

Correctional Predoctoral Psychology Internships: Creating a Uniquely Qualified Mental Health Work Force

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Authors' Note: *The opinions expressed are those of the authors only and do not represent the official position or policies of the Federal Bureau of Prisons or the U.S. Department of Justice.*

By converging legal mandates, research findings and humanitarian concerns, a continuing need for correctional mental health services is clearly identified. Every day, psychologists practicing in jails and prisons are meeting these needs and addressing difficult problems such as substance abuse, suicidal behavior, severe mental illness, traumatic brain injury and disruptive personality disorders. Through numerous crisis intervention contacts and the coordination of residential treatment programs, they also make significant contributions to the administration of safe and orderly correctional facilities.

It is known that the successful delivery of these services is contingent upon a professional mental health work force with advanced training, yet few studies have ever examined the dynamics of this important group.¹ While contemporary correctional systems recognize the vital functions this work force serves, they continue to have difficulties recruiting qualified professionals into their ranks.² It is worth noting that, from a historical perspective, this particular challenge is not new. In their 1930 scholarship on criminal careers and the process of change, Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck wrote: "The penal institution offers an excellent field for young psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and clergymen ... [S]ome means must be found to attract earnest and capable workers to this much neglected missionary field at our very door." This article identifies correctional predoctoral psychology internship programs as a method of attracting competent and well-trained correctional mental health professionals and explores strategies for retention of these individuals.³

Attracting an Earnest and Capable Work Force

Correctional agencies must compete with other government agencies and private industry interests to draw the attention of desirable work force candidates. The most strategic systems typically develop a series of embedded methods to attract talented and qualified psychologists to join their public service mission. Successful strategies include leveraging promotional and advertising opportunities that are affordable. Keeping an active network of correctional mental health professionals who maintain relationships with students and the larger professional body through training and public speaking in national and local communities also pays dividends. In addition, efforts to increase name recognition of a system through professional leadership and scholarship related to clinical practice in corrections can also be quite successful.

These overlapping approaches produce numerous benefits for both retention and recruitment. However, all of them combined barely approximate the opportunity for recruitment created by the investment of resources to develop an actual pipeline of uniquely qualified psychology service applicants through predoctoral internship training programs. Such programs serve as a bridge from the ivory tower of graduate school to the gun tower of corrections. It remains an essential strategy for the following reasons. In many correctional systems, mental health positions are classified as "hard-to-fill." In addition to an above average separation rate (the ratio at which employees leave their positions and the agency), the job market of available professionals to fill these positions remains small, and virtually none of the U.S. doctoral programs prepares students for clinical practice in corrections (the University of Alabama remains one of several exceptions). Furthermore, the median age of a person with a new psychology doctorate is 33, meaning many potential recruits may be ineligible for

employment in correctional agencies that have age-related hiring restrictions.⁴ As noted, the remaining, highly qualified professionals may choose from any number of career options offering various benefits. To compete for these finite resources, correctional agencies must maintain a mechanism within the educational process itself that demonstrates that employment within corrections is a viable career choice.

A Training Model

Seeking to create this pipeline, the Federal Bureau of Prisons has more than two decades of experience implementing and operating correctional predoctoral psychology internship programs.⁵ These internship programs began in the early 1980s, and since that time, more than 800 doctoral-level psychologists have met degree requirements through completion of a yearlong internship in a BOP facility. Currently, the BOP hosts nine programs that have received full accreditation by the American Psychological Association. Vetted by this professional association, the BOP has earned the ability to rank its choices among the 600 predoctoral clinical and counseling psychology applicants who compete for these internship program positions annually.

The effectiveness of this training and recruiting strategy has been clearly established during the past 20 years and produces several beneficial outcomes for the agency. In terms of recruitment, more than 70 percent of eligible interns have gone on to become BOP psychologists. Those interns who are recruited often accept positions that are the most difficult to fill, frequently in rural locations or at new facilities. In addition, some have gone on to take significant leadership posts in the agency, including one who became the agency's director.

Aside from enhancing knowledge about correctional careers, internship programs allow for the development of abilities specifically related to agency needs. A recent analysis on the training backgrounds of correctional psychologists demonstrates that the skills necessary to provide psychology services in a prison context are unique and complex, and that it is highly unlikely that these skills would be mastered in any environment other than a correctional system.⁶ Internship programs that train psychologists in essential correctional psychology skills provide a solution to this problem. Having already received a year of training from the BOP, interns who are recruited for staff psychologist positions are steeped in the agency's mission and uniquely qualified to serve the mental health needs of inmates. They are skilled in:

- Delivering clinical care to inmates in secure facilities, including segregation units;
- Using confrontation avoidance to protect staff and inmates and defuse potentially volatile situations;
- Conducting suicide risk assessments of correctional inmates with divergent presentations and motivations for behavior;
- Treating specialty populations and behaviors specific to correctional settings in a manner commensurate with best practices standards, agency policy and legal mandates;

- Educating staff on effective behavior-management strategies and prevention of disruptive acts; and
- Understanding core agency values and implementing programs with these aims.

