The Beginning of a New Era in Mexico’s Correctional System

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The main purpose of the American Correctional Association Mexico Chapter, which was approved by the Board of Governors and the Delegate Assembly during the 144th Congress of Correction in Salt Lake City, is to improve and transform the correctional system in Mexico through the unification of processes, procedures and training for those who work in Mexican prisons. Four years ago, Chihuahua began restructuring its entire correctional system, and today, the city has achieved a total transformation that has benefited both inmates and prison staff, as well as the citizens, who can confirm that any high-impact crime is handled inside the Chihuahua Centers for Social Reinsertion (CERESOs).

**First Steps**

In order to start with this restructuring process, the following six guiding principles were implemented by the Chihuahua correctional system:

- **Self-governance removal.** The Chihuahua correctional system regained control, order, discipline and governance of the state CERESOs. Where the inmate populations exceeded the capacity of some facilities, inmates were transferred to other locations so that the maximum capacity was met and maintained.

- **Rebuilding facility infrastructure.** More than 60 million pesos ($4.5 million) were invested from the government budget into renovating correctional facility buildings. This put an end to the times when there were no funds available for as little as a can of paint.

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Improving the technology structure. The Chihuahua correctional system acquired intelligent customs systems and cell phone signal inhibitors. In addition, the CERESOs created the Main Penitentiary Control Center in order to collect and track strategic information.

Standardization of processes and procedures. The Chihuahua correctional system, along with ACA, created processes and procedures that improved the operation of all facilities. The new processes and procedures also eliminated individual criteria with the implementation of similar activities common to all the facilities.

Reinforcing training of security staff. After many years of no classroom or training activities, the Chihuahua correctional system implemented customized training programs to fit the characteristics and roles of CERESOs staff, with an emphasis on security in order to help the staff recover a sense of belonging.

Social reinsertion. In each facility, the Chihuahua correctional system has designed and implemented inmate reintegration programs geared toward providing inmates with an education, job training, employment opportunities and sports activities.

Initially, these six principles could have been defined as simple, but the restructuring process required more than 1,000 actions to comply with these principles, which together comprise the transformation of the correctional system. Once these bases were established, the first step was the self-government removal through searches and shakedowns, which nowadays are still operating with great seizure results, such as 1,500 gallons of alcohol; 73 long guns; 32 explosive, fragmentation and blast grenades; 13,762 steel-edged weapons; and other prohibited items as of Oct. 1, 2014. These seizures were only the “tip of the iceberg,” because every single action also detected illegal acts inside the prisons, such as cockfights, musical performances and even horse racing. This reflected the unlimited power and control the criminal groups used to have inside the walls of CERESOs, enough to even plan and order kidnappings, extortions and other crimes.

Through the Merida Initiative — an international treaty for organized crime combat in the U.S., Mexico and Central America through equipment supply and training for law enforcement agencies — the support of ACA was obtained in order to improve the Chihuahua correctional system. As soon as Chihuahua got ACA support for the accreditation program for CERESOs in June 2012, the transformation started immediately. By November 2012, CERESO #1 located in Aquiles Serdán, Chihuahua, had the first audit with a 100 percent score.

In the first quarter of 2013, the following CERESOs went through the accreditation process: Female CERESO #1 in Aquiles Serdán, CERESO #4 in Hidalgo del Parral and CERESO #5 in Nuevo Casas Grandes. Audits performed later in June 2013 resulted in a 100 percent score for each of them. At this time, César H. Duarte Jaquez, governor of Chihuahua, made an outstanding public commitment in his 2013 Annual Activities Report. During his speech on Oct. 3, 2013, he said, “One year from now, all the CERESOs will be ACA accredited.”

Therefore, the accreditation process continued for the remaining facilities as follows: CERESO #2 in Chihuahua City was audited in November 2013 (approximately one month after the governor’s announcement); CERESO #7 in Cuauhtemoc and the Female CERESO #2 in Juarez City, both with audits in June 2014; and CERESO #3 in Juarez City had an audit performed in October 2014, just a few days before the governor’s 2014 Annual Activities Report. In the report, he announced the fulfillment of his commitment with great joy. All the audits performed for the accreditation of the eight CERESOs had a 100 percent score.

The ACA Mexico Chapter Begins

To continue with this transformation, in February 2014, the government of Chihuahua had the first meeting with the executive officers of ACA in order to meet the requirements to set up an ACA dual chapter that would operate in Mexico for the first time. The importance of establishing a direct liaison between Mexico and the U.S. regarding the field of correctional staff was due to the lack of availability of an office inside Mexico that offers the same services ACA provides worldwide. As Chihuahua became a pioneer within the ACA accreditation program, the interest to serve as facilitators of change for the correctional system began to grow in Mexico.
According to Eduardo Guerrero Durán, chairman of the ACA Mexico Chapter, it is necessary to work within a reform in which each of the CERESOs operates the same principles. On Oct. 1, 2014, Guerrero Durán said, “ACA has given [Mexico] the opportunity to standardize the processes and procedures, and this is reflected in the great security benefits that the accreditation of eight facilities in Chihuahua has brought for all citizens.” Among the benefits obtained with this series of actions is the 67 percent decrease in high-impact crimes, which was observed after each of the searches and shakedowns performed since 2011. The goal of the ACA Mexico Chapter is to professionalize everything related to the correctional system through services such as training, personal assessment, operations advice and conventions, among others, and even to give support to other Mexican states in the improvement of their correctional conditions. Undoubtedly, the significance of having an accredited correctional system and having a liaison office will bring great benefits to Mexico, such as a greater fluency for training and equipment supply for the correctional staff. Another benefit is that the inmate population will gain a respect for human rights, as well as values, discipline and respect, so once they achieve freedom, the offenders can contribute to society.

**Conclusion**

On July 21, 2014, Guerrero Durán traveled to the ACA headquarters in Alexandria, Va., on behalf of the Chihuahua correctional system, where he formally submitted the bylaws for review, and later vote, by ACA’s Board of Governors. Once this liaison was approved, the ACA Mexico Chapter met for the first time in Chihuahua City in September 2014, where Duarte Jaquez stated the importance of restructuring the criminal justice system starting with corrections, because inside the prisons is one place where the government can effectively enforce the law. On Sept. 19, 2014, Duarte Jaquez said, “Only a few governments in Mexico have approached their efforts to restructure their prisons, but today, they see the good results of Chihuahua and some of them [have] began with such process.” The mission of the ACA Mexico Chapter is to be a support tool for the transformation of the correctional system in Mexico by gathering all the professionals, academics and civil organizations of Mexico in order to contribute to the construction of a sturdy and operable Mexican correctional system, and to provide welfare and safety to all Mexican citizens.

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