



The Correctional Oasis

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DWCO 18 Years—2003-2021

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Getting Back to Work ... And Is That Even Possible?

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As the pandemic lags on, the toll it is taking on all of us is not even measurable. The negative impact upon the correctional environment will be experienced for decades. In many agencies, inmate programs have been non-existent for months. Teachers haven't been teaching, case managers have had very little contact with their clients, and mental health programs have been minimized to reduce exposure to disease. In the middle of all of this, many agencies have enacted protocols that have required staff to quarantine at home for 1-2 weeks (depending on a variety of factors) after certain types of exposures. This has resulted in custody staff working even more hours than before the pandemic. This fact alone, even if you ignore all other impacts of this pandemic, has resulted in a mass exodus from this line of work.

Any review of social media platforms for corrections personnel reveal the numbers of people who are so fatigued and feeling so "disposable" that they feel they have no choice but to leave corrections. The flip side of this same issue is the numbers of corrections officers who have already completed so many years in this career that they see no choice but to remain (at any cost) because they are so close to their retirement benefits. The irony of this is, of course, that these employees are older and less able to manage the stressful work of corrections when they are heavily fatigued. Then, you know what happened next, these older employees started getting sick and going on leave. So the employees who are left are working even more hours.

Some agencies are handling these critical staffing shortages by putting teachers, program staff, and even medical staff to work on custody posts. This is, of course, not what they planned to do with their lives, so these staff are finding work elsewhere.

Then, what about the inmates? They are not getting access to programs, so in some agencies they are not getting access to parole. In other agencies, inmates are being locked up for at least 23 hours a day, sometimes with a cellmate. This is being done to try to contain the spread of the COVID virus. The result is, of course, inmates who are agitated, bored, separated from contact with their families, and potentially more violent. The recent push to eliminate 23-hour confinement (often referred to as solitary confinement) has been stalled. This movement gained steam based upon the negative impact of this type of confinement upon inmate's mental health, so the full impact of this recent widespread use of lockdown (even for lower level inmates and inmates who are not misbehaving) is yet to be seen.

In another crazy extreme, some agencies have relaxed the rules regarding how inmates are being managed, in an obvious effort to reduce any violence. I have talked to staff in agencies where they have been told to not enforce all of the rules, and inmates are even given "treats" to prevent misbehavior. Is this the new norm? Or will the corrections

officers who have not been allowed to enforce the rules during the pandemic going to be expected to go in and take away the treats and start once again enforcing all of the rules? I imagine we will see it happen both ways, in different agencies.

Either way, whether the inmates are locked down or are being allowed extra privileges and fewer rules, the barriers that have been put in place to reduce the spread of the virus have also reduced the positive interactions between staff and inmates. We have already seen the negative impact of the use of masks and partitions between people who are not in prison, and a similar, if not more pronounced result is likely to be taking place in confinement facilities. I had a staff member from an eastern state tell me that the way staff and inmates are treating each other is just like the “old days” (50 years ago)—that is, not well.

Then, there is the issue of bringing the employees back to work, in a facility, when these employees have been working from home for the past year. This is not an issue that is only impacting corrections. All businesses and agencies are grappling with this matter, as their employees are making a case that there is no need to return to the organizations’ buildings, if they have been productive working remotely. This is a valid argument in many settings. However, how will this play out in a corrections setting? Will employees who have been working from home be able to continue that type of work? Some agencies may allow this to continue, for a specific few types of positions. I believe that most agencies will not allow this to continue. In fact, many agencies have already called employees back to the facilities. This decision has also led to an increase in the numbers of employees leaving corrections work.

Is it justified to return people to the buildings? One could make the argument that having office-type people on site increases the number of staff available for an emergency response. In fact, in many agencies, administrative staff are often called upon in an emergency, therefore, having them on-site makes sense. The issue of “team” is also important in most work settings, but in corrections it is critical. Having a cohesive team that is clear about their vision and mission is important for safety of staff and inmates, and it is also important for retention of staff. Can a cohesive team be created and maintained when some employees are never on site? That will be the real question that has yet to be answered as we move through the COVID pandemic.

Additionally, the pandemic has created an environment where many families’ lives have changed dramatically. Not only are many employees working from home; many of their children are attending school from home as well. The remote learning that has occurred in many areas of the country has altered child care arrangements, parental involvement in the education of their children, and relationships between family members. There may be some instances where these changes have not been positive, and where employees and children are anxious to get back to school and work. There may also be instances where this type of environment has been a success, so that the employees are not willing to return to a traditional work environment.

