

# STRUCTURED VISITING FAMILY FUN NIGHTS At Stafford Creek

BY SCOTT FRAKES

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The concept of structured visiting at Stafford Creek Corrections Center (SCCC) in Aberdeen, Wash., grew from the single line, "Structured visiting — visiting as a program rather than recreation." As correctional operations continue to grow nationwide and state budgets continue to shrink, resources for offender programming in prisons get pushed farther down the priority list. Corrections professionals know that good security and quality offender programming are directly linked. In *Effective Prison Leadership*, author Kevin Wright states, "The orderly management of a prison depends upon effective programs for the inmate population. ... [I]nvolved and active inmates generally pose fewer security problems." If programming is reduced, it is reasonable to expect an increase in undesirable offender behavior.

The maxim "do more with less" has been the refrain in government for a number of years. This push to improve performance has led corrections professionals to examine every aspect of operations, looking for more efficient ways of doing business. One resource that is common to most correctional facilities is the offender visiting program. Offender visiting programs vary in frequency of visits, staffing levels and security enhancements. But every facility that operates a visiting program allocates some level of staff resources to manage and supervise the program. Contact visit programs are a well-documented source of contraband introduction.<sup>1</sup>

Staff assigned to supervise visitation programs typically focus on preventing the introduction of contraband, enforcing rules and ensuring that facility security needs are met. Visitation program staff have little time to positively impact the family relationship work that occurs in prison visiting programs.

## VISITATION AT STAFFORD CREEK

SCCC is a 1,936-bed medium/long-term minimum-custody facility for men opened in 2000. At the facility, there are four correctional officers and a correctional sergeant responsible for the operation of the offender visiting program. Additional resources include the visit coordinator who processes all visitor application paperwork, and the offenders' assigned counselors who assist with processing applications. The offender visiting program operates four days a week, with 36 hours of scheduled offender/visitor access. The visiting area was constructed to provide a clear line of site throughout the room. Electronic monitoring includes walk-through metal detection, an X-ray package scanner

and a recorded tilt/pan/zoom camera system so powerful that it allows staff to clearly read the playing cards in a visitor's hand. The well-thought-out combination of staffing, physical plant and electronics creates a safe and secure offender visiting program.

SCCC's visiting program has a simple, but important mission: provide a safe place for offenders and the public to build, maintain and/or strengthen community ties. When considering the amount of resources put into achieving this mission, it seemed reasonable that SCCC should be able to get more value from its investment. Was it possible to add some structure to a part of offender visiting, moving it from a recreational program to an educational program? Was there an opportunity to implement a cognitive-behavioral program in the midst of regular offender visiting?

The structure could not have a negative impact on the existing program. Visitation program staff were doing an



Photos courtesy Stafford Creek Corrections



Inmates Leon Toney (left) and Sione Maama (above) enjoy arts and crafts projects with their families during Family Fun Night.



Family-friendly activities such as painting, bingo and scrapbooking have become popular among SCCC inmates and their families.



excellent job of maintaining security and operations, but they did not have time to deliver structured programming during offender visits. Other resources were needed to develop and deliver programming, which had to be palatable to offenders and their visitors. Offender access to visit sessions is on a rotating schedule due to space constraints, and further reducing offender access to visits was not acceptable. This meant that participation must be voluntary and program delivery had to occur in the middle of recreational visiting, without impacting good security practices. In the book *Governing Prisons*, author John DiLulio speaks of order, amenity and service as the foundation of a “good prison.” Order refers to the absence of undesirable behavior, amenities are those things that enhance the comfort of offenders, and service comprises those things that improve the life prospects of offenders. Structured visiting could be a model for DiLulio’s order, amenity and service concept.

## FAMILY-FRIENDLY ACTIVITIES

Approximately five years ago, the Washington Department of Corrections began to focus on using a portion of the Offender Betterment Fund to support activities that brought together offenders and their family members. The fund is financed through offender fees, commissary operations and telephone revenue.

The Father’s Day event at McNeil Island Corrections Center in Steilacoom was an early and highly successful example of what came to be known as family-friendly activities. The Offender Betterment Fund budgeting process was expanded to include a proposal process, with requests for specific funding allocations related to family-friendly activities. Approved programs are required to submit quarterly reports on funds use and measurable outputs. Data supporting program success are needed before a program is funded for another year.

The connection between structured visiting and family-friendly activities was easy to see. The facility had an established program (offender visiting) that brought together offenders and their families every week. Security resources were used to ensure the program was safe, and family-friendly funds would cover the cost of materials and supplies. The next challenge was to find resources that could develop and deliver structured programming. SCCC’s physical plant was designed to capture staffing efficiencies, and facility staffing levels reflect those efficiencies. With no funds to pay for additional staff, and no staff with room in their workload for an additional program, finding volunteer resources was the solution.

Community volunteer programs are an important part of most prisons across the country. Staff volunteers are used to a lesser degree, but they can be some of the most effective volunteers in a facility. They know the operations, and are trained in security practices and offender relationships. Staff volunteers bring all the benefits of community volunteers, as well as specialized training and experience. The Washington DOC has a policy on community volunteers and a specific approval process for staff who work as volunteers within facilities and/or community corrections. It is important to stay in compliance with labor and

industries regulations, the Fair Labor Standards Act and other applicable agencies/laws that govern employees.

