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Women in Corrections: An Essential Asset

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Professional women are an increasing presence in a broad spectrum of leadership roles throughout our country. They have not only permeated the corrections industry, but have advanced to national leadership roles in many areas, both in the public and private sectors. They are growing in numbers and visibility in industries that have previously been dominated by men, and their impact has been felt. The corrections industry is no exception and has benefitted from this trend. Women have contributed substantially to the growth and development of corrections and have taken their place as leaders at all levels of the industry. More important, women have a presence not only in the softer side of corrections (programs, counseling and education) but also are found in significant numbers in the security and administration arenas. However, the true measure of how corrections has grown is seen in those women who are chosen for leadership roles, not because of the unique skills they bring due to gender, but because the best person for the job happens to be a woman.

A longtime colleague of mine, Sharon Johnson-Rion, president of TransCor America, whose career in the public and private sector spans nearly 36 years once said: "Women in corrections face some challenges, the same ones faced by any women who work in a traditionally male-dominated industry. When I first became a warden in 1981, there were fewer than 40 female administrators, wardens

and superintendents in the country. Likewise, the number of women coming up through the ranks in federal, state and local facilities was minimal. Clearly that has changed — a change that I believe has, and will continue to, alter the corrections culture. I believe that part of that change has been the qualities that women have brought to the job. The concept of leadership in general, not just in corrections, now incorporates many characteristics that women have brought to the workplace."

Women have been working in the corrections field in the United States since the 1700s and, according to the *2005 ACA Directory of Adult and Juvenile Correctional Departments, Institutions, Agencies and Probation and Parole Authorities*, make up 35 percent of the employees in adult correctional agencies and almost 45 percent of staff working in the juvenile justice system. As the number of women working in the field has increased, so has their collective impact. The need continues to grow for broad-based professional development, career planning and networking opportunities. Several organizations and national conferences have developed in recent years in response to this need, to support the growth and development of women who choose corrections as their career. There are national conferences and organizations such as Women Working in Corrections and Juvenile Justice and the Association of Women Executives in Corrections that target and address issues and concerns that affect

women working at all levels and in all arenas of corrections. Those women who have risen to leadership positions in our industry are committed to serving as role models and mentors for their female colleagues in the industry. Those in leadership positions today help to prepare others to assume leadership roles in the future.

Ours is not an easy industry in which to work. We have responsibility for issues and individuals that range from safety and security to supervision and rehabilitation. Historically and especially in the prison and jail sectors, women have brought a unique perspective and skill set that are essential to achieving corrections' goals. Often, success in the industry is built around communicating, networking and relationship building, assets that are frequently associated with the management styles of successful leaders, both male and female.

Currently, women serve as commissioners, judges and leaders of major organizations and agencies, in corrections and the broader criminal justice arena. They contribute in all sectors of the industry and are leaders in positions from entry level through top leadership. The women featured in this issue of *Corrections Today* each have successful careers in diverse arenas of corrections. In reading about their experiences, I hope you will gain insight into their approaches to dealing with challenges within the industry; an industry that is increasingly recognizing and supporting the efforts and success of its people, regardless of gender. ♦