

Staff Recruitment and Retention in Corrections

The Challenge and Ways Forward

BY THE OFFICE OF CORRECTIONAL HEALTH, AMERICAN CORRECTIONAL ASSOCIATION



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Introduction

Employees are the most valuable assets in corrections, especially when managed, trained, and appropriately utilized for success. Corrections relies on well-trained, experienced, and devoted workforces to provide the most cost-effective required security service to their community and stay on track with the larger mission of public safety. Among those important workforces in corrections, many employees are responsible for overseeing arrested individuals, those awaiting trial, or individuals sentenced to serve time in jail or prison: correctional officers and other front-line facility staff. Corrections officers are at the foundation of correctional institutions and are an essential piece of the criminal justice system. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) data, in 2020, there were about 418,500 correctional officers and jail administrators in the U.S. whose primary responsibility is to maintain the safety and security of the correctional facilities for the benefit of the justice-involved individuals, staff, and community. Those professionals are also responsible for enforcing rules and keeping order within jails or prisons, supervising the activities of justice-involved individuals, inspecting facilities to ensure that they meet security and safety standards, searching justice-involved individuals for contraband items, as well as reporting, escorting, and transporting justice-involved individuals.¹

Correctional officers are required to establish good interpersonal contact and pro-social relationships with justice-involved individuals and support the behavioral change process toward a crime-free life while maintaining the safe and secure operation of facilities. This makes it critically important for the corrections sector to develop a high-quality correctional officer, as they are groups of professionals who play a crucial role in law enforcement of the justice system.^{2,3}

However, those responsibilities of correctional officers are physically and psychologically demanding, which negatively affects the well-being of staff. Managing those challenging responsibilities requires a great deal of skill and commitment, often at the expense of personal

well-being. Correctional officers are confronted with various work-related, institution-related, and psychosocial dangers and adverse outcomes. This can result in diminished work performance, burnout, and absenteeism, leading to workforce shortage and reduced security levels within entire correction facilities.⁴

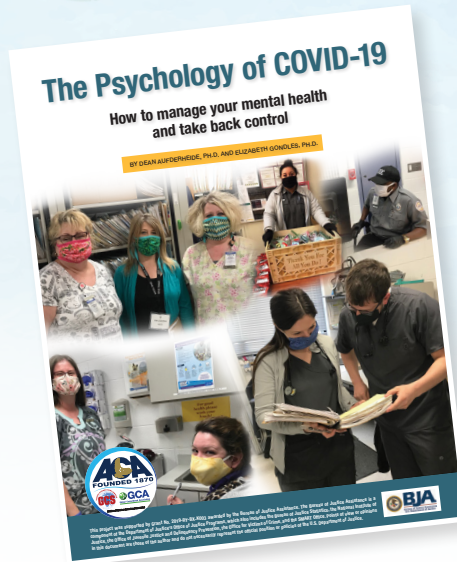
Because of these myriad problems and other job-related factors, the staff shortage of corrections professionals has worsened over time. The overall employment of correctional and bailiff staff is projected to decline by 7% from 2020 to 2030.⁵ On average, an estimated 35,700 openings for correctional officers and bailiffs are expected each year because of high staff turnover, shifting to other industries, and retirement.⁵ High staff turnover and understaffing in corrections can lead to lockdowns of correctional facilities and the problem has worsened since the COVID-19 pandemic.^{6,7}

In 2015, the ACA Staff Wellness Committee was formed. Their charges were numerous but the theme was simple: get the word out that this crisis provides for a much-needed opportunity.

In response to these concerns and challenges that face correctional staff everywhere, the American Correctional Association's (ACA) elected leadership and membership has taken numerous actions to improve the wellness of front-line staff in the corrections field. In 2015, the ACA Staff Wellness Committee was formed. Their charges were numerous but the theme was simple: get the word out that this crisis provides for a much-needed

ACA supports corrections professionals in wellness.