Beyond providing a well-trained pool of applicants for correctional agencies, predoctoral internship programs also serve to screen those not suited for prison work. Stated another way, an intangible benefit of the program is to reduce the costs associated with the wrong initial selection of employees into the correctional mental health work force. Averted costs include those associated with moves to new geographic areas, training, salary and benefits. Additionally, hidden costs, such as the corrosive effects on employee morale and threats to institution security, are potentially averted.

Looking Ahead to Prevent Talent Loss

Given work force forecasts that suggest a more portable work force in the future, how do correctional settings retain these uniquely qualified individuals recruited through internship programs and prevent talent loss or erosion? As previously mentioned, national rates of attrition among correctional psychologists are relatively high despite strong recruiting practices. Simply put, once qualified professionals are trained and hired for hard-to-fill positions, an agency must enact ongoing strategies to ensure the career service mission is realized. If these uniquely qualified individuals are leaving the correctional field, some effort should be expended to understand the reasons.

Prior to discussing retention strategies, one needs to look closely at what happens during the internship. The process of learning and teaching, which is part and parcel of creating a learning environment, is not only effective for magnetizing the first wave of recruits, it is also an effective strategy for maintaining a sense of professionalism among those who are, in fact, professionals. This approach to learning, if it can be created, sustained and supported, is essential to creating a culture where mental health professionals thrive and continue to make an impact in the services they deliver.

It is important that correctional systems attempt to foster such an environment, and steps for doing so can be fairly simple. For example, the agency should encourage the maintenance of the professional identity through an expectation of licensure and continuing professional education. In correctional mental health and substance abuse work — where the stakes are high, the environment unique and the services complex — it is essential that these professionals maintain proficiency in their skill to continue producing high-yield benefits (e.g., increased safety among all staff through the reduction of inmate misconduct by offering effective treatment programs). Likewise, correctional agencies need to assure that this skill is applied in its most obvious context, the provision of professional services.

Opportunities for scholarship, which is part of the ongoing professional development of mental health professionals, should not be overlooked as an inexpensive strategy for preventing talent erosion and loss. Given the increasing diversity

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of correctional psychologists, agencies may also need to explore relevant work force issues such as job-sharing and other more flexible approaches to service delivery.

Correctional departments that are serious about recruiting mental health professionals should look internally and externally. These departments should engage in outreach toward those graduate departments that are making a conscious effort to provide instruction in correctional mental health and psycholegal issues. Additionally, agencies must continue educating correctional administrators to ensure maximum use of the professional work force they already employ.

Recruitment and retention of correctional mental health professionals can be challenging, but significant progress has been made in this area. During the past two decades, the BOP's correctional predoctoral internship training programs have been effectively serving this critical agency role by attracting a well-qualified, diverse, mission-sensitive work force for important but hard-to-fill correctional psychologist positions. Strategies for continuing to employ these uniquely qualified professionals in the BOP and other correctional agencies are within grasp of administrators and must be employed in today's increasingly competitive marketplace.

ENDNOTES

¹ For notable exceptions, see Ax, R.K and R.D. Morgan. 2002. Internship training opportunities in correctional psychology: A comparison of settings. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 29(3):332-347;

Boothby, J.L. and C.B. Clements. 2000. A national survey of correctional psychologists. *Journal of Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 27(6):716-732; and Boothby, J.L. and C.B. Clements. 2002. Job satisfaction of correctional psychologists: Implications for recruitment and retention. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 33(3):310-315.

² Gondles, E. and C.J. Kehoe. 2007. Phase 2 survey will look into other professions in corrections. *American Correctional Association Resource Bulletin*, 3:1.

³ Glueck, S. and E.T. Glueck. 1930. *500 criminal careers*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

⁴ For example, in federal law enforcement positions, such as those in the Federal Bureau of Prisons, Public Law 100-238 precludes initial appointment of candidates after they have reached their 37th birthday.

⁵ Magaletta, P.R. and J. Boothby. 2003. Correctional mental health professionals. In *Correctional mental health handbook*, eds. T. Fagan and B. Ax, 21-38. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage.

⁶ Magaletta, P.R., M.W. Patry, E.F. Dietz and R. Ax. 2007. What is correctional about clinical practice in corrections? *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 34(1):7-21.

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