For the employees who have been working from home, they have not always been held to a strict work schedule. Many have been allowed to work at any time of the day or night, as long as they get in their hours or complete their work. This type of flexibility is not often embraced by corrections agencies. Then in other corrections agencies, some employees have been paid their full salary, yet they have not been required to work a full schedule. In these cases, just getting back to working a 40 (plus) work week, at a set schedule, can be very difficult. I talked to one employee who admitted that they hadn’t worked a full 40 hours in over a year and they didn’t know if they could even do that anymore. I understand that the corrections employees who have been working massive amounts of overtime for over a year have no sympathy for this problem, but this is one more issue that will have to be addressed if these employees are going to continue to work in corrections.

Again, the full impact of the COVID pandemic and the strategies that have been put in place to deal with it will not be fully known for years. The measurement of work productivity, facility violence, and inmate recidivism will tell the tale as time goes on.

The Hidden Impact of COVID-19

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In my experience talking with correctional employees for the last 21 years, the reason most of them who have families give for working in corrections is that they do it to be able to provide for their families. And when asked what is most important in their lives and what brings them joy, most of them once again mention their families.

Yet, with the advent of COVID-19, correctional employees (particularly custody staff who are designated to be essential employees who have to report to work) have faced a quandary. Their job, which they took in order to take care of their families, now threatens to hurt their families, perhaps irreparably.

What I am referring to here is a topic that is not discussed much to date in correctional circles or in the media: the impact of COVID-19 on custody staff's family's life and well-being.

This issue, which is addressed in this article, can be broken down into two main parts: (a) the essential correctional staff's abject fear of infecting their family or other household members with COVID-19, and (b) the effects of COVID-19 realities and related concerns on essential correctional staff's family relationships.

Since they are considered essential, custody staff had to report to work (and continue to do so) throughout the pandemic. In some cases, their agencies provided them with questionable, even expired PPE, or they had to buy their own. They may have been assigned to COVID-19 units or they may have been tasked with transporting offenders sick with COVID-19 to hospitals, sitting with them in their room for hours at a time, and sometimes watching them die.

From early on in their correctional careers, custody staff in particular have accepted that they serve in a line of work where someday they may not get to go home at the end of their workday. And they have faced communicable (and rather well understood) diseases, such as Tuberculosis, HIV and Hepatitis C. For the most part, staff have made their peace with these realities, and perhaps their families have made their peace with them too.

Corrections staff have also at times faced threats directed against their family members, threats made by offenders or from offenders' associates. However, threats of violence by offenders or their associates are a type of danger that they are familiar with and have been trained to confront, a hazard they know how to defend themselves against.

COVID-19 confronted correctional staff with a very different type of threat: a new, little understood, unpredictable and almost impossible to defend against virus that entered the world's stage suddenly, globally upending life as we knew it. This foe, we found out, could suddenly turn lethal or cause irreparable damage to different organs of our bodies. This foe, we were also told, could live on our skin, on our clothing or on other items for hours at a time, possibly infecting others who came in contact with us or our items. And we might even be carriers of this invisible enemy, and yet not show any signs of having it, blithely breathing it on those around us and making them sick.

For essential corrections employees, exposure to COVID-19 has been practically impossible to prevent due to their being in close quarters with offenders, often in crowded housing units, and at times with inadequate PPE. And this could go on for longer periods of time than a normal workday due to increased mandatory overtime, a direct result of large numbers of staff being sick or in quarantine.

It is one thing for custody staff to know that they are at risk of exposure to COVID-19, and that they put themselves in harm's way by going to work. It's a whole different thing for them to know that they could be bringing this potentially deadly virus home to contaminate their loved ones.

As staff have shared with us, some of them have immunocompromised family members living with them, cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy, family members suffering from asthma or other respiratory conditions, or other illnesses that (we found out as time went on) render them vulnerable to poorer outcomes if infected with COVID-19. Others may have newborns or young children at home, or pregnant wives, with not enough known about what the effects may be on a pregnant woman and the fetus if she contracted COVID-19.

All these fears have been weighing heavily on essential correctional staff for more than a year now, undermining their health and well-being, and most likely affecting their job performance.

And these worries have only been compounded by grief and a sense of guilt when their worst fears came true, when their housebound family members did become ill with COVID-19, in some cases very seriously or even died, likely due to the staff's COVID-19 exposure at work.

Here are some anonymous and de-identified comments by Correctional Officers on living and working with COVID-19. These comments give us a glimpse into the amount of strain essential correctional employees have been under for months at a time.

"I haven't been able to be around family in over 5 months due to being around hundreds of positive cases and myself becoming COVID-positive and very sick. Then once I was cleared I was mandated 2-3 days a week and felt restless with the quick turn around and not enough sleep. I wasn't well and healthy enough myself, but it was mandatory. My family with health conditions

are still scared to see me or have me come around because they don't want to chance me bringing them COVID, since I'm around it daily. It's very stressful!"