In 2019, ACA received a cooperative agreement from the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) to increase the volume of resources, trainings, and technical assistance for all correctional agencies in the United States.



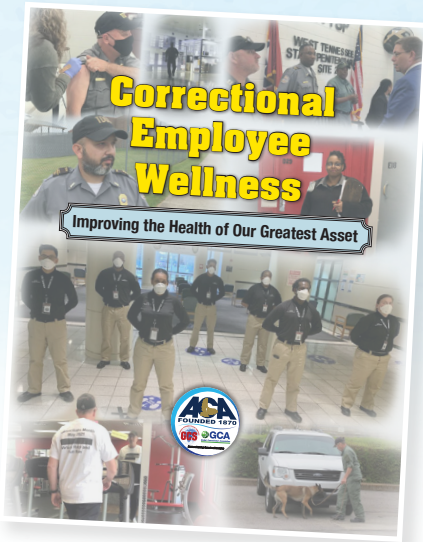
opportunity. The committee presented a *Resolution Supporting Correctional Wellness* that was approved by ACA’s governing bodies to become a key public document drafted by corrections professionals to benefit corrections professionals’ livelihoods. The *Resolution Supporting Correctional Wellness* urged agencies to raise their awareness and educate employees about their wellness.⁸ It encouraged agencies to start their own wellness initiatives beyond just physical wellbeing, to include components that would also benefit emotional, environmental, financial, intellectual, occupational, social and spiritual wellness. The framework was laid to build upon a call that will benefit the lives of thousands who have a direct impact on so many more justice-involved individuals.

The ad-hoc Staff Wellness Committee’s work didn’t end there. They made sure the important work didn’t lose momentum and continued to expand the pool of resources for corrections. The Public Correctional Policy on Employee Wellness was unanimously ratified by the American Correctional Association Delegate Assembly at the 2018 Winter Conference in Orlando, FL. This policy took the previous resolution a step forward to explain that correctional agencies should value, enhance, and protect the health and wellbeing of all employees. It goes on to state agencies should support wellness by offering programs for personal and professional wellbeing. The document advises to educate and raise awareness of how to mitigate stressors while

sharing practices and evidence-based research with correctional partners.⁹

Next, ACA’s Staff Wellness Committee drafted an expected practice that was presented to ACA’s Performance-Based Standards (PBS) Committee. This would make staff wellness a part of the compliance audit that is completed for a facility seeking accreditation. After being approved by the PBS Committee in August 2018, agencies and facilities are now expected to have “written policy, procedures and practices encouraging and supporting employees to participate and engage in health and wellness activities inside and outside of their institutions/agencies”.¹⁰ Certain criteria for wellness programs became a part of the accreditation process, including incentives to encourage participation and linkages to support programs.

In addition to the dozens of articles that have been written and workshops presented at national ACA conferences that have been sponsored by the ACA Staff Wellness Committee, the committee was also charged to hold a Health and Wellness Expo at ACA conferences. The expo serves to remind attendees about the importance of taking care of their wellness as well as underlining the importance that staff wellness programs play for their colleagues back at their home agencies. Whether someone is getting a wellness screen from a nurse, receiving a quick chair massage from a masseuse, learning nutrition tips from a registered dietician, or playing a quick game of cornhole, the Staff Wellness Expo emphasizes



Images courtesy American Correctional Association

the importance of all Eight Dimensions of Wellness. The event has been such a success that a Proclamation was signed to ensure that it will continue at ACA's Congress of Correction conference annually.

In 2019, ACA received a cooperative agreement from the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) to increase the volume of resources, trainings, and technical assistance for all correctional agencies in the United States. Deliverables from this grant include publications like "The Psychology of COVID-19: How to Manage Your Mental Health and Take Back Control" and "Correctional Employee Wellness: Improving the Health of Our Greatest Asset". The latter publication highlights results and analysis from a national scan to assess what programs are currently being provided across the country, as well as additional key information like barriers, financing, and oversight responsibilities. These documents contain critical information and resources for front-line staff as well as agencies looking to set up or enhance staff wellness programs.

