that is our staff. ♦