## PROGRAM INCEPTION

In spring 2003, a group of SCCC staff were invited to attend a meeting to discuss the idea of creating a family-friendly program connected to the offender visiting program. The initial invitation made it clear that most of the work associated with the program would occur on a volunteer basis outside of regular work hours. Twelve staff members were invited to join in and, ultimately, six of them committed to the project. The original Offender Betterment Fund proposal had been titled Family Fun Night. The concept was to bring selected offenders and family members together in a corner of the visiting room during regular offender visiting and provide facilitated educational and recreational activities. The Family Fun Night team quickly pointed out that this approach could have a very negative impact on the other children in the visiting room who were unable to participate. What was needed was a program that anyone present could take part in, while allowing regular visiting to continue.

By the end of the first team meeting, the program outline was in place. The team would host one Family Fun Night event each month, and each event would have a theme or central activity. The events would run for two hours on a Friday evening, a time established as open visiting for the entire facility population. The events would be tied together with a scrapbook project. Offenders and their visitors could use provided materials to build a scrapbook, capturing important memories. All of the items used in the scrapbook were approved for offender retention. At the end of the year, offenders could retain the scrapbook in their personal property, or a family member could take the scrapbook home. All of an offender’s visitors were considered to be family for this program. The event activities were structured to ensure high entertainment value for children and to encourage interaction between offenders and their family members.

## CREATING SOMETHING SPECIAL

There are those rare occasions where a program's performance far exceeds the anticipated success. Family Fun Night was an immediate and continuing success. The first Family Fun Night was held at SCCC May 23, 2003. The event was advertised through the weekly facility bulletin and posted flyers in the visiting room. The offender and visitor turnout was higher than normal, with more than 150 people present. The Family Fun Night team members introduced themselves and spoke briefly about the program. A community volunteer, an expert in the scrapbooking field, was on hand to give individual instruction on building scrapbooks. The Family Fun Night team opened up the scrapbooking supplies, and began walking among the tables of offenders and visitors. At first, the response was tepid. Some of the children excitedly took the brightly colored paper, markers and glue sticks and began to work. A few of the visitors and offenders had taken the opportunity to bring the authorized two photographs, drawings or writings described in the flyer. Many of the offenders shook their heads "No," or said they were not interested.

But then the room came to life. Children looked around and saw what others were doing, and then asked their fathers (the offenders) if they could join in. Offenders and their adult visitors began to raise their hands and ask if they could have some supplies to work with. Within the first 30 minutes, almost each offender and visitor was busy drawing pictures, creating shapes, gluing scraps, laughing and talking in the way that families should interact. Although the room was nearly full of busy people, the noise level was no louder than a regular visiting session. What was absent was the steady flow of traffic to the vending machines, the noise of children loudly playing in the children's toy area and the sound of small children crying. All of the staff and volunteers there that night knew something special had been created.



Family Fun Night allow inmate Darryl Henderson to bond with his family.

## STRENGTHENING RELATIONSHIPS

More than 50 percent of the nearly 2 million people incarcerated in America have at least one minor child. The impacts on children with an incarcerated parent vary greatly, but disruptions in the parent-child relationship can strongly influence the development of the child's identity.<sup>2</sup> Offender visiting programs offer an opportunity for children and incarcerated parents to interact. Unfortunately, the results are often less than positive for the child. A 1998 report from the Florida House of Representatives Justice Council, *Maintaining Family Contact When a Family Member Goes to Prison*, captured the visiting experience for most children of offenders: "The rules of the department require that children in the visiting area must remain under the control of their parents at all times. However, as many family members and correctional officers remarked, it can be difficult to maintain good behavior in children for a six-hour visit when there is nothing to keep them occupied. For security reasons, most institutions prohibit children from bringing in toys, books or games into the visiting area. Although such objects could occupy the child, they also reportedly provide a potential hiding place for contraband. With nothing to do, children are expected to sit quietly at the table with their parents."

The comments from the children attending Family Fun Night shows how different the visiting experience can be. "I like bingo and scrapbooking, they're fun. Regular visitation is boring and Family Fun Night you get to have fun," was how 12-year-old Mariha described the program. Thirteen-year-old Delano said, "It's fun, especially



bingo. Fun interaction is always better than a regular visit night. It doesn't seem like such a prison environment." Patrick, an 8-year-old familiar with prison visit programs, seemed to best capture the spirit of Family Fun Night: "Good, cause I get to do stuff with my family I don't normally get to do in regular visitation."

Family Fun Night has been a successful initiation of the structured visiting concept. From birdhouses, to pumpkin painting, and the ever-popular bingo — every session has been well-received and attended. The relationship between the visitors and staff at Stafford Creek has always been positive and professional. Family Fun Night has further improved staff/visitor relationships without diminishing facility security. After nearly a year of operation, the visitors attending Family Fun Night exceed available space. Revisions to the program are under way to ensure that visitors are not turned away. Planning for the next structured visiting program has begun, with a focus on the children of offenders. The participants are lined up at the door.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Kalinich, D. 1996. Contraband. In *Encyclopedia of American prisons*, eds. M.D. McShange and F.P. Williams III, 111-115. New York: Garland Publishing Inc.

<sup>2</sup> Travis, J., E. Cincitta and A. Solomon. 2003. *Families left behind: The hidden costs of incarceration and reentry*. Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute.

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