Of course, ACA knows the importance of communicating correctional staff's critical roles and their wellness needs to key external stakeholders — governors' offices, legislators, unions, advocacy groups, potential funding sources, etc. — but what good are these programs if they're not being used? With all this momentum, ACA leadership turned the focus directly to front-line staff. During the 2021 National Correctional Officers and Employees Week, a diverse panel of corrections

professionals acknowledged the difficult job within each of their settings — jails, prisons, juvenile agencies, community corrections — and expressed their gratitude for the people responsible for overseeing justice-involved individuals. At the conclusion of the webinar, an e-brochure of resources was released for correctional staff to access. Additionally, any agency that wanted to participate and 'Meet the Challenge', as the program was called, could institute some sort of wellness contest within their agency. Agency program winners were entered into a drawing to win air travel and free registration to ACA's 2022 Winter Conference. During that event, each winner was publicly recognized for the accomplishments they made for themselves, the pride they provided their agency, and the motivation they gave their peers to do better.

During the 2022 National Correctional Officers and Employees Week, ACA provided motivational posters to the field to support front line workers and increase the retention of invaluable employees. Additionally, a webinar by frontline staff to frontline staff was delivered, featuring facility staff of various ranks, disciplines, and correctional settings. Their message was clear ... don't be a bystander when it comes to taking care of yourself or your teammates. Per Lieutenant Mike Real of the Oregon Department of Corrections, "If one of your brothers or sisters starts a conversation with you, help them out or if you don't think you're ready to, get them to the person that can. Corrections is not an individual effort. It takes a team and we are stronger together than we are separate."

Recruitment and retention effort in corrections certainly requires more assistance. Staff wellness programs are an excellent opportunity to help in that way. But it takes people strong enough to say when they need some help to increase the efficacy and accessibility of these programs. ACA's leadership and membership recognize how resilient and tough correctional staff are. But for long-term success and higher quality of life, we have to make sure everyone is well in all aspects of their life.

Historical challenges for recruitment and retention

It has been challenging for correctional administrators to find enough corrections officers for the nation's prisons and jails. In 2018, the CNA Center for Justice Research and Innovation published a paper addressing the critical problem of recruitment and retention of correctional officers in America.¹¹ The profession was characterized in this report as in a state of crisis due to struggles with recruitment and retention. Their literature review, which ranges from 1985 to 2017, revealed common themes which have contributed to all-time lows in staffing to include stress, high turnover, low morale, high injury rates, and psychological duress. In 2020 and 2021, the Correctional Leaders Association (CLA) surveyed its members, representing correctional administrators of all 50 states, four U.S. territories, four large jail systems, and military corrective systems.¹² Recruitment and retention consistently topped the list as a priority for corrections leaders. For almost 50 percent of corrections agencies, officer turnover rates range from 20 percent to over 30 percent annually, 38 percent of staff leave within one year, and 48 percent of staff leave within one to five years. For both recruitment and retention, correctional employees cite prison overcrowding, staffing shortages and burnout, low regard for the profession, low job satisfaction and pay, occupational danger, and job difficulty as reasons for



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their departures from service. Meeting today's workforce where they are, incorporating their cultural needs into hiring and retention decisions are critical. Millennials and Generation Z or Zoomers are not incentivized by lengthy careers in fields like corrections. Given that correctional leaders serve 2.5 to 3 years on average in their positions, focusing on recruiting and maintaining staff at more realistic timeframes is significant.

