

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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Mandatory Overtime

We often hear from officers who have to work doubles. Here is input from hardworking corrections officers across the nation on some of the challenges and dangers of mandatory overtime (MOT).

•*MOT is a fact and a necessary evil of Law Enforcement work. There is more to MOT than meets the eye though. Besides the time away from our families, MOT can be a serious hazard. Having worked through some serious staff shortages myself, I can attest to the effects of MOT. Short on money, years ago my department was running almost 25% short-staffed. We were working 3-4 forced overtimes per week. This was a time we did not dare answer our telephone on our off time, to not risk being called into work. After several months of this, the effects of the working conditions became obvious. Everything, from illnesses to injuries to divorces, was a direct result of repeated, constant MOT. There was a steady increase of Worker's Compensation claims. Many of these were directly related to tired officers making small mistakes that got them hurt. Most of them were minor, but as we know, small mistakes can turn bad quickly in our profession. The rate of incidents skyrocketed. The normally patient officers were running out of patience with the inmates. Long hours were affecting the moods and decision-making abilities of almost every officer. Sick calls soared. Officers were desperate for a break. Home life was strained also. All of these unintended consequences eventually led to an increase of cost to the state. Administrators need to remember that their officers are more than Law Enforcement machines. They are human beings with needs and with families. When employees begrudge their leaders, our goals to protect and serve are not accomplished well.*

•*Due to MOT I don't get to see my family, as I often have to work 16 hours. My commute home is a challenge to stay awake. I have almost fallen asleep behind the wheel. When I get home I try to go to sleep right away because I get up 5-6 hours later, sometimes less, because I am too wired to sleep due to stress and due to drinking caffeinated beverages throughout the night to stay alert. When I am mandated I am not able to take my nighttime medica-*

tion, so I fall behind in my schedule in taking my daytime meds. My health deteriorates. I am tired and irritable. At work, I am not as alert as I want to be, fighting off sleep and fatigue. I can be doing a back to back mandatory or maybe get one day in between. If I get a mandatory on my Friday, I spend one day catching up on my sleep. At times I have to call in sick to get some rest. This impacts the shift because now other Officers have to be mandated to fill my position.

•*Although MOT is necessary, the effects can be very dangerous. You are not mentally prepared to work for at least 16 hours. I like to know ahead of time when I am working overtime. When my children were younger I had to make arrangements to ensure that they were looked after (and pay additional costs for childcare). It is hard to work 16 hours and then get up again the next morning prepared to deal with the inmate population. You have to be able to quickly diffuse situations. I have trouble sleeping, so I am already not getting the required amount of sleep. MOT makes it worse. I also have not brought enough food to have two meals, so I*

IN MEMORIAM

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December 17, 2008

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INSIDE THIS ISSUE

PAVE ROAD TO WELLNESS	2
ANNUAL CONFERENCE	2
MANDATORY OVERTIME	3
UNKNOWN WARRIORS	4
MANY THANKS	4

(Continued on page 3)

P.A.V.E.™ Your Road to Wellness

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There are four areas that are pillars for corrections staff's wellness. These involve *Processing* the emotional impact of the job, finding *Antidotes* to work-related stressors, having a *Vision* for their life, and giving *Encouragement* to themselves and others.

Processing: Emotional processing refers to “digesting” and getting past stressful life events. Like milk is processed to cheese and peanuts to peanut butter, processing converts events and their emotional impact to lessons learned and “filed” memories that are no longer acutely disturbing. Such processing can reduce depression, acting out behaviors, and Corrections Fatigue.

Processing requires awareness of one's thoughts, emotions, intentions and urges. It also involves willingness and determination to examine one's inner life. Processing is not for the faint of heart, as being honest with ourselves and experiencing emotional discomfort take courage. It is much easier to escape through addictive behaviors or attempts to make others miserable.

The most common means of processing involve writing or talking to trusted others—family members, friends, coworkers, professionals, or even your God.

Antidotes: Wikipedia defines an antidote as a counterdose, a substance which can counteract a form of poisoning. If bitten by a rattle snake, you need the antidote of rattle snake anti-venom. What work-related negative influences do you need to counter, to neutralize to remain well? Getting enough sleep and having a meaningful and love-filled life outside of work are key antidotes for corrections workers. Having someone you can confide in is also essential. Being outdoors in the beauty of nature refreshes your spirit. Working out in moderation de-stresses your body. Engaging in enjoyable hobbies and other activities, such as volunteering, refuels your soul. List the antidotes that work for you. Then put them to practice.

Vision: Research shows that having a vision—a purpose to get out of bed in the morning—boosts

health. Vision guides how you invest your life, how you impact others, and what legacy you want to leave behind. Seeing yourself as part of a bigger picture and going beyond your narrow existence to embrace the welfare of others pumps you full of life.

How do you come up with a vision for your life? Start by asking yourself what principles you value dearly, what causes you are passionate about and what you sense your natural talents are. Then start thinking of ways to uphold those principles and to promote those causes using your talents.

Encouragement: This practice is about “speaking life” to self and others. Encouragement de-stresses and creates a positive atmosphere around the encourager. To encourage yourself, act like a good parent or a good coach toward yourself. Identify your abilities and strong points. Acknowledge any progress you make. Point out to yourself a job well done. Remind yourself that mistakes are learning opportunities. Speak words of life to others as well. Tell them about their strengths and improvements. Consistent encouragement is energizing. It can bring out the best in people. It causes positive people to be attracted to you and so form a supportive community around you, which contributes both to your well-being and theirs.

