

Destination: Global Eagle

BY CHARLES MAUTZ, MA AND CYNTHIA THORNTON, BA



North Carolina (NC) Prisons comprises over 50 correctional facilities, approximately 29,000 incarcerated offenders, and over 16,000 staff. Our system, while moderate in terms of offender population as compared to others in the United States, is quite diverse regarding geographical dispersion and mission of facilities, staff disciplines and expertise, as well as offender demographics and needs. Meeting the needs of varying offenders, staff and community or government stakeholders is challenging. Facing these challenges, North Carolina Prisons leadership set a goal that will facilitate the practices, standards, and processes necessary to meet and even exceed these needs and apply uniformity and consistency where applicable. Beginning in 2019, NC Prisons decided to seek American Correctional Association (ACA) Accreditation for all correctional facilities across NC Prisons. When we achieve our goal, we will join other exemplary prison agencies as having earned the ACA's esteemed Global Eagle status. In this article, we will describe how and why this goal was set, what we have undertaken to prepare for success, and the benefits we anticipate reaping.

Beginning in 2019, NC Prisons decided to seek American Correctional Association (ACA) Accreditation for all correctional facilities across NC Prisons.

In mid-2019, a change of leadership brought a new Commissioner to head NC Prisons, Todd Ishee. The Commissioner advocated the necessity and benefits of reform, along with delivering the energy and intention to follow through. As Mr. Ishee delivered his message to staff, he also sought their input. Correctional professionals from across the state had an opportunity to contribute to the conversation regarding the necessity to improve and how best to go about it. In essence, the new leadership came with an open door, an emphasis on collaboration and

staff input, and the focus on striving for excellence. As an example, NC Prisons leadership began evaluating current and ongoing needs and goals, leading to the creation of an extensive five-year Strategic Plan. Over 500 staff contributed to this process, which yielded ten overarching Goals, each of which included numerous specific strategies. A major theme of these goals was we are one team with one mission. That made it logical to establish the goal of achieving accreditation for all facilities within NC Prisons to strive to better serve our state as that one team.

Structuring for successful accreditation

In addition to goal setting, NC Prisons administration was partially reorganized to cultivate a sustainable, defined team overseeing the various aspects of staff disciplines, programs and facilities. As part of this reorganization, a new section was created to facilitate the development and implementation of processes to manage our professional, operational and performance-related practices: Performance and Standards. Led by Director Cynthia Thornton, a former Warden and Regional Director within NC Prisons, the section contains several key teams, each led by an Administrator or Manager. One, the Policy Administration, oversees processes for development, revision and organization of all statewide Policy and Procedure. Two, the Innovation Institute serves as a research and planning hub that reviews and evaluates potentially-useful or advanced initiatives, programs or uses of technology, providing targeted recommendations and assistance to leadership. And three, the Audit Administration was created to provide oversight and management of all performance and practice-based audit processes, both internal and external.

The Audit Administration arm of the new Performance and Standards section is led by Audit Administrator Paula Page, the first to serve in this role within NC Prisons. This group is the focal point of NC Prisons leadership regarding ACA Accreditation procedures, including staff training, audit preparation and compliance procedures. These tasks were assigned to new dedicated full-time statewide, regional and facility-based staff, positioned to address various domains of correctional practice necessary for accreditation. Specifically, one regional Compliance Manager will be positioned in each of the Division's four geographical regions to support initial audit preparation

processes and ongoing compliance needs for all facilities in the given region. Further, one Safety Compliance Manager and one Medical Compliance Manager oversee subject-matter-specific audit and compliance needs regarding their respective domains, with oversight resting with the Division at large. The Division of Prisons has also funded an additional 38 Facility Compliance Specialists, each based at a facility or hub of facilities and tasked with overseeing facility- or hub-specific compliance procedures. Given the existing facility and regional chains of command, facility-specific and regional compliance positions will dually report to the Audit Administrator and to the facility or regional leadership, encouraging cohesion and support for compliance needs over time. These additional staff positions and their structure across the division is purposefully intended to provide the knowledge, procedural support and hands-on direction to facility staff across the state in terms of requirements, documentation and communication and areas needing attention regarding not only ACA Expected Practices, but North Carolina Prisons' operational expectations as well. It is insufficient for North Carolina Prisons to focus efforts only on ACA benchmarks; thus, this team will serve to reinvigorate and advance Division-wide internal audit and compliance expectations and procedures over time. In the coming years, we expect this group of staff to spearhead an improved structure to encompass all performance-based reviews in our facilities, building on the foundation and direction provided by the ACA.

Developing the necessary resources

To complement the creation of Performance and Standards and its Audit Administration, leadership provided support for additional expert resources to begin preparation for ACA accreditation. Experienced correctional administrators were hired on contracts to assist in developing procedures for audit preparation, compliance processes and necessary strategy for statewide completion. Similarly, a statewide two-day training was held virtually across NC Prisons, led by ACA accreditation professionals and attended by over 400 staff and administrators. This training outlined processes, needs and recommendations for preparation and execution of audit compliance; further, it introduced staff to the major sections of necessary Expected Practices. The combination

of these two external resources was vital to our efforts to prepare for accreditation, as well as strengthened the relationship between our agency as a whole and the knowledgeable, experienced and dedicated professionals within the ACA.