State commissioners, directors, and secretaries are significantly engaged on issues related to recruitment and retention of staff. Over the past two years, CLA surveyed its members and hosted quarterly meetings with correctional leaders and their human resources, public information, marketing and communications, and other staff to examine the challenges and share ways they have addressed them. A webinar was held in September 2021 with human resource personnel, public information officers, and corrections leaders as participants. They all agreed it is important corrections representatives do a better job at promoting the profession of corrections, dispelling myths about working in the field, and changing

the perceptions of and helping the public understand the importance of jobs in corrections and how these professionals affect the lives of others.

Staff health and wellbeing issues in corrections

Work conditions in the correctional setting are associated with numerous health and performance outcomes like exhaustion, psychological distress, dissatisfaction, and impaired work ability.⁴ Stressors related to corrections work and the dangerous characteristics of the offender population can seriously affect the well-being of employees in corrections. The nature of the job in correctional facilities puts employees in this field at risk of physical injury and extraordinary stressors that can seriously affect the well-being of staff.^{3, 13}

Because of the confrontations with incarcerated individuals and exposure to infectious diseases, employees of correctional facilities have one of the highest rates of injuries and contagious illnesses in all occupations. Because of a staff shortage, officers often work long hours in a closed environment and sometimes in old, overcrowded, hot, and noisy correctional facilities. Correctional professionals are also at higher risk of developing chronic illnesses, including stress, depression, suicide, obesity, and cardiovascular diseases.¹⁴ These concerning characteristics for correctional staff led to an increase in research conducted on just how problematic working in the industry can be for individual health and wellness.

A study conducted with the Oregon Department of Corrections correctional staff revealed that more than 90 percent were obese or overweight and 93 percent had hypertension or prehypertension, high cholesterol, and high triglycerides. Studies also have shown an increased risk of certain cancers, high stress, alcohol abuse, and sleep deprivation among corrections officers working in maximum-security facilities. The worst part of this

finding is that those correctional staff did not know that they had an increased risk of developing chronic illness or had already developed it. They only knew that they were a bit overweight and perhaps should reduce the number of beers they drank at night. Staff had no idea if they were in these high-risk categories, which meant they were not going to their doctors for risk assessment and medical attention.¹⁵

Correctional officers are also exposed to numerous work-related events that may influence their overall well-being. A study conducted on 8,334 officers and other staff of California correctional facilities in 2017 showed that employees in correctional facilities dealt with violent behaviors in their workplaces. More than 50% of correctional officers report that violent incidents are regular at the prison where they work. The study also showed 80% responded to at least one violent incident in the last six months of the interview time. Among the respondents, 10% had been seriously injured while responding to these incidents. 17% of correctional officers reported that justice-involved individuals had seriously injured them, 48% feared they would be injured, 63% had seen or handled dead bodies at work, and 73% had seen someone seriously hurt or killed while on the job.¹³

This study also showed that correctional officers regularly exposed to traumatic events are more likely to struggle with depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), suicidal thoughts, and anxiety disorders.¹³ A similar survey conducted in 2011 anonymously showed that 34 percent of corrections officers had post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms. In contrast, only 14 percent of military veterans experienced those symptoms.¹⁶ Another study conducted in 2013 on the prevalence of depression among correctional professionals also revealed that about 26% of correctional professionals had symptoms of depression. This figure was much higher than the prevalence of 9.1% in the general population of the United States.¹⁷

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Recruitment

Recruitment in correction struggles with negative perceptions of corrections as a career, unattractive work environments, low wages and competing with other employers for the same workforce particularly with local businesses in rural or outlying areas. Potential employees opine those other businesses pay competitive wages and provide more favorable work environments. Even though corrections is a challenging work environment because of many reasons mentioned above, it is also rewarding and attractive to some individuals. According to correctional officers, uniformed and plain-clothed, by engaging with, encouraging, and attempting to rehabilitate individuals through life-skills programming, educational attainment, and supporting incarcerated individuals in maintaining family connections, they provide a valued service in keeping the community safe.

