

Leading the Change in Facility Transition

By Marsha Travis

What does it take to be a leader? At the Davidson County Sheriff's Office (DCSO) in Nashville, Tenn., an agency dedicated to being a leader in the corrections field, the only thing that remains the same is the ability to change. Change is ever present in the field. Take a look back 15 or 20 years. In 1988, substance abuse treatment for the incarcerated was not available; however, alcohol/drug treatment is now an expected program in systems committed to doing more than simply warehousing correctional populations. What was once a novelty is now a staple.

In the recent past, corrections has seen commitment to a greater provision of services to the incarcerated population, ranging from mental health treatment to release and reentry planning, all in conjunction with other community service agencies. None of these areas was thought to be the responsibility of the criminal justice system when many practitioners began their careers in corrections. In time, the isolated role of securing inmates has expanded into a team-member role that is concerned with addressing inmates' underlying problems.

For agencies opening a new facility, the opportunity to "do things differently" often presents itself in a more obvious manner, as was the experience in opening a new, stand-alone female facility for DCSO. The physical plant changes led to operational changes. With vision and an open mind, the changes can be far-reaching, with a wide



Photos by Steve Taylor

The Correctional Development Center-Female in Nashville, Tenn., opened in March 2005.

impact. The offenders are not the only ones feeling the impact of change; the staff, administration and agency as a whole are affected.

History of Female Incarceration In Davidson County

Prior to opening the Correctional Development Center-Female in March 2005, the custody of the female population had been contracted to a private agency due to crowding issues in the 1990s. When the opportunity to construct a new facility became a reality, the administration of the sheriff's office was keenly aware of the challenges, as well as the possibilities, ahead of them. After contracting out the female population for almost 10 years, not only had the agency changed, but the female inmate population had grown and changed as well. The last time the agency had been responsible for the daily care of female offenders, the average daily population hovered at slightly more than 100 females. In 2005, the population was approaching 400.

The preparation and transition needs were overwhelming. Not only did the transition team and the new administration need to contend with typical transition issues related to opening a brand new facility, everyone was tasked with responding to and planning for the gender-specific needs of a population, which had not been supervised by the sheriff's office in a very long time.

Physical Plant and Space Issues

One of the first steps facing any agency opening a new facility is developing the physical plant. With this particular project, as with many public facilities built, the users of the facility had little input in the design. Although the housing areas wisely incorporated the current trend of direct supervision, designs omitted space for many of the support functions needed for jail operations. The facility was placed adjacent to a male facility and was expected to share common areas such as administration offices, programming areas and space for medical operations. Both the male and female facilities are dedicated to providing a host of therapeutic and rehabilitative programming, further complicating space issues. However, with much collaboration and cooperation among various entities needing room for their individual operations, a little innovation made the best of the situation.

From the beginning, all divisions were included in meetings to discuss the obstacles that would face the facility. Representatives from programs, security, classification, medical services, food service and administration were all included in this comprehensive approach to delivery of services. Included in the groupings were personnel from the agency and representatives from other contracts, providers and community resources, which are vital in operations. Allowing everyone to participate in the very beginning of the planning phase educated each person in the overall purpose and needs of the facility. The give-and-take among all the stakeholders has been phenomenal.

Long-term vision and goals are a key component to agency growth.

Although no one has a situation they feel is optimal, it is amazing to observe the collaboration and sacrifice each has been willing to make in order to allow other areas to perform their functions. This sacrifice would not be made as willingly if all groups had not been involved in the initial decision-making through routine and ongoing meetings. The constant sharing of information allowed everyone to understand each other's needs. Once this level of cooperation is obtained, any goal can be reached.

An Agency's Paradigm

For quite a few years, correctional paradigms have been challenged, and "thinking outside the box" has been the battle cry. To be a leader in the corrections field, the organization must recognize that there is no box. Long-term vision and goals are a key component to agency growth. Just because something has not been done before does not mean it should not (or cannot) be done.

Consider the idea of animals living in offender housing areas. Not so long ago, this seemed like a crazy idea. However, someone was creative enough to try, and now the animal/offender programs are among the most popular programs with the public. Any community tour through the Correctional Development Center-Female facility always asks to see the housing unit where the dogs live. To date, success for this program, Helping to Educate and Enhance Lives (HEEL), which is completing its first year, is undeniable. Previously unwanted dogs have found loving homes in the community after receiving basic obedience and socialization training. Every dog has been adopted, and only one offender who completed the program has been rearrested. Five years ago, the sheriff's office would never have dreamed of this program. Today, facility staff could not imagine operating without their animal program.

Staff Selection and Training

As the vision begins to unfold, one large piece of the puzzle is the personnel who will be responsible for the continued development and implementation of the agency goals. Although administration is important, line staff make more daily decisions than any supervisor. Ensuring that staff understand the agency vision and receive appropriate training is vital to success. Before opening the Correctional Development Center-Female, the organization needed to prepare to deal with issues related to female offenders that had long been forgotten. For the few remaining staff who had worked with the female offenders 10 years earlier, many were unsure of current issues and legalities that they would face. Training and education was a key component. Cross-gender supervision and direct supervision classes became mandatory training. For existing staff, these classes were presented in



The HEEL program is one of the most popular among staff, inmates and the public.

the yearly in-service classes, regardless of facility or job assignment. Since that time, the subject matter has been presented to every pre-service class.

