

CORRECTIONAL OASIS

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

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Crawling into the Bottle

by Sgt. Barry Evert

Even though the term "officer" is used in this article, the issues apply to corrections staff of all ranks.

Most of us in corrections know someone who is a "hopeless alcoholic." Sadly, rarely do we do anything about it to try to help these officers. The stereotype I think we can all relate to is the older supervisor with many years in the department. S/he is probably well liked, and would give you the shirt off their back to help you. This person is the first one to respond to an incident, and the last one that goes home at the end of the night. Sounds familiar?

I don't have enough room here to discuss the root issues, but I will try to address some key matters. First of all we need to define alcoholism. This can be very difficult to define. If you go by some standards, most of us are alcoholics. The key for the presence of alcoholism is that there is an abuse or dependence on alcohol for daily living, or that alcohol has become the main or even exclusive coping mechanism.

People have told me that if you drink to help you relax, you are an alcoholic. I take exception to that, as we all drink alcohol to get some desired affect. If this wasn't true, we'd just have iced tea or water. By its very nature, alcohol enhances some senses while it numbs others. This is the desired effect, not a definition of alcoholism.

For example, I enjoy a drink most days after work to help me unwind. Not to excess, but just enough to make me relax. So by some people's definition I am an alcoholic, as I depend on this to relax me after work. The difference is that if there were no alcohol in the house, I would rely on other relaxation techniques. Alcoholics stop at the liquor store on their way home and make sure that there is alcohol within their reach at all times. Often, when these persons do not have alcohol, they can be unpleasant, moody or downright nasty.

Alcoholic officers rely on alcohol to avoid feeling their trauma or stress. They eventually begin coming to work immediately after drinking. These officers take great care not to drink too much to where they will be noticed, but enough to "help" them get through their day.

The alcoholic officers are often very open and friendly at work, but have few friends outside of work. Few people know where they live, and even less have ever been to their house. These officers will often avoid contact with people outside of work for fear of being "found out."

Alcoholic officers pose a great threat to themselves and to their coworkers. Their alcoholism might lead to other vices that can be detrimental to their well being or are even illegal.

The sad thing is that we ALL know officers like this. This description of course is not a mold of every alcoholic officer out there, just an example that I have found common throughout my experience and research.

What can we do? Most of us think we would be violating our coworkers' privacy by trying to intervene. We may also fear that we could get the officer fired by exposing them, especially if they come to work smelling of alcohol. With all the risks in our line of work regarding getting fired, we don't want to see bad things happen to other officers.

We need to set this thinking aside both for the benefit of the alcoholic and their coworkers. Yes, these officers are

IN MEMORIAM

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**Food Service
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January 10, 2009
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DWCO MISSION

To increase the occupational, personal and family well-being of staff of all disciplines within the corrections profession.

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

UNDERSTAND ADDICTION	2
INTO THE BOTTLE	3
DWCO IN 2008	3
GREENING OF OASIS	4
DWCO CONFERENCE	
MANY THANKS	4

THE CORRECTIONS VENTLINE™

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(Continued on page 3)

Understanding Addiction

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Back in 2005 I received the following email. I am re-printing it with permission.

My name is Gary Ouillette. I am a retired Correction Officer from Massachusetts. I thought you may be interested in some Alcohol and Substance Abuse numbers relative to the correctional staff in our state. I was responsible for developing the MA Department of Corrections Stress Unit in 1987 in Southeastern Massachusetts. ...I retired in 1999 and during the time I was in the position of stress counselor, I transported over 200 corrections officers to treatment facilities both within and outside of MA for the reasons stated above. These numbers go undocumented, as no one truly wants to know the stress levels in corrections today. It is acceptable behavior to our peers to ingest substances and self-medicate because we have not been educated on proper stress management skills and techniques. "There is no money in the budget to address your request," was the answer I would receive.

Gary Ouillette states that, in his 12 years as stress peer counselor, he personally transported over 200 corrections officers to substance abuse treatment facilities. That averages more than 16 officers annually that he was directly involved with in his area. That is a notable number as we know that for every individual who is mandated to seek help or who chooses to seek help on their own, there are many who have yet to address their destructive substance abuse.

Substance abuse among corrections staff is a grave matter that needs to be researched and addressed. Currently there are no national or state statistics available on rates of substance abuse among corrections personnel, or rates of illnesses and deaths related to staff's substance abuse.

Of course, the reason for addressing the issue is to provide staff with effective help. For those not comfortable with the treatment model of Alcoholics Anonymous, the book *The Heart of Addiction: A New Approach to Understanding and Managing Alcoholism and Other Addictive Behaviors*, by Lance Dodes, M.D., provides an alternative approach.

Dr. Dodes suggests that addictions are fueled by rage at perceiving oneself to be helpless and "stuck" in situations that deny the satisfaction of fundamental

needs, such as the need for security, worth, or acceptance. He proposes that addictive behaviors are preceded by an entrenched sense of powerlessness to overcome or avoid the negative experiences of failure, rejection or humiliation.

His suggestion is that addictions are attempts to escape distress by "doing something" that creates feelings of pleasure and empowerment, rather than doing nothing and remaining in psychological pain.

So addictions, according to Dr. Dodes, are like going for a jog while your house is burning down. Taking addictive action (e.g., consuming alcohol), or even *deciding* to take such action, creates the illusion of regaining control through doing something temporarily pleasant, which briefly improves one's mood.

Dr. Dodes states that addicts usually do not recognize the root issues of their distress, and so they do not employ more appropriate behaviors to meet their legitimate needs. Alternatively, no other options seem possible or permissible to them due to their fears or social prohibitions. For example, they may stay in a bad relationship either because they do not want to be alone or for financial reasons.