An occupation in corrections offers an opportunity and exposure to various challenges and equips an individual to develop excellent conflict resolution skills. Correctional officers are in high demand, which guarantees employees stable job security, high promotional opportunity, and high earning potential for those committed to long-term career development in the field, even without a four-year college degree. According to the BLS, the median wage for a correctional officer is an annual salary of \$47,920 or \$23.04 per hour in 2021. However, those who have worked for a longer time and advanced their position in the field have the potential to earn more than \$100,000 in the field. They also can receive clothing benefits, health insurance allowances, and early retirement at 50 years of age or 20 years of service in correctional facilities with full pension benefits in some agencies.^{18, 19}

Correctional administrators' primary goal is to attract suitable candidates for the job and motivate them once

they are employed by creating an encouraging working environment. A range of factors determines whether individuals are attracted to or remain in the field of corrections. Health and wellness-related factors are the main concerns that keep qualified and experienced employees away from correctional institutions, amongst a variety of other factors.²⁶

Trending strategies in recruitment and staff investment measures

In 2018, the director of the Oregon Department of Corrections partnered with Portland State University to conduct research on the mental health and well-being of

their correctional officers. Additionally, the department collaborated with the Oregon Health Sciences University to study the physical well-being of staff. Their combined research revealed that staff experienced PTSD, shorter lifespans than the average adult, and suffered from obesity, hypertension or prehypertension, and high cholesterol. Staff also shared an increased risk of “certain cancers, high stress, alcohol abuse, and sleep deprivation issues, with corrections officers



working in maximum-security facilities at the highest risk.” In response to these results, the agency implemented more than 160 wellness programs to promote staff well-being. These programs were one step in shifting corrections culture with an eye towards focusing on health and wellness in their system.²⁰

This is an example of a correctional system that embraces the perspective of a people-run organization where staff are the most important asset, as their well-being is also tied to carrying out the agency’s mission and vision. Focusing on the health of staff, recruiting wellness-minded individuals, and providing tools for existing staff to support a healthy lifestyle throughout their career creates

better health outcomes for staff and ensures individuals in their custody will be better served.²¹ Recruitment affirmative measures such as creating hiring incentives (e.g., relocation reimbursement), referral bonuses, and increased pay and benefits may help to attract candidates into correctional facilities. For instance, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice recently deployed a 15 percent pay increase across the board for all staff.

Using traditional and non-traditional advertising sources including radio, TV, and newspaper ads in conjunction with social media websites managed by state employment agencies, online vendors such as Indeed, YouTube commercials, and videos on Facebook and Instagram are helpful. For example, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) created and posted a “Level Up!” video on their website to share information about their hiring process and how potential employees level up through employment with CDCR. Similarly, the Tennessee Department of Correction created and aired a recruitment video featuring current employees who provide a day-in-the-life example of the profession. Both videos have increased interest in their respective agencies.

Active hunting for job seekers, for example appearing at high school career days and outreaching military installations, to find potential employees is encouraged. The Maine Department of Corrections implemented a “Hire a Vet” initiative which has been moderately successful. Revising the hiring process to include hosting virtual career fairs or in-person one-stop job fairs and streamlining practices so that applicants can complete up-front requirements simultaneously at one event is an exemplary practice. For example, the Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services, Minnesota Department of Corrections, and Virginia Department of Corrections allow applicants to complete applications, pre-hire assessments, tests, fingerprinting, and background checks during one visit. Additionally, many departments of corrections are branding business cards and recruitment materials with a QR code to link interested individuals directly to agency hiring portals. In addition, allowing flexible schedules — part-time/full-time and shift options — so applicants can complete up-front requirements simultaneously during one event are exemplary and particularly attractive to the new generations that make up today’s workforce.

Retention — current struggles

Employee retention and staff turnover are major and increasing challenges of workforce management, as millions of workers in the United States quit their job. Nowadays, employee retention is a more challenging issue than ever. In 2022, every month, about 2.9% of employees, which is more than 4 million Americans, quit their job.⁵ Better job opportunities on the market, hiring unsuitable candidates, lack of motivation, workplace anxiety, different job expectations, and salary dissatisfaction are the main reasons for high staff turnover and difficulty in retention.⁵

A wellness program is a great tool to attract qualified individuals and retain high-performing employees for a longer time.

