



We need to do a better job of publicly acknowledging the outstanding staff members who work in our correctional systems.

Hardwork and Dedication: The True Face of Corrections

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When I was first informed that the subtheme of the annual Best in the Business issue was “Corrections’ Public Face” (the media and public’s view of corrections), I found it somewhat ironic. While I am quite certain that all of us working in corrections are well aware of the outstanding individuals employed in our field, I believe those on the outside often do not share the same opinion.

I read a survey conducted by a state corrections department that said less than 25 percent of the general public thought the DOC was doing a good or excellent job of running the state’s correctional system. In fact, the survey revealed that more people thought the DOC was doing a poor job than thought it was doing a good or excellent job. I believe this surprisingly low public approval rating is most likely due to the generally negative, usually imbalanced and occasionally inaccurate image of the corrections field portrayed by the media. Evidence for this assumption can be found in the survey results, where less than one-third of the news media questioned felt the DOC was doing a good or excellent job. Further confirmation that the responses were based on a generated perception rather than reality was the fact that 68 percent of the general public and 51 percent of the media interviewed thought that correctional officers who work inside prisons are armed. Incidentally, more than 76 percent of the DOC staff interviewed in the survey felt the department was doing a good or excellent job, and 93 percent of

DOC employees knew that correctional officers in prisons are unarmed.

The corrections field does an excellent job of protecting the public by running safe and secure prisons, effectively supervising offenders in the community on parole and probation, and creating and administering essential programs to assist in the rehabilitation of offenders. However, we desperately need to improve the manner in which we convey this information to the public. We need to do a better job of publicly acknowledging the outstanding staff members who work in our correctional systems. We need to upgrade our process of educating the media and the general public as to the very important work we do and more accurately convey the realities of working in the corrections field.

This will not be an easy task. We, in corrections, tend to be very reactive when dealing with the media and are inclined to share little information for fear of it being misunderstood, used out of context or portrayed negatively. In addition, sadly, positive press in the corrections arena is typically of little interest to the members of the media. However, this is not an acceptable excuse and the responsibility rests with us to improve in this area. We must do a better job of publicly promoting our employees and sharing their stories of achievement. We also must remain tireless in our efforts to detail the tremendous work done in the corrections field.

During these difficult budget times, it is now more important than ever that we focus on highlighting the accomplish-

ments of our valuable employees and the vital work they perform. As lawmakers, the media and members of the public place attention on the tax dollars allocated to the corrections field, it is critical that they have an accurate portrayal and strong understanding of what actually goes on within our system. In addition, we owe it to the professionals that work in our field, many of whom have been asked to take on additional responsibilities or partake in employee concessions during this era of strained financial resources.

Many of us no longer have the option available to financially reward employees who suggest, develop or initiate improved processes resulting in greater efficiency and cost savings for our departments. We can, however, publicly acknowledge these efforts both internally through department awards, agency newsletters or departmentwide e-mails and externally through press releases, citations on department Web sites or strong promotion of a story to the media.

As individuals who have chosen careers in the criminal justice field, we all know the true face of corrections. It is the face of the hard working, compassionate, dedicated and honorable men and women with whom we work every day. It is the face of people we laugh with, cry with and trust with our lives. It is the face of friends and family. This year, let us resolve to focus on improving the public’s perception of corrections. It may be a difficult task, but we are worth it. ♦