

UNLOCKING THE DOOR TO RELATIONSHIP-BASED CORRECTIONS RECRUITMENT

By Nicole Baker and Max Carrera

The single largest inducement for individuals to apply for a career in corrections is a referral by a friend or family member who works or has worked in corrections. In fact, 46 percent of correctional officers hired in 2006 at Washington's Walla Walla State Penitentiary applied as a result of employee referrals (see Figure 1). Not surprisingly, Figure 1 data also indicate that recruitment efforts encompassing direct contact with job seekers and providing corrections awareness increases the likelihood the job seeker will apply for employment in corrections. Bearing these statistics in mind, it is essential that correctional employee recruiters recognize this dynamic and design vibrant, mutable recruiting strategies that systematically build relationships with job seekers, encourage current employees to refer applicants and work effectively with community-based organizations to locate a diverse applicant pool.

Myth vs. Reality

Television and movies often record images of dark, dank hallways inhabited by fierce correctional officers who abuse and exploit the men and women in their charge. The dramatization of prison riots, corruption, beatings of inmates and beatings by inmates reinforce the mystery and fear associated with correctional facilities that lurk behind walls topped with razor wire. As a result, few people actively plan for a career in the corrections field. Without recruiters' efforts, few potential applicants will ever know that correctional work can be a rewarding career ladder for many professions.

Those who overcome these negative images and enter the field usually do so because they have contact with someone working in corrections. A friend, family member or teacher dispelled the myths and demonstrated that a career in corrections provides first-hand experience in the criminal justice system, that it provides livable wage jobs,

that career options in corrections are many and varied, and that corrections is a growth industry with career stability. The greatest challenge for corrections recruiters is to remove the stigma of the profession by showing its human face.

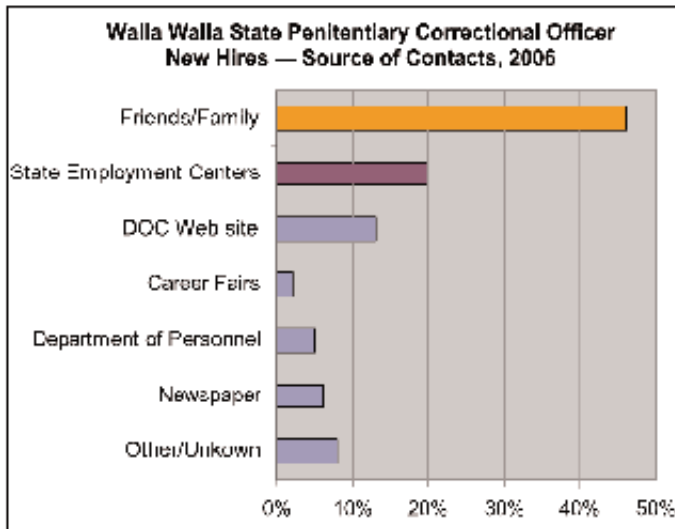
Relationship-based Recruiting

Relationship-based recruiting means getting out from behind the desk and going to where job seekers are found. It means talking with them one-on-one and in small groups. It means expanding beyond simple career fairs and developing relationships with community organizations and local schools. Recruitment for correctional facilities, unlike traditional government or business recruitment, is unique because of the stigma and false information associated with such employment. Applicants cannot "see" into prisons to understand what they are like. To counter this problem, recruitment and selection staff must make themselves available to answer questions, communicate personally and allay concerns; in short, they must develop relationships with potential applicants. Those involved in the recruitment and selection process must learn to emulate the role that friends and family play in recruitment, especially at a time when, due to the prevalence of online recruiting, current recruitment efforts require and encourage less human interaction.

In this age of Internet-based application processes, recruiters may rely less and less on personal contact with job seekers. Too often corrections recruitment and selection staff who can answer applicant questions are safely tucked away in the facility, inaccessible to the curious potential applicant. To further complicate the matter, few people have a clear idea of the options and possibilities a career in corrections brings. They have no understanding that each facility is like a small city and requires a diversity of personnel. There is little awareness among potential

The distinctive towers add to the mystery of Walla Walla State Penitentiary.

Figure 1



employees of the huge number of corrections support staff and administrators whose work takes place outside the facilities and little knowledge of all the tasks associated with community corrections. Recruiters must take advantage of every opportunity to educate applicants on what a career in corrections would entail and the many benefits and training opportunities that exist in the field. An opportunity to visit with knowledgeable people who can answer questions, topple myths and emphasize the opportunities that a career in corrections has to offer can dispel fears and correct the misinformation held by the average job applicant.

In making these connections, recruiters must focus on including diverse populations and building relationships and partnerships with various groups that exist within the community. Recruiters' commitment to these communities is not completed by simply placing an ad in a periodical of diverse circulation; to better understand the issues, partnerships must be developed through activism — becoming active in community groups, getting to know key community leaders and participating in e-mail discussion groups. This is important preparation for introducing the corrections field and its employment opportunities to community members. According to *A 21st Century Workforce for America's Correctional Profession*, a 2004 study by the American Correctional Association, a large number of America's correctional officers are white males ages 25 to 44. The Census Bureau projects a decline in this age group by more than

4 million in this decade alone, the ACA study indicates. Additionally, Census Bureau data reveal that non-Hispanic whites are the most rapidly shrinking demographic pool. If recruiters fail to develop relationships with diverse populations, they not only fail to be inclusive and respectful of other groups but overlook a significant number of potential applicants while the traditional pool declines.