It is crucial to retain talent and keep experienced people at institutions as long as possible. High employee turnover is associated with expensive tangible and intangible costs. Tangible costs include paying out benefits, hiring temporary replacements, and advertising or headhunting for a replacement. Intangible costs include low morale, creativity, and corporate reputation. Significant time and resources are allocated to developing job descriptions, reviewing resumes, interviewing, evaluating assessments, background investigations, and recruitment services. The financial and administrative costs of formal training for new employees are also another burden to existing employees of an organization. Overall, replacing one employee costs about 50-60% of the employee’s annual salary.²²

The retention of a qualified and experienced correctional workforce is critical to the success of effective and professional operations in the field of corrections. However, attracting and retaining qualified staff has historically been challenging, particularly in institutional corrections. Correctional facilities across the country have struggled

for years to recruit and retain their staff to maintain an adequate workforce for their daily operations. In the correctional system, recruitment and retention have become a considerable concern. It has been common to see more professionals leaving the correctional field and fewer candidates applying for jobs in the correctional field.³

Dangerous work conditions, the difficulty of the job, pay, and an increase in retirement-eligible staff were often cited reasons for lack of staff retention. Low staffing ratios have resulted in reduction/suspension of programming or lack of staff to manage incarcerated individuals which have increased incidents of inmate-on-inmate and inmate-on-staff violence. Although retention time depended on the timeframe measured, particularly in 2020, mandatory overtime also contributed to decisions to retire earlier than an individual normally would have.

Trending strategies in retention/staff investment measures

Various strategies are suggested to improve the retention of correctional officers. These strategies focus on applicant screening, new employee orientation, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, supervisory relations, work environment, training and development, salary and benefits.

One vital retention mechanism to prevent high staff turnover is an employee wellness program designed to improve employees' physical, mental, and social well-being. A wellness program is a great tool to attract qualified individuals and retain high-performing employees for a longer time. Employers send a clear message that their organization cares about its employees by offering wellness programs. A strong employee wellness program allows employees to flourish and achieve their full potential to benefit themselves and their organization. Employee wellness programs not only retain employees but also lower employees' health care costs, improve productivity, reduce absenteeism, and increase commitment and trust among employees.²³

Corrections leaders have examined issues unique to retaining corrections staff and have implemented the following activities to address these issues. They have established retention bonuses, premium overtime bonuses, premium pay for those working in high-risk facilities as well as restructuring salary and pay differentials for seasoned staff. In fact, one agency introduced incentive

pay for employees who obtain certain milestones in their career. Agencies have also implemented or revised policies to be more "staff-friendly." Agencies in California, Colorado, Idaho, Kansas, Louisiana, and Texas have changed policies to allow employees to bring their personal cellphones into secured parts of their assigned facilities. Some have also allowed staff to wear different hairstyles such as braids and dreadlocks while others are examining institutional culture that may contribute to staff departures or early retirements.

Correctional leaders have also re-evaluated promotion guidelines to allow staff to move up the career ladder quicker. In one agency, staff accrual time now includes time employed at other corrections agencies to allow staff to accrue time faster for career advancement purposes. Agencies have also utilized social media to highlight the contributions of staff. In the Arkansas Department of Corrections, this approach has improved communications with staff and taken employee recognition programs to a new level.

