

Special Media Statement



The news media have cast themselves in the role of keepers of the truth and exposers of wrong-doing. Responsible journalists should show their professionalism by respecting ours.

“Guard” Must Go

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As corrections professionals, we rely on journalists to credibly and accurately inform the public about our field. Unfortunately, we are often disappointed and frustrated by inaccurate depictions of corrections by the news media. A disturbing example is the continued use of the word “guard” to refer to custodial or security personnel.

More than 20 years ago, ACA decided to eliminate the word “guard” and other offensive and outdated terms from our publications, advertisements, announcements, communications and exhibits. It is now our official correctional policy. We condemn its use because it implies that the job is inherently passive and demands nothing more than watching locked-up inmates. Corrections personnel know that nothing could be further from the truth. In this day and age, it is grossly inaccurate to continue using the term “guard.”

The media should accept and use the term “correctional officer” when referring to personnel performing security functions in correctional settings. This term embodies the diverse skills officers employ each day — communication skills, cultural awareness, first aid, suicide prevention, emergency response preparedness,

program and service delivery, and the proper use of force.

The role of correctional officers is to ensure that offenders complete their sentences in a way that sufficiently addresses the wide range of problems they often bring with them, while maintaining corrections’ paramount duty — public safety. While custody and control is a major aspect of their role, correctional officers’ duties also include support of rehabilitative or rehabilitative programs that require advanced or specialized training.

Times have changed, the practice of corrections has changed, and the media should move on from using terminology that has been out of place for decades.

The news media have cast themselves in the role of keepers of the truth and exposers of wrong-doing. Responsible journalists should show their professionalism by respecting ours. Further, if the media made a greater effort to learn more about corrections, they, too, would understand that the term “guard” does not apply.

To embrace the rationale, as some journalists have suggested, that “guard” can be used interchangeably with “correctional officer” because the public is more familiar with the term or because it has fewer letters is unjustified. The word no longer fits. Times have changed, the practice of corrections has changed, and the media should move on from using terminology that has been out of place for decades.

Responsibility for improving our image does not rest solely with the media. We play a major part here. I encourage all ACA members to contact their local media outlets and let them know about our policy on the proper use of “correctional officer.” We need their cooperation and influence if correctional officers and their work are to be represented fairly and accurately. ACA’s Public Correctional Policy on the Term “Correctional Officer” is on our Web site at www.aca.org. Under Government and Public Affairs, click on Policies and Resolutions. Please share this policy with others and follow its recommendations. Your example will be an enormous help in educating your colleagues and the news media about this vital concern. ♦