Dr. Dodes' proposed treatment focuses on helping addicts find more effective actions to take when faced with feelings of powerlessness.

How might this theory apply to corrections staff? It has been my experience that some corrections personnel view themselves as being professionally "stuck." They dislike their job, they may even hate it, yet they are afraid to leave because "the money is good," because of debt, or because they do not believe that they can do any other type of work. Add to these scenarios the likelihood of psychological traumatization on the job and the correctional culture's stigma for seeking help, and it is no wonder that alcoholism and other addictions may indeed be rampant among correctional workers.

The solution to these issues is complex. Some people would be better off in other work environments, even if they earn less there. Others need the tools to learn to love what they do as corrections professionals. And others require treatment for conditions such as psychological traumatization or depression.

Crawling into the Bottle

(Continued from page 1)

often well liked, which makes the idea of exposing them unattractive to most. What needs to be understood though is that not doing anything enables addiction, and that puts the lives of your partners at risk. Although the alcoholic officers may have their heart in the right place and be the first ones to respond to an incident, they are a liability if they have been drinking.

Most departments have a system in place that is underappreciated. Oftentimes alcohol dependence is related to work trauma and stress, so the employer has an obligation to help. In many of these programs, the employees are placed on some type of leave while they attend inpatient or outpatient treatment for their addiction. This is done very inconspicuously, and the law viciously protects the employee's privacy. Rarely is an officer fired just because s/he has an alcohol abuse problem, unless there has been an incident related to the drinking.

There may not be cause to run to the administration at your department right away though. If you are a friend of the affected officer, take them out for lunch one day and approach them with your concerns in private. Give them the chance to seek their own treatment, with the assurance that you will be there for them every step of the way. This will take great personal sacrifice, but you may have saved a career, their life, and possibly the

lives of others.

There are many different types of alcoholics out there. Some can be violent and dangerous. If you choose to personally intervene, make sure you get advice from a counselor on how to proceed. Alcoholics Anonymous provides a wealth of information.

The officers will not quit drinking until they are ready, and they will need lots of support from their peers. I knew a supervisor who was a serious alcoholic. We all loved him. One day I told him, "Brother, if you keep crawling in that bottle to hide every night, you won't make it long after you retire."

Two months after our conversation this supervisor retired. Six months later he was dead. Don't let yourself live with the guilt of not having done anything to help your fellow officers. Do something to help them, even if it means "exposing" them.

If you are struggling with alcohol abuse, I implore you to get some help. You are not crazy. You are not weak. You have developed a dependency that makes you sick, and you need help. If you won't sober up for yourself, sober up for your friends, family and partners. Your partners at work already know you're an alcoholic, and are tortured every time they see you, because they want to help you, but don't know how. Seek help today. Your partners will be there for you, even if you have no one else.

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DWCO in 2008

As we look back to 2008 we are filled with fond memories of a fruitful and very full year. We are amazed and grateful that we get to invest our lives in the well-being of corrections personnel and their families nationwide. Here is a summary of our accomplishments, the ways we served corrections staff in 2008. We want to say a special thanks to our volunteers and donors, without whom these accomplishments would not have been possible.

- **Trainings:** 23, ranging from 2 hours to 2 days, in CO, KS, WY, with a total of 843 trainees
- **The Corrections Ventline™:** 104 contacts (phone, email and face-to-face). Of these contacts, 10 were with suicidal individuals and one with a person concerned about a suicidal loved one
- **Professional counseling sessions:** 144, individual and couples therapy
- **Volunteers:** 49, who donated 12,903 hours of estimated value \$305,851.65
- **DWCO's website:** 307,859 hits, averaging 25,655 hits monthly, with a high of 34,367 hits in June
- **Income:** \$65,904.97 (donated, earned and special events)

Additional accomplishments

- Dr. Spinaris Tudor authored the booklet *Staying Well: Strategies for Corrections Staff*, which was published by the Billy Graham Prison Ministries and rolled off the press in January 2009.
- DWCO's publication, the *Correctional Oasis*, was sent to over 3,500 individuals and corrections facilities per month. Given the number of individuals who forward the publication to the entire staff at their facility, a conservative estimate is that 7,000 individuals read the *Correctional Oasis* monthly.

Desert Waters

Correctional Outreach



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

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MANY THANKS!

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DWCO in 2008

(Continued from page 3)

- Articles from the Correctional Oasis were reprinted in the e-zine *corrections.com* (eleven articles), in the e-zine *correctionsonline.com* (two), and in the Cañon City Daily Record (six).
- DWCO offered its first annual conference on wellness issues for corrections staff. The 2-day conference in Colorado Springs was attended by 60 individuals from 10 states.
- DWCO hosted its second annual fundraising banquet in Cañon City, with Ari Zavaras, Executive Director of the Colorado Dept. of Corrections as guest speaker.
- DWCO launched its Women in Corrections project. Numerous employees from several states are contributing ideas and training materials for this project.

The Further Greening of the *Correctional Oasis*

Some of you receive the *Correctional Oasis* via regular mail and some by email. We will gradually be switching to the e-letter version. *If you are receiving the hard copy and have an email address, please email it to us at desertwaters@desertwaters.com.* After September 1, hard copies will be sent only by special request.

DWCO's 2nd Annual Conference May 7 & 8, Colorado Springs, CO Wellness through Positive Leadership

Mahatma Ghandi said, *Become the change you want to see in the world.* Our upcoming conference offers criminal justice personnel of all ranks cutting-edge insights and evidence-based research on Positive Leadership skills that boost staff wellness, morale, and performance. For more information on the conference, please go to our Home page at www.desertwaters.com or to <http://www.landsharkdesign.com/desert/DWCOMay2009Conference.pdf>.