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Juvenile Corrections: Why Would Anyone Want To Work in This Business?

By Francisco "Frank" J. Alarcon
Deputy Secretary
Florida Department of Juvenile Justice

Midway through a recent meeting I was having with a high-level juvenile correctional executive (who shall remain nameless to protect the guilty) in which we were discussing allegations of staff misconduct, he suddenly paused in mid-sentence and matter-of-factly said, "Why would anyone want to work in this business today?" And with that statement, I had the theme for my commentary for this edition of *Corrections Today*.

After all, why would anyone want to work in juvenile justice/corrections today? On the surface, anyway, there are certainly many different reasons why country singer Johnny Paycheck's old country standard of "take this job and shove it" might spew out of the mouth of a juvenile corrections probation or parole officer, or a juvenile corrections superintendent, warden or administrator. For purposes of illustration, let's go over a few.

Low Pay. There are exceptions, of course, as there are to any of the examples I list here. But for the most part, people who work in juvenile corrections, at all levels, are underpaid and largely underappreciated relative to similar professions. This contributes to an industry with generally high staff turnover, as we see more and more young people move on to higher paying positions in law enforcement, adult corrections or other industries.

Increased Oversight and Scrutiny. Not all of this is bad. In fact, some of us

have felt strongly for some time that the juvenile justice system has been severely hampered over the years by its seemingly overindulgent use of the cloak of confidentiality. What I am talking about here is the too common use of juvenile justice and its employees as the scapegoats for everything that is wrong in society. This leads to politicians pontificating to cover their own shortcomings and excessive media "investigations" to sell newspapers and advertising. No wonder the average tenure of a state juvenile correctional administrator is just two years.

Do More With Less. Everyone has had to tighten their belts in this post-9/11 economy and that is fine. And we in juvenile corrections have managed to find intelligent ways to carry out our mandates as well as or better than any other public sector business. However, in state after state, my colleagues inform me that juvenile justice/corrections has taken a disproportionate share of necessary budgetary reductions. Even within all of criminal justice, juvenile corrections usually falls beneath sheriffs, police, the judiciary, state attorneys, public defenders and adult corrections in the pecking order for resources.

Unhappy "Customers." An upset parent calls because his or her child "is not receiving proper treatment" for an ailment that should have been treated before the child was incarcerated. The sheriff is upset because a recent release from detention committed a new crime just two days after his dis-

charge. The state attorney is unhappy because one of your "bleeding heart" probation officers had the audacity to suggest probation for a youth he feels should be locked up. The public defender shares her concern that all your agency ever does is recommend that youths be incarcerated. A judge expresses displeasure over the quality and timeliness of predisposition reports from a probation officer who is carrying 85 active cases. A victim calls and demands a restitution payment. And, by the way, the governor's office is on the phone. They want an answer to a press inquiry and they want it yesterday.

Are these exaggerations? No, not at all. Do they tell the whole story? Absolutely not. As someone who has been a proud public servant in his chosen profession during the past 29 years, there are many more reasons I have learned to appreciate why someone would want to work in this business. Read on.

Meaningful Mission. We have the wonderful opportunity to help change people's lives in positive ways. As we have embraced restorative principles and practices, we continue to improve public safety. We assist victims of juvenile crime, help communities strengthen families and neighborhoods, and give young people opportunities to reduce deficits and develop the skills necessary to make it in the real world.

Incredible People. I feel so privileged to have met and to know so many outstanding people from all walks of life

who either chose or backed into a career in juvenile justice/corrections. Committed, conscientious, caring and courageous are just a few of the adjectives that come to mind — and that is just covering the C's in the alphabet. The people in this business are what keeps me going.

Stimulating Work. The variety of work and challenges is truly amazing. I often tell friends who are less familiar with this business that there is no part of public life that we do not touch or get involved in, whether it is in actual services or by participating in policy-making. As a juvenile correctional administrator, for example, I have been involved in decisions affecting education programs, environmental issues, transportation, construction, health care, private industry, labor, employment, food services — you name it, we either do it or have some influence and involvement.

Interesting Places. Our work takes us to every nook and cranny of our communities — poor and affluent, rural and urban, diverse and homoge-

neous. We run small six-bed group homes and large 1,000-bed facilities. We see courtrooms and boardrooms and visit the YMCA and jail. Some of us even take or get the opportunity to conduct site visits in other states and countries.

Fascinating Future. We know so much more today about “what works” than we knew 30, 20 and even 10 years ago. Evidence- and research-based approaches to reducing juvenile crime and improving recidivism rates are gaining in acceptance and implementation. We are getting better at targeting our prevention resources for high-risk children before they have serious involvement in the system. We are improving our screening and assessment tools to better understand both the strengths and weaknesses of the families and young people we see. We are doing a better job of training our work force to meet the challenges of juvenile crime in the new millennium.

This edition of *Corrections Today* celebrates and further illustrates several of the reasons so many of us

chose to work in this business. From Cheryl Stephani's piece on making system changes in Washington State and Alex Escarcega's article about federal programs for Native Americans to Steve Gibson's writing about how a small juvenile justice system in Montana operates; and from Elijah Lewis and Simon Gonsoulin's discussion regarding a class-action lawsuit in Louisiana to Anne Seymour's perspective on victims of juvenile crime — I hope that these articles and others in this magazine will remind you of the reasons we do what we do. I also hope you will share this column, these articles and your reasons for working in this business with young people you meet or work with who may be contemplating a career. A fascinating future for juvenile justice and corrections will also be a bright one if we continue to attract young talent. I, for one, look forward to my next 29 years of public service. ♦

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