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Work Force in the 21st Century

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The field of corrections is changing. Likewise, the correctional work force of the 21st century will reflect a similar transformation. Correctional managers face both challenges and opportunities as they go about the business of hiring employees to satisfy basic operational needs and providing programs that enhance public safety by reducing recidivism.

Hiring and retaining correctional employees means addressing some of the same challenges that confront human resources managers in other sectors of the U.S. economy today.

Consider the graying of the nation's work force. Thousands of correctional managers and experienced staff across the country are nearing the end of long careers in the field. The younger workers moving up to replace them lack those decades of experience and are fewer in numbers. How will corrections fill the gap?

The resulting generational mix will create its own set of challenges in coming years. Work styles differ from one generation to the next, as do personal values, expectations and levels of commitment to a single employer. These differences can create employee retention issues and points of conflict among employees and managers that may not have existed a few decades ago.

Increasing diversity has been another important change in the American work force. In corrections, white males still comprise the majority of employees, but great strides have been made toward increasing the

racial and ethnic mix of correctional staff. Women have also become a significant factor within the correctional work force. This increasing diversity provides new opportunities for positive role modeling between staff and offenders who possess similar characteristics, but it also increases the potential for charges of discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace.

The correctional work force of the 21st century is expected to be better educated than in past years. Education adds value to employees, making them more highly sought after by other correctional programs and other sectors of the economy. The competition for more highly educated and trained staff will require correctional managers to increase pay incentives, improve advancement opportunities and take other steps to retain some of their most valuable employees.

Quality-of-life issues for correctional workers will be more important than ever before in coming decades. Employees in all job categories expect employers to provide family-friendly programs, such as flexible work schedules. Employers have come to realize that hiring a new employee really involves hiring a member of a family who arrives on the job with a life history and particular needs related to his or her life outside of work. As part of the hiring process, employers need to devote more time to determining who that person is.

Leadership styles in the 21st century may also differ from those in the past. Today's emphasis is on

collaborative decision-making, and less on top-down, authoritative management. The collaborative approach has advantages and disadvantages. While the quality of decisions may improve, the time required to make important decisions increases. Also, will the emphasis on collaboration leave younger and less-experienced managers ill equipped to take decisive action in crisis situations?

Although the role of unions in the working lives of many Americans has declined during the past half century, unions continue to be a powerful voice for public-sector employees, including those in corrections. Unions may improve the salary and working conditions of employees, but work rules mandated by union labor contracts tend to reduce the flexibility managers have to respond quickly to new workplace situations. This also has implications for the ability of correctional programs to evolve and implement new strategies for dealing with offenders and protecting the public.

Finally, technology will continue to have profound impacts on American workers, including correctional staff. Advances in computer technology will enable correctional programs to create offender plans and to monitor progress throughout an offender's confinement and community supervision. My colleagues in corrections will explore these issues in *Corrections Today* through a series of articles on the work force in the 21st century. ♦