Staff wellness programs development to increase retention over time

Historically, significant resources have been invested in justice-involved individuals' safety and security and creating rehabilitation opportunities. In contrast, limited attention and effort have been given to maintaining the health and wellness of corrections staff, including correctional officers.²⁴ Staffing corrections with physically and mentally sound correctional officers and administrative staff who can respond to numerous stressful job environments is crucial.²⁵

Researchers suggested that improving staff training, the work environment and conditions may help to address the corrections workforce shortage. However, there is also evidence that the level of funding for corrections workforce training is insufficient compared to other criminal justice professionals, and there is variation in curriculum content and length of training sessions across the sector. Improving the work and conditions in correctional facilities is another crucial strategy to enhance workers' experience, positively impacting recruitment and retention in the industry. Creating a safe environment in the workplace, to as great an extent as possible, and supporting a healthy lifestyle may also help employees to be attracted to the field of corrections.^{26, 27}

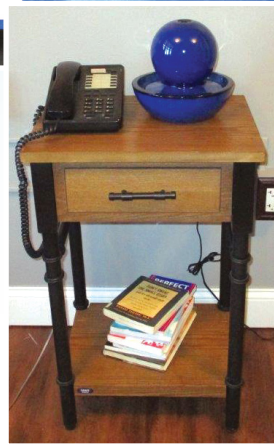
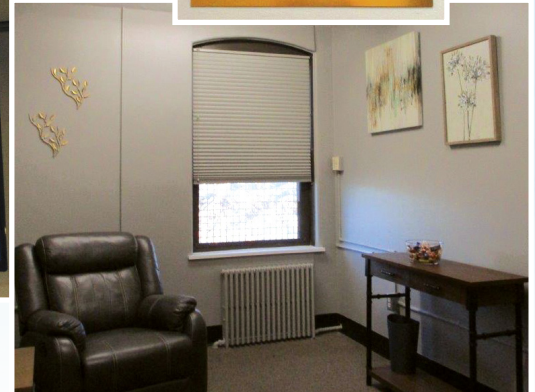
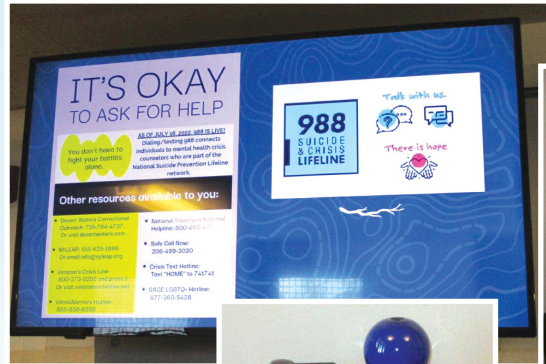
Staff wellness areas promote mental health.

New York Department of Corrections and Community Supervision



The Mothers Room

HAVE HOPE
BE STRONG
LAUGH LOUD
LIVE & PLAY HARD
IN THE MOMENT
SMILE OFTEN
DREAM BIG
REMEMBER YOU ARE
LOVED
AND NEVER EVER
GIVE UP



Photos courtesy New York Department of Corrections and Community Supervision

A substantial number of agencies implemented Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to address these workplace wellness-related problems, consisting of mental, physical, emotional, spiritual, financial, or familial health services. Employee assistance services may include counseling referrals, addiction recovery support, financial services, family counseling, and crisis intervention.²⁸ There is an opportunity for agencies to go beyond a traditional EAP program to help with staff retention efforts.

Staff wellness programs, efforts and impact on retention

The ACA conducted a scan in 2020 on the landscape of staff wellness programs in corrections, emphasizing the number and type of services offered, barriers to provision, and program funding. The scan was sent to 50 state agencies and 37 local detention facilities. It was completed by 45 states and 25 local detention facilities for a combined response rate of 80.46%. The scan asked about the overall provision of employee assistance programs and 17 specific wellness program offerings. 96% (44 state agencies and 23 local) of correctional agencies that participated in

this scan offered staff wellness programming, while 4% of agencies that took part in the scan did not offer Staff Wellness Programming of any kind. About 31-50% of the agencies that took part in this scan provided health education, drug, and alcohol treatment, resiliency support, nutrition, social engagement activities, and marriage or family counseling. About 50% or more of these agencies provide a more comprehensive wellness program to their staff, including Employee Assistance Program, Critical Incident Debriefings, Preventative Health Screens/Vaccinations/Inoculations, Peer Support, Outside Referrals, Fitness, and Health Fairs. Only 47% of agencies provide Health Education, and the most offered health education topics were stress management and suicide awareness. Only 10-30% of respondents provided mindfulness, yoga, and physical therapy wellness services.²⁶

