

CORRECTIONAL OASIS

**A PUBLICATION OF DESERT WATERS CORRECTIONAL OUTREACH
A NON-PROFIT FOR THE WELL-BEING OF CORRECTIONAL STAFF AND THEIR FAMILIES**

VOLUME 5, ISSUE 4

Combined Federal Campaign #82466 ♦ Combined Colorado Campaign #3908

APRIL 2008

Corrections Officer or Guard?

By Captain William Ashby

When I graduated from the Corrections Academy, like most rookies, I wore my uniform proudly. I graduated in a time of transition, a time when we were trying to improve from the status of guards to corrections officers. Like most recruits I looked up to and respected my instructors. Our lead instructor told us that we were corrections officers and we should stand up to anyone that called us guards. I remember it like it was yesterday. My first week working in the jail a salty veteran walked up to me and called me the bad word, "Guard". I was young and fresh out of the Marine Corp. I quickly stepped up to him and challenged his words. He stated, "How many people have you corrected today?" to which I replied, "None." Then he stated "How many people have you let escape today?" and again I replied, "None." He then stated, "That makes you a guard," and walked away.

Over the years I've questioned myself, whether I was a guard or a corrections officer. I guess that pride is something that must first come from within. I've come to terms with the fact that no matter which one I am, I will always maintain pride in knowing that I'm part of something that is a necessity in our society.

Last night I ran into an old high school friend of mine. We started talking and he asked me if I remembered a conversation we had some years ago while he was in jail. I did not. Even after he reminded me of our conversation, I still did not remember. But oh, did he! He went on to tell me that on that night he was on his fourth trip to jail and moving down the wrong path. I pulled him from his dorm and we sat and talked for a while, although he made it sound like a lecture from an old friend. I inquired about his first-born child and went on to ask him what role he planned on playing in his child's life. After he told me, I asked him how he planned on accomplishing that role from a jail cell. To me the conversation meant very little. It was some-

thing that I did quite often to pass time during the boring nights after all was quiet. For him it was everything. He said that he wrestled with my words all night and vowed to himself and to his first-born that he would never be incarcerated again. Today he owns his own business and his son is very proud of him. So proud, that he even got to speak at his son's career day at school. With a smile he went on to even brag about the fact that he now makes more money than I do. Without saying it, I knew that he was giving me heartfelt thanks.

Today I realize that I have corrected at least one person and who knows how many countless others during the passing hours of a slow night. As corrections professionals we have a unique opportunity. When our parents and teachers fail us when we are young, and as we fail ourselves as adults, the system is sometimes our last stop. As corrections professionals we are truly given an opportunity to reach people when they are at their lowest. I'm just now realizing what a great responsibility that entails, and only hope that I'm up to the challenge. I know this to be true to my heart: Whether corrections officers or guards, I know that, without us, our society would be missing something much needed when some people hit bottom.

William.Ashby@louisvilleky.gov, Louisville Metropolitan Department of Corrections

IN MEMORIAM

Sgt. Jack Wilkinson
February 15, 2008
OSCI, Oshkosh, WI

Ofc. Phil Adomavich
February 27, 2008
KMCI, Kettle Moraine, WI

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Getting Stuck with Getting Stuck

Sgt. Barry Evert

In this article Sgt. Evert describes personally dealing with what might be the ultimate “endurance test” in corrections—being exposed to offender body fluids and waiting for test results for months following that exposure. I can only begin to imagine the intensity of emotions staff and their loved ones must experience—repeatedly—during those long months. Emotions such as fear, anger, sorrow and helplessness may recycle through their souls at every reminder of their situation. It takes tremendous courage to get through such a stressful time without succumbing to self-destructive coping behaviors. And it takes tremendous inner strength to choose to turn that harrowing experience into something positive. By writing this article Sgt. Evert did just that. He wants to help corrections staff avoid what he went through and get the best possible help if they end up in the same predicament. CST

Out of all the dangers we face as correctional professionals, none is as life changing as an exposure incident. During a cell search a while back, I was stuck with a “dirty” tattoo needle. I had followed all the rules and took all the precautions. I was wearing two sets of latex gloves, and even looked in the area I was searching before I put my hand there, but nonetheless, fate intervened.

As I grabbed for some contraband between two lockers, I felt that telltale electric shock feeling. I pulled my hand out and looked again, only to see a tattoo gun taped to the bottom of the locker.