Appropriate staff selection has always been a debated topic. Allowing correctional officers to bid on open positions is a generally accepted approach to staffing. In opening a facility, the administration should strongly consider its criteria for staff selection. Bidding on positions often seems to be the most equitable way to assign staff, but consideration must be given to the facility's needs. Of course each facility needs some experienced staff, but will the years of experience outweigh any other selection criteria?

Administration must also consider that experienced staff may also bring bad habits with them. Hiring and training of all new correctional staff is not the answer, either, because there is no guarantee how the new hires will perform once they are on the job, and some amount of the staff must be experienced. There is no easy answer in staff selection, only the various issues to consider.

Preparing officers to maintain posts inside a housing unit was necessary because the county had never had a facility designed to facilitate direct supervision. Officers experienced a culture shock when they no longer worked primarily outside the housing units and especially so with the increased amount of communication with female offenders. In addition to the in-house training offered, supervisors were expected to achieve a higher degree of understanding of the population, through both outside readings and online training courses specifically targeting issues of female offenders.

A staffing consideration that the administration faced during operational development for the facility became the presence and role of male correctional officers. What posts would male officers be allowed to work? Most agencies readily accept female officers working male housing units, but what about the reverse situation? How would male officers adapt to the change? The administration felt that restricting male officers from working in the housing units would provide a more difficult staffing situation. Many male officers were understandably apprehensive about

working directly with the female population. Everyone anticipated a large number of misconduct allegations.

The new facility consists of eight housing units, each comprising 32 two-person rooms. Two units are adjacent to each other with a two-tiered glass wall separating them. By using direct supervision in each of the housing units, each officer has a visible "partner" in the next unit. This staff presence has alleviated some of the fear and apprehension. Sound operational practices have also played a significant role in reassuring staff. Officers, regardless of gender, are instructed not to enter an occupied room without notifying their partner. Not only does this protect against sexual allegations, it reinforces the aspect of officer safety. The facility houses all classifications and security levels. Ensuring that officers do not become complacent when dealing with the offenders is of utmost importance. Attention to these issues has

limited allegations of inappropriate staff/inmate relationships to two allegations in the first year of operations.

While staff remain cautious, false allegations are no longer the predominant concern, and some benefits have been realized. A side benefit of male officers in the women's facility was brought to the administration's attention during a recent tour with a well-respected psychologist and counselor. Upon discussing the presence of male officers in the facility, the psychologist noted that the environment gave the offenders an example of a positive male role model, something some offenders may not typically experience.

Policy Review and Revision

Policy considerations became the next focus in preparations for opening the facility. Aside from the physical plant differences in the newest of the sheriff's office's five facilities, the female population would prompt the organization to evaluate existing policies for gender responsiveness. With the organization's dedication to accreditation, the administration was comfortable with the existing policy process, which allows for yearly evaluation of each policy and revision as needed. As each policy approached its review date, critiques for changes became more important. Many policies were considered and changed to allow for gender-specific issues prior to opening. Continual review, however, has been of utmost importance. No matter how much an organization plans and dedicates itself to opening a new facility or a new endeavor, there will be unanticipated situations. A responsive organization will allow for continual evaluation and changes to its existing policies.

Comprehensive contraband and search policies were already in place due to the sheriff's office's control of the

Ensuring that staff understand the agency vision and receive appropriate training is vital to success.

intake booking process into the correctional system. The issue that sparked the most debate and concern was the restraint policy. At first glance, one would think inmates are inmates; a maximum-security female inmate should be restrained in the same manner as a maximum-security male inmate. However, for example, male inmates do not have pregnancy issues. In what manner are pregnant females restrained? At what point does the pregnancy affect restraints? How will all staff, even transporting staff, receive the information regarding the level of restraints that will be used? How much force should be used in dealing with pregnant inmates? After much deliberation, the security team consulted with the medical provider to develop a comprehensive yet safe approach to restraining pregnant offenders.

Personal property allowances, commissary offerings, increased medical needs, treatment, programmatic options and most every other aspect of facility operations required evaluation and adjustment. The administration evaluated any anticipated problem. Will female inmates be allowed to order boxer shorts from commissary? What types of make-up will be allowed, and is there an adequate offering for all skin colors and types? What type of hair care products will be available, and are products available for all hair types? Would facility uniforms be jumpsuits or two-piece? Although some of these questions seem trivial considering the big decisions that are required every day, they are concerns of the population. In communication with the offenders prior to the transfer of custody, these types of questions were the most common. Few offenders were focused on opportunities available for reentry planning and linkage to community resources. They were most concerned about the small issues that affected quality of life and dignity while in the facility.

By taking time to listen to the small issues and ensuring that provisions for those services were in place, facility staff and administration have been able to demonstrate a level of care that has been appreciated by the majority of the population. Offenders were worried about their personal issues, but it was also the agency's responsibility to be concerned with a broader spectrum of service provision and availability.

What Is Next?

Day-to-day facility operations are fairly smooth; however, the transition aspect remains. No one expects that the way business is conducted today will be the same a year from now. At the facility's one-year anniversary, the staff and administration are in evaluation mode. What works, what does not, what could be done differently? New legal opinions affect the organization. Two to three months of evaluation are expected, and then everyone will be changing and growing again to develop new ideas and to fine-tune the old ideas. Staff will swap responsibilities with each other. New perspectives will lead to new ideas. Existing staff will have a broader range of experience and knowledge. Change cultivates growth that develops the next round of leaders. In the future, those newly developed leaders will be tasked with opening the next facility.

Marsha Travis, CCM, is assistant administrator at the Correctional Development Center-Female in Nashville, Tenn.