However, securing audit compliance extended beyond these initial trainings and the decisions made by leadership or the framers of the Strategic Plan. Staff across our state play the most crucial role in attaining our goal, as their mission, tasks and input will ultimately allow our operations to align with nationally recognized standards. Thus, garnering staff support for accreditation has been a priority early and often. Leadership meetings, presentations, site visits, conference calls and numerous other methods have been used to foster an understanding of the importance of accreditation and what benefits it will yield not only for the agency as a whole, but for individual people working within it. All 16,000 plus of our staff must have the opportunity to understand accreditation means improvement in workplace efficiencies, in safety and security practices, in health and wellness and in organizational structure. Seeing the future return on investment of putting the effort in now to align their daily jobs to the practices prescribed by the preeminent correctional body of the nation, staff and leaders alike will surely grasp accreditation does not eliminate individuality, creativity or innovation. Instead it stands for consistency, accepted practices and professional excellence. By embracing the Expected Practices necessary for accreditation, we are not only evaluating our performance as it stands now, we are laying the groundwork for a correctional agency that operates more uniformly both within its facilities and relative to others across the country.

Garnering support for ACA accreditation has also involved developing and capitalizing on similar understandings with other governmental and correctional support entities within our state. This initiative has the backing of NC's Secretary of Public Safety, the NC General Assembly and the NC Correctional Association (NCCA). Quite similar to involving and building support within our staff, these relationships have been cultivated by discussing of the benefits of accreditation, educating governmental leaders on the value it will provide our staff, our offenders and our communities.

Benefits of accreditation for staff and populations

Accreditation offers clear, measurable and attainable benchmarks for safety and security operations, offender treatment and programming, facility and agency administration, responsible stewardship of resources and more. Those benchmarks not only set standards for our practices now, they illustrate pathways toward continual improvement and advancement. We anticipate safer prison environments, improved staff morale and cohesiveness and operational upgrades all due in part to achieving accreditation. Our staff will have put in the work to be part of an accredited agency; thus, they will be recognized as dedicated professionals operating in-line with nation-wide standards. As Warden Doris Daye, President of the NCCA put it, “NCCA is about promoting professional development; the goal is to get people excited about our job. Through accreditation, we get that stamp of excellence — we’re qualified professionals and should be recognized as such.”

As we began the process of achieving accreditation, NC Prisons leaders chose to lead by example. Prisons Administration was the first office to prepare for and be audited, doing so successfully in 2020. This success was soon followed by five additional facilities undergoing audits, each having successfully been accredited or awaiting hearings with the ACA’s Commission on Accreditation. As we continue to pursue accreditation one facility at a time, our team grows in confidence and practice. Our facilities and their staff build on early successes from auditing and turn their energy into sustained, high-quality practices that will stand when tested by compliance reviews or re-accreditation, as well as by internal audits, Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) audits, Health and Human Services audits or other additional attention. Knowing the methods we use and the protocols we set align with our country’s leading correctional guidance institution instills that sense of pride, of accomplishment and of confidence our staff desire in their day-to-day work. Those motivated staff, utilizing compliance procedures and continued support from the Audit Administration, Prisons leaders and the ACA, will ensure our facilities continue to operate more safely and efficiently. Those staff will turn an audit and a commission hearing into lasting professional advancement in our craft. At Sanford Correctional Center, 2020 accreditation processes brought

this to light, as Sergeant Mindil Kennedy-Lindsay put it, “My experience with the ACA Accreditation was rewarding. I gained knowledge on all areas of the department. I am glad I was a key part of ensuring my facility became accredited — all the hard work paid off.”

A worthy goal

As of mid-2021, NC Prisons is well underway toward its goal of system-wide ACA accreditation with several early successes with initial audits, Commission on Accreditation hearings, and staff, training and procedural resource allocations. We also are proud to have already achieved system-wide compliance with federal PREA standards. Yet, we recognize the length of the road ahead. This goal was not set with the intention to accredit one, five or ten facilities. The goal is to accredit all facilities. Given the size and scope of our system, we must recognize the time it will take to achieve our goal without allowing that time to deter our focus. Once complete, we can stand a little taller. We can look back at the work it took to solidify North Carolina as a national correctional leader. We can reflect on the quality improvements, the procedural efficiencies, the staff morale. We can look to the future of serving our state efficiently, safely, and aligned with nationally accepted standards across all domains of correctional work. Once completed, North Carolina will have earned the Lucy Webb Hayes Award and the Global Eagle from the American Correctional Association for being both fully compliant with all PREA standards and fully accredited in all facilities by the Commission on Accreditation. We’re up for the challenge of becoming a national leader.



Charles Mautz, MA is the Innovation Institute Administrator at the North Carolina Department of Public Safety, Prisons.



Cynthia Thornton, BA is the Director of Performance and Standards at the North Carolina Department of Public Safety, Prisons.