After confronting the inmate, I hurried to the emergency room, following our local guidelines. Our exposure control plan is an in-depth one that aims to minimize the risk of infection. Unfortunately, with a rate of Hepatitis C ten times that of the general public, there is little that can be done after a needle stick like this. Luckily, the chances of contracting any disease from a minor puncture are one in 10 million. However, I have never been one to tempt fate, so I took all the precautions available to me.

If you do not have an exposure control plan for incidents of “gassing” (*body fluids thrown at staff*) or needle sticks, you are not only out of compliance

with federal mandates, but you also are putting your employees at risk. Did you know that the risk of contracting HIV can be lessened if the employee gets to a hospital within two hours? If you didn’t, discuss this with your physician, and do everything you can to implement a plan at your institution.

It is a sinking feeling to wait for test results, and having to change your entire life for several months. A good exposure control plan can ease this for employees. Make sure that at the very least you inform your employees of the following:

- Until test results come back, take great care not to infect your family. This will include using protection during sex with your spouse.
- Make sure you are up to date on your Hepatitis B vaccinations, and that the vaccination is effective. This can be determined with a simple blood test. There is a simple booster available should you need it.
- Immediately after exposure, remove any affected clothing or gloves, and wash using hot soapy water. If alcohol wipes or other solutions aimed at killing viruses are available, use them.
- Assume every exposure is dangerous until you are told otherwise by medical staff.
- DEMAND to be seen by a physician within two hours of your exposure. This could save your life.
- Get counseling as soon as possible if you feel overly anxious or nervous. Knowing the facts of your exposure will make you feel better.

I know I will be looking hard at what else can be done to prevent sticks like this in the future for other officers. Of the many options available, few are practical. Puncture resistant gloves are too thick, and latex gloves are too thin, leaving us unprotected most of the time.

However, being proactive never hurts. Remind employees to look before they leap, and to never reach into areas they cannot plainly see. Don’t have them, or yourself, get stuck with getting stuck.

Behind the Mask

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As you may know, on May 8 and 9 Desert Waters is hosting "Reaching Behind The Walls," the first of its type conference on mental health and workplace wellness for corrections staff.

We are doing this because our experiences with staff have led us to believe that, especially for staff with considerable offender contact, psycho-spiritual struggles are not a rarity.

Corrections staff operate in an environment of chronic stress, continual alertness, and the ever-present possibility of violence. Staff are exposed to violence in a multitude of ways, the impact of which adds up over time. They read about crimes in offender files, they view videos of assaults or riots for training purposes, they hear or read about assaults on the news, they witness such assaults firsthand, or they themselves become victims of violence. Gradually, this exposure, coupled with the high stress and need for continual watchfulness, breeds symptoms of psychological disturbance such as anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, and secondary traumatic stress. As one of you said to me, "What I come across at work wounds my soul."

We believe that in the absence of effective individual and organizational coping strategies, this build-up of negativity leads to stress-related illnesses, substance abuse, divorce, family violence and suicide. Not surprisingly, it also results in high rates of sick leave, disability and staff turnover. Of course some individuals will be more susceptible and some more resilient to these pressures. That also is vital to identify. Why do some people bounce back, whereas others don't do as well? What are the ingredients of healthy hardiness? These subjects will be addressed at the conference also.

In case you wonder what types of struggles I am referring to, below are composites of staff stories, with details altered or removed to render them unidentifiable. These are NOT "problem children." On the contrary, they are hardworking, seasoned and conscientious employees. When you come across people like them, you would never guess that they are struggling. They wear their "It's all good!" mask, acting like nothing bothers them. Are their struggles rare? I wish they were, but from my conversations with staff over the years I do not think so. Do their stories get the message across that staff needs more help and direction regarding dealing with the impact of the job? You read on and you decide.

I have been a C.O. for 15 years. Lately I've been real short with my family. Four months ago I was viciously assaulted by two inmates. Since then I've become very somber. I don't smile much and I keep replaying the incident in my mind. Even when I close my eyes at night I see the inmates lunging at me. In the morning I wake up feeling exhausted. Lately I started drinking before going to bed. It helps me fall asleep. I don't like doing that, but I can't see myself going to a shrink.

I've been a C.O. for 9 years. In social situations I get terribly tense. I feel like I'm in danger and that I need to get out or push people away, even though I know that there is no danger! I make excuses to avoid social events unless I know that only a handful of people will be there. If I am given a table at a restaurant or even have to sit in a room with other people, if I can't put my back up against a wall, I get so stressed, I have gotten physically ill. I hate not being able to enjoy social situations anymore. I feel like life is passing me by.