"I contracted corona while working and had to quarantine from my family for 2 weeks, but it was already too late because I already infected my live in partner."

"I could sit at home collecting unemployment and be a million times happier. Instead, I get COVID from work ... and have to live with the guilt and shame of wondering if I'm the reason my ___ died from COVID. Live with the fact I may have killed my _____. And the jail does nothing. I received nothing after my ___ passed away, not even an acknowledgement."

Even less mentioned than these grave concerns, is the impact of COVID-19 on family life as staff desperately attempted to prevent contaminating their household family members. Examples include staff following rigorous decontamination routines when they get home, not hugging family members, or staying away from their families for weeks and even for months at a time, living in their garage or in RVs, and spending holidays together online. The strain of having to apply these measures and the impact on emotional intimacy can be hard to fathom.

"Since the pandemic started, when returning home from work, I've had to enter my home through my garage, remove my uniform in my garage, and wash it separately from all other clothes (then sanitize my washer afterwards) in order to combat spreading it to my family. This practice alone is stressful. Not to mention having to distance myself from my family and my family from other people (both in my household and outside my household), i.e. afraid to hug or kiss my wife or children or take them to visit any family members out of fear of spreading it to them. I've been uninvited from holidays, small gatherings, and many other things specially because of where I work. ... It's one thing to deal with the stress of being a CO and risk my well-being daily, but now we risk our families' well-being by potentially exposing them to Covid-19."

"Work has affected my home life more than management knows. I have not slept in the same bed with my wife in almost a year. I get undressed in my garage. My work uniforms stay in the garage until I wash them all together. I then sterilize the washer before it can be used again."

"I'm high risk for COVID-19. My family members are also very high risk. Additionally one family member has a compromised immune system. To safeguard them, upon arrival at home after work, I strip naked on my porch, place all clothing in a garbage bag before entering my home. Then immediately wash clothes and take a shower. I have not hugged or kissed my family since this pandemic started and I sleep alone."

"Since this whole thing began I've had to spend extra time away from my family to make sure that they are protected. I have to change out of my work uniform and boots before entering my house. I have to run directly into the shower before greeting my wife and children. I have to stay away from some family members because of where I work and how easily they virus spreads there."

"I had COVID-19 that I can guarantee came from working on a COVID unit, and I spent Christmas alone at home and missed everything. I had to just talk on the phone with my family so I didn't expose them."

"I caught COVID from an inmate that the jail knew was positive. Then had to be quarantined in a trailer in my driveway over Christmas. I watched my family have Christmas on FaceTime."

And due to no longer being able to operate as a team at home because of the COVID-19 distancing, it was even more of a burden for families with children to navigate the responsibilities of assisting them with their online schoolwork, and/or to find childcare services. This of course was magnified for single parents and for those who were required to work the night shift.

“Lots of changes are happening in everyone's lives. School for our kids especially. The kids are home now and childcare has become very difficult.”

“Many of us have trouble with mandates due to childcare. Times are different with having to homeschool, and to find a daycare that will take toddlers is very hard or impossible. Yet management wants to discipline you for not taking a mandated due to childcare. Times are not the same when we first signed up for the job.”

All these challenges have resulted in essential staff feeling overwhelmed, helpless, taken for granted, and wondering if the paycheck and the benefits are worth dealing with such high degrees of strain with no clear end in sight. And in some cases, it resulted in correctional employees leaving the profession.

“I will be leaving my career in corrections sooner rather than later as risking my life is not worth it.”

“I used to be DOC proud and now I'm looking for a new job so I can actually spend time with my family.”

What can correctional agencies do to support their staff under these circumstances?

Here are some suggestions:

Ensure that staff have access to sufficient and current (not expired) PPE, such as N95 masks, goggles, cleaning supplies, hand sanitizer, and gloves, and that these are used as recommended by CDC.

Ensure COVID-related policies that aim to prevent virus transmission are followed by both staff and offenders.

Rotate staff out of COVID-19 units and hospital transport positions.

Regularly thank staff for their sacrifices due to the COVID-19 threat and consequent restrictions, and validate their ordeal and struggles.

Ask about the staff's families' health.

Provide staff with tools for anxiety management, such as mindfulness practices, and provide them with short online training and literature that they can take home to their families.

Consider offering essential staff hazard pay when they work in housing units or do hospital transports.

You may have your own suggestions as well as to how a correctional agency can assist their essential staff during this time. If so, we'd love to hear them. Please send