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# Evolving Through Accreditation

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As president of the National Sheriffs' Association from 2001 to 2002, I had the opportunity to discuss with many sheriffs across the nation concerns associated with the jails they operate. Ever since the jail's inception in fourth-century England, the accountability for the operation of the jail has fallen primarily on the elected sheriff. Since the first jail opened in America in 1626, the how, why, ways and means of incarcerating offenders has continually evolved. No longer are jails one-celled brick rooms with iron bars keeping a lone inmate imprisoned. For some offenders, locally operated jails are the precursors to our nation's prisons. Generally, however, jails hold those inmates who are pretrial or who are sentenced to a year or less of incarceration.

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, local jails currently house 32 percent of the nation's incarcerated offenders. Large county jails, like those operated by the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, house a good portion of those inmates confined to jails, while other county facilities house very small percentages of the nation's offenders. Regardless, each jail has the same responsibilities and faces the same issues. No longer can jails be run purely by just looking at low-cost external providers. Numerous laws and court decisions have determined that a jail's vicarious liability to the community does not pass away merely by contracting jail administration or management.

Current topics influencing jail management include: dealing with special populations such as the mentally ill, making defendants available for court, maintaining healthy and sanitary conditions free from infectious disease, protecting offenders from predatory conduct, ensuring compliance with legislation and court mandates, ensuring quality medical services and above all, being accountable.

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One method of accountability is participating in the accreditation process. We want the public to have confidence that we are doing our jobs to the best of our ability and beyond. Throughout the country, there has been a movement toward and an increasing awareness of professionalism in both law enforcement and corrections. One of the most effective ways we can accomplish this is through dedication to accreditation. Accreditation is, simply put, a way to better your facility and/or agency from the inside out. A facility involved in

accreditation can better assess its strengths and weaknesses. Also, staff will have a greater understanding of the tasks they are to perform through policies and procedures mandated by the accrediting organization. Accreditation provides an invaluable opportunity for jails and prisons alike to challenge their staff to be the best.

As the nation's primary jail keepers, sheriffs have a responsibility to their community, their employees and to those housed in their facility. Jails face the same difficulties as large prisons, but on a short-term basis. Since most jail inmates are in a facility for less than a year, inmate services and programs should cater to those short-term needs. We can do our part to reduce recidivism by educating our inmates, meeting their medical needs and providing counseling that will assist them with whatever difficulties they may encounter.

According to BJS, nearly nine out of every 10 jail inmates are adult males, but the number of juveniles and adult females in local jails is increasing. We should study these trends to know how to best meet the needs of our community, inside and outside of the jail.

As we look forward to an ever-increasing population in our jails and changing demographics, we must remember that change is inevitable. Through national accreditation standards, professionals can be sure that they are providing the highest-quality services to their community, employees and inmates. ♦