I've been a C.O. for 17 yrs. I'm 55 years old, twice divorced. Time is ticking. I can't shake the anxiety and depression, even on meds. I had a heart attack five years ago. I have nowhere to turn. I don't want to be a burden on anyone. A week ago I did a practice run on empty with my 38, but when I loaded it, I could not go through with it. If anyone knew how I'm feeling, I'd be taken to the funny farm in a straightjacket.

I have been a C.O. for 9 years now. The job is getting to me. I often catch myself treating my two boys like inmates, screaming at them if they make any noise, and expecting them to do as I say immediately. They don't deserve that kind of treatment. My wife is fed up with me being mad all the time. If she tries to argue with me about anything, I blow up. If the house is messy when I come home, I fly off the handle. I then take it upon myself to clean the entire house until everything is clean and tidy to the extreme. I can't relax till I'm done. I'm ashamed of my behavior and I don't like living like this. I can't go to the doctor for anything related to mental health because, if it gets back to work, I'll lose respect and perhaps even lose opportunities for promotion.

I've been a C.O. for 13 years. I can't seem to get along with anyone anymore. The only people I want to be close to are my husband and my daughter, and they don't want to be close to me because I am so miserable

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Desert Waters

Correctional Outreach



*a non-profit organization
for the well-being of correctional
staff and their families*

Caterina Spinaris Tudor, Ph.D.
Executive Director

**P.O. Box 355
Florence, CO 81226
(719) 784-4727**

DESERTWATERS@DESERTWATERS.COM

WWW.DESERTWATERS.COM

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MANY THANKS!

Individual donors: William & Lisa Adelman, Anonymous, Rod Barringer, Vergel Bautista, Jim & Linda Beauchamp, TC & Joellen Brown, Harold & Becky Hutson, Mike Krauth, Matthew McNeill, Matthew & Jeri Mead, Becky Miller, Jeffrey & Connie Mueller, Than Lundquist, Revs. Clint & Dr. Margie Pollard, Kevin & Robin Rivard, Chaplain Russ & Cherrie Scharf, Larry Stringari, Don Wallace & Angela Kantola

Business donors: Janice Barnett, CPA; Bridge to Life Assembly; Cañon City Counseling & Psychotherapy, John Morlock; Classic Furniture; Let's Talk, Paul & Cindy Bowen

Special thanks also go to: Jim Beauchamp, Charlotte Burrous & the Cañon City Daily Record, DWCO Board, Florence United Methodist Women, June Knight, Jim Martin, Arlene Pennington, Eleni Spinaris, and the Ventline Responders

Ventline Sponsors: City of Cañon City; Colorado Health Foundation; Colorado Jail Association; Credit Union of Colorado; Doing HIS Time Prison Ministry; Fremont Community Non-Profit Center; King County Corrections, Guild, WA; Prison Health Services; and St. James Urban Church

Behind the Mask

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all the time. I get to the point where I feel like I just can't stand my job anymore, but then I go back. I complain to my husband nonstop. I hate myself for it, but I can't stop. I wish I could get out of this rut. I sit alone and cry when no one is around. Honestly, I'm nervous about going in these days. We have many gangbangers who (I hate to admit) intimidate me. And we have some staff who make each other's life hell. Sometimes I don't know who's harder to take—the inmates or the staff. When I really think about it though, it's the staff that is the worst. With inmates I know what to expect. But with coworkers, I never know what some of them are going to pull.

I am a C.O. I have been doing this job for the last 7 years and am finding it's changing me, and not for the better. I am negative, tired, gloomy. I know I wasn't like that before starting this profession. I remember the way I used to feel about people before. I used to enjoy hanging out with people, meeting new people. Now I just don't like people anymore. I don't even like myself these days, the person I'm becoming. I need to be able to have fun again, to be cheerful again! I can't go on raising a family feeling so grouchy and so exhausted. When I applied for the job I was sold—I loved the idea of being a correctional

First Annual DWCO Conference

REACHING BEHIND THE WALLS Mental Health & Workplace Wellness for Corrections Staff

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The Castle, Glen Eyrie, Colorado Springs, CO

Addressing interactions between workplace culture, staff mental health, job performance, and family life.

Topics include Secondary Traumatic Stress, Staff's "Psychological Survival", Supervising Stressed Staff, Motivational Leadership, Corrections Staff Suicide

Track A: Corrections Staff.

Track B: EAP & other mental health providers.

More information on www.desertwaters.com.

officer. My, was I in for a disappointment!

Realities such as these motivate us to keep bringing the issue of corrections staff's psychological and career survival to the forefront. Staff needs both the permission to safely acknowledge their struggles and effective practical tools for dealing with the impact of their jobs.

A challenge acknowledged is a challenge half-solved.