Recruiters also struggle with the difficulty in hiring female correctional officers because of physical ability requirements. Although some states have successfully found a way to discontinue or modify the physical ability testing, many states continue to use outmoded testing that creates obstacles for women who may have an interest in a correctional officer career. In developing relationships with these women, opportunities can be created to coach and mentor them through their physical training, thereby increasing their chances of passing the physical tests. If recruiters can overcome this barrier, the corrections profession can become a viable and sustainable work choice for women.

Photo courtesy Washington Department of Corrections



Cedar Creek Corrections Center

Putting a Face to Corrections

To be successful, correctional recruiters must develop partnerships in the community, similar to community corrections specialists, in order to become more accessible to the public. Career fairs no longer can be the limit of community contact for recruiting purposes. Numerous opportunities exist to establish and maintain contacts that become conduits for new employees. The suggestions below offer an assortment of opportunities for the corrections recruiter.

Community Workshops. Recruiters should use their state's employment programs. This partnership fulfills the obligation of both agencies. The employment agency's mission is to connect people with jobs. Let them connect people with corrections jobs. If the employment centers have computer banks for job seekers, recruiters should take the opportunity to teach regular workshops explaining the correctional agency's application process and walking interested job seekers through the electronic process. Hold regular employer days at the employment centers. The Washington State Department of Corrections has partnered with several WorkSource locations to staff the centers during certain days each week, thus establishing a consistent

Photo courtesy Washington Department of Corrections



Stafford Creek Corrections Center near the Washington coast



McNeil Island Corrections Center is the last prison in North America located on an island accessible only by boat (or helicopter).

presence for job seekers. This allows recruiters opportunities to connect with individuals and speak about working in corrections — to explain what the facilities are like, what positions are available, what it is like working in a prison environment and to discuss the myriad positions that do not require entering a prison.

On-site Career Workshops. Recruiters can build and maintain strong ties to local high schools, colleges and universities. Rather than simply dropping in on career days, they should establish a presence. An effort should be made to find instructors interested in inviting recruiters into their classrooms. Recruiters should talk with students about work opportunities in corrections, explaining the benefits of working for an agency so alive with prospects that one can change careers completely and never skip a paycheck. Even students in criminal justice programs often are unaware of the possibilities within the corrections field. Recruiters should plant the seeds; these are long-term relationships. They may not bear fruit immediately, but by nurturing educational connections, recruiters create future opportunities.

Corrections Camp. Recruiters may develop a corrections camp for high school students showcasing the service, training and adventure of a career in corrections. Young people thrive in a hands-on environment. Such camps often offer a two- or three-day youth-friendly collection of activities, including interactive discussion groups that illustrate possible careers, a segment on defensive tactics and mock cell checks. The camp should build their enthusiasm and kindle their imaginations. Again, this is an effort to develop long-term prospects and should be followed up on in subsequent years.

Open House at “the Big House.” One of the greatest barriers to recruiting employees for prisons is the fear of the environment. Ironically, the mystery of the Big House is

a titillating draw that should be used by the recruiter, who can throw open the doors and invite the public inside. Keeping security in mind, recruiters can open correctional facilities to career orientations. As no typical recruiter can do, existing corrections professionals can give an accurate picture of what happens inside correctional facilities and what the work is really like. A tour can allow staff to share their professional journey in corrections, a PowerPoint presentation can draw on the history of the institution. Job seekers should be allowed to ask questions and then staff can address their concerns. This is a perfect demonstration that the securities in place ensure the safety of employees and, in fact, whole communities.

Employee Referral Rewards. Correctional recruiters should not neglect their relationships with current employees, who are, after all, an agency’s most active recruiters. Recruiters must recognize the commitment to word-of-mouth advertising exhibited by current employees. This is the most effective method in attracting potential employees. Current employees can be shown that their contributions are valued through a reward program that pays \$50, \$100 and \$200 for up to three referrals who successfully complete training. Correctional administrators should give tangible acknowledgement that their employees lay their reputation as good friends and neighbors on the line every time they recommend the facility as an employer.

The data show that relationship-based recruiting works. Direct contact can address potential job seeker concerns and dispel myths about working in corrections. As a

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result, it is critical that recruitment campaigns focus on direct contact and corrections-awareness efforts. When recruiting for correctional officers, because the selection process can be arduous, building relationships

is even more critical. Coaching and mentoring applicants through the hiring process increases the likelihood of successful placement.

As the 21st century picks up speed, correctional recruiters must adjust staffing methods to keep pace with the changing labor force. As unemployment rates continue to trend downward and impact the available work force, targeted, flexible and personal recruitment strategies must be employed. In the end, by providing a constant, positive presence by truly connecting with the communities, correctional recruiters shape the identity of corrections as a viable employment provider for society.

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