This scan findings showed that the range of wellness programs offered varies from region to region and from urban to rural to suburban areas. Facilities in rural areas provided, on average, the fewest number of resources compared to their suburban and urban counterparts. Barriers to implementation of some of the wellness programs reported by study participant agencies include lack of funding (71%),

lack of adequate staffing level (53%), lack of physical space (36%), lack of interest (30%) lack of information/knowledge (21%), lack of community resources (15%) and organizational culture (8%).²⁹ A full listing of the report and additional documentation can be found on the ACA website.

In October 2018, the Nebraska Department of Correctional Services (NDCS) opened its first employee wellness center. The goal of the center was to specifically give staff a place where they could work out, build camaraderie, get healthier and relieve stress from their daily work experiences.³⁰ The work continued until recently in May 2022, when NDCS opened a new reception and treatment center. This center was designed with the wellness of staff and incarcerated individuals in mind. The work environment for staff is safer, the facility includes natural light and room to safely move around and congregate, and there are improved amenities to help recruit and retain staff. For example, the new “workout center, men’s and women’s locker rooms, break areas, a staff dining room and training space” contributes to staff wellness in that staff “now have space to work and relax, which was not available before.”³¹ The evolving efforts of this department continue to address pervasive issues impacting existing and newly recruited staff: stress, high turnover, low morale, high injury rates, psychological duress, overcrowding, low job satisfaction, occupational danger, and job difficulty.

Looking forward

Offering competitive benefits packages, including affordable health and wellness, is recommended to attract new hires and retain experienced officers in corrections. In response to staff shortage and recruitment and retention challenges in disciplines, correctional leaders and staff recommend that strategies are implemented during the recruitment process as well as to retain staff. Supporting a diverse, market-rate compensated, well-trained, and well-resourced workforce and encouraging personal/career development with career advancement opportunities in corrections may positively attract and retain the workforce. It is also recommended to recognize opportunities and seriously addresses staff mental health. Agencies should also identify and share strategies found in model programs from other agencies.

Other efforts to increase recruitment, retention, and staff wellness programs include weighing in on federal and state legislation designed to increase pay, offer incentives, increase respect in communities where prisons and

jails are located, and raise the profile of corrections and the importance of the work of its employees in maintaining public safety. Leaders should also continue to bring awareness to the critical nature of the work corrections agencies and staff perform. This can be accomplished through creating initiatives to improve the general public’s image of working in corrections.³²

Conclusion

Recruitment and retention has been one of the toughest challenges in corrections historically because of several factors. The most important reason behind this challenge is the fact that an occupation in corrections involves violence and confrontations with incarcerated individuals. Agency culture and environmental factors are directly related to retention and recruitment. Evaluating facility cultures and being mindful of generational differences are key to understanding shrinking corrections workforces. Attracting new people to the profession is difficult and retaining staff is problematic given the average length of time correctional officers staying employed in corrections ranges from less than one year to five years.³³ Despite the challenges the field has and continues to face, it’s clear that corrections administrators are using their historical experiences to explore new ways to hire and keep staff. Taking a holistic approach to the hiring and retention process has resulted in dividends that will hopefully have long-term payoffs. Offering a comprehensive staff wellness program helps to promote healthy correctional institution, increases engagement among employees, sets up a healthier and more productive workforce, attracts candidates by adding appeal to job seekers, promotes healthy correctional institutions, and keeps more experienced individuals in the field.

ENDNOTES

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