

# Training the Next Generation of Leaders:

## Texas' Approach

By Brad Livingston



**W**ith an increasing emphasis on training and staff development taking place nationwide, today's state correctional officers are better trained, better equipped and better prepared for supervising the inmate population than ever before. But are they better prepared for the day when they begin supervising their co-workers?

Today's correctional officer is tomorrow's correctional officer supervisor. The training and experiences that prepare an individual for the challenges of managing the offender population may not prepare that same person for all the challenges associated with promotion. As preservice training for newly hired correctional officers is enhanced, correctional systems must also consider the training needs of the experienced correctional officer about to assume leadership responsibilities.

### Pre-Service Training Academy

"People Are Our Business" is a core value of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) and the slogan of Correctional Training and Staff Development (CTSD). At the cornerstone of CTSD is training for the correctional officer. Preservice programs designed to orient new officers to the correctional environment have recently been expanded and improved. One such modification has been the extension of the Pre-Service Training Academy to include a total of three phases. The first phase involves 200 hours of primarily classroom training designed to educate the recently hired employee regarding his or her new profession and to teach the skills necessary for successful service as a correctional officer. During the second phase, new correctional officers participate in the 100-hour Field Training Officer/On-The-Job Training initiative, which involves hands-on training at the work site. The new correctional

officer must demonstrate competency in basic tasks such as applying restraints and conducting searches. Upon completion of this second phase, correctional officers are assigned to veteran staff who serve as their mentors. These staff mentors provide much-needed guidance and support to the assigned correctional officer for a full four months.

The search for effective ways to improve training also led to new courses for experienced staff. These courses were designed to enhance their level of competence in areas related to offender manipulation of staff and identification of inappropriate relationships between staff and offenders, detection of offender sexual assault and extortion, and critical incident management.

### Creating the Sergeants Academy

Although both the TDCJ Pre-Service Training Academy and the in-service program — the latter providing all correctional officers with 40 hours of continuing training each year — serve to prepare and educate correctional staff, neither are designed to develop supervisory skills. Preparing the new sergeant for supervisory responsibilities benefits the correctional officer who serves under the new supervisor, as well as the recipient of the training. Consequently, the agency may enhance the skills and abilities of supervisors while simultaneously, if indirectly, making improvements that benefit the line officer. With this in mind, TDCJ established a training program for the newly promoted sergeant of correctional officers. The sergeant serves as the immediate supervisor of correctional officers within the department, and, thus, may be the single individual most likely to positively (or negatively) influence their performance. The goals of the new Sergeants Academy are simple: Improve the quality of the supervision; increase the success of first-line supervisors; and, thereby, better sup-

port the dedicated men and women working as correctional officers.

In order to develop an effective academy providing newly promoted sergeants with the skills required of first-line managers, members of various levels of management throughout the organization were consulted. Using input from agency leadership, focus groups of both wardens and working sergeants, and needs-assessment surveys from sergeants and ranking security supervisors, a laundry list of essential functions was developed. Among the technical topics selected for inclusion were: legal liabilities of supervision, the sergeant's role in use of force, classification and offender crisis management, the concepts and principles of reentry programs, the Prison Rape Elimination Act and the agency's Safe Prisons Program, managing security threat groups, how to conduct a thorough investigation, count procedures, critical incident management, and procedures related to the Emergency Action Center. Interpersonal and communication courses/topics

include "Management By Walking Around," the importance of training, mentoring and coaching staff, the TDCJ Back to Basics Program, as well as the impact of the sergeant on other unit departments such as food service, education, agriculture and industry. The inclusion of existing courses already mandated by policy — "Principles of Supervision" and "Human Resources Topics for Supervisors" — and a short course on how to conduct life endangerment investigations, combine to make this a comprehensive program. "Principles of Supervision" and "Human Resources Topics for Supervisors" were previously stand-alone programs, delivering information to first-time supervisors on both policy-related issues and the interpersonal communication skills necessary to successfully manage correctional employees.

With the assistance of numerous proponents and subject-matter experts, lesson plans and training aids were devised to best convey this knowledge and impart these vital skills. The instructional sets employ various teaching techniques such as hands-on, practical application drills, interactive scenarios and role-playing, facilitated group discussion, tabletop exercises and individual student presentations.

Notable blocks (topics included in the curriculum) include: completing sample turnout rosters with changing levels of staffing; conducting a shift briefing in front of the class, complete with job assignments and safety training; a count exercise that requires all students to take and clear count from an actual, prerecorded unit count; and the use of Eastham Unit's "Old Camp," which has a simulated prison environment, including mock-ups of cells, dayrooms

and a dining hall, to conduct various security scenarios such as hostage, riot and use-of-force situations.

The result is 86 hours of specialized training that is complemented by the use of experienced on-hand staff. Management trainers and key guest instructors, including division directors, regional directors, wardens, assistant wardens and various department heads, present the material to students in existing classrooms. Agency leaders present their vision for both the Sergeants Academy as well as the TDCJ. By devoting their time and knowledge to this program, the agency leaders demonstrate their belief that the future of the department relies on the success of these new supervisors.

This 12-day program culminates with a graduation ceremony during which the sergeants receive their certificate of completion from their division director and are pinned with the sergeant's insignia by their regional director and unit warden. This ceremony, like the presentations from agency leaders, continues to emphasize the value placed on the sergeants and their critical role in making the state's prisons a safe place in which to work and live.

## A Promising Future

The Sergeants Academy debuted in March 2005, and to date, 220 newly promoted supervisors have completed this training program. Other levels of supervisory training include a partnership with Sam Houston State University and the Correctional Management Institute of Texas to provide mid-management training to agency captains. This course not only imparts skills to enhance their current job, but also serves as preparation for future advancement to the rank of major. Lastly, a course has already been established to better prepare some of the department's

most experienced and capable staff for the unique challenges that await them as they become newly appointed wardens.

It is the responsibility of leaders to develop more leaders in correctional organizations. Increasing both the leadership and management skills of correctional supervisors benefits all employees and helps ensure that the mission of correctional agencies will be accomplished. The nationwide commitment to improve and expand training for correctional staff must include this critical component of the work force.

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Photos courtesy Texas Department of Criminal Justice



**At the Eastham Unit's Old Camp simulated prison environment, new sergeants take part in security scenarios in a supervisory capacity for the first time.**

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