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Mandatory Overtime

(Continued from page 1)

begin feeling sluggish. Imagine the effects after 16 hours of dealing with various personalities. Tempers flare. Things that would not normally bother you are enhanced ten times and incidents get out of control quickly. Inmates also know when you are working overtime and they will use it to their advantage. Sometimes they purposely bait you into arguments, so that they have a reason to be disruptive.

•Emotionally an 8-hour shift is all I can handle. Negativity from officers and inmates alike gets to me. My normal work week consists of at least 2 half shifts of overtime. If I don't schedule them I am subject to being forced to work at the last minute and for an entire extra shift, not just half of one. After 12 hours spent around criminals I come home, eat, shower, veg in front of the TV, and just fall out and prepare for the next day. When I take my boots off my calves are swollen and do not go down until I go to bed. It is depressing that my "real life" depends on whether my supervisors decide I can go home at the end of my shift or I need to "help out" for another 4-8 hours. I wouldn't mind the job so much if I knew that I could just go home at the end of my shift. I'm not in this field to work overtime. Extra pay is not worth missing grandkids' activities, holidays, being dependable for picking kids up from school, making my own appointments, etc. In spite of my seniority, I'm subject to the same rules of MOT as the 25 year-old rookies who are in excellent shape and gung-ho about the job.

•MOT hits everything from having to drop out of college to watching staff burn out. I love my job, and most of the time I take pride in it. My greatest challenge is how MOT affects me and my family. My ailing elderly parents are often in need of extra care. Holidays at work bum me out when I think, Could this be their last Christmas? Once when MOT was so bad I hardly saw my daughter except to put her to bed at night. She told me I was not her momma anymore, that her daddy's girlfriend was. Wow, how that hurt! I'm not sure I can pick my job over my child again if MOT got bad in the future. You just can't raise a healthy family when you go to work in the dark, work 16 hours and come home in the dark, then turn around and do it all over again.

•I once lost three days pay because we had so much comp time (hour for hour, no time and a half), that we went over the allowed limit. Some staff lost even more than that. Due to riots and other problems, I and other officers incurred over 180 hrs each of overtime in one year. Our health suffered, our families suffered, our

work suffered, but true to the correctional officers' unspoken code, we "handled it."

•MOT makes me feel like I am running at half speed with no hope of getting caught up. It is even worse if I have had something planned or it occurs on a holiday. Loved ones do not always understand when you have to call and cancel an arranged function because you have to stay at work. There is absolutely no consideration of the officer's circumstances when OT is mandated. The more it happens, the worse it gets. I am not sure you ever mentally recover. It is always worse the next time it happens, no matter the time in between. It is one of the reasons I left custody even though I am less safe in my current assignment. It is also one of the reasons that officers resign.

•Frequent MOT results in staff's "I don't care, I don't have a choice to be here" attitude. They don't enforce rules as they should because they are run down. Due to MOT we LIVE at work. It becomes our second home. Departments of Corrections wonder why we have all these "overfamiliarity" cases across the country. Not every staff gets involved with inmates because of MOT, but I believe it contributes in some cases.

•The original idea behind MOT was to allow for staff to be available during major disturbances, or when weather conditions or disasters prevented staff from coming to work. Unfortunately, now MOT is being used as a budgetary tool. This is not good for the department or its officers. There are going to be times when bad planning or bad events are going to lead to MOT, but they should be few and far between. As for the employees, every officer needs to understand that MOT is part of the job. It is their duty to safely staff the institution. We cannot allow our personal feelings to jeopardize the safety of our communities. Saying "no" is not an option unless you are prepared to lose your job. If your administration is abusing their power of MOT, then it is time to sit down with them and discuss it. If the MOT is causing you stress on or off the job, take the time to talk it over with someone. If you have a caring spouse at home, sit down and talk to them about it. If you are still struggling, seek out a counselor for help. It is important that you keep your mind, body and spirit strong!

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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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From the Old Screw Unknown Warriors

This is what I'd like to share with the general public in our prison community.

Dear neighbor:

Have you ever paid attention to a Correctional Officer in uniform? Perhaps, if you thought anything about him or her, you might have thought that they are overpaid, "lazy" people. What, you might wonder, could they possibly do to earn the big wages they make?

First of all, let me tell you that the wages they make are not that big and they don't begin to pay for the loss of family time, stress and danger.

Yes, you could say, if they don't like it, they can go work somewhere else.

You need to thank God that these Correctional Officers are willing to put their lives and their families on the line.

They often work long hours. They work all kinds of shifts and mandated overtime. And they have a career of routine and boredom mixed with times of terror and death.

Correctional Officers for the most part don't brag or even tell people what they do. How many people want to go to work knowing they may die that day, have excrement thrown on them or face many other dangers—all in the line of work? No one wants to hear some of the disgusting things Corrections Offices see or have to do on the job. Yes, you wear gloves when you work around inmates, but all it takes is a tear in the glove or a cut on your skin, and you face the danger of AIDS, MRSA or Hepatitis C that you could get yourself and then take home to your family. And gloves don't help when you have excrement thrown in your face.

An Officer's family goes through almost as much danger as the Officer in other ways also. How many of you have to worry about gang-bangers threatening your families?

So the next time you see a Correctional Officers in uniform, thank them for what they do. They are putting their life on the line for you, your family and your community.

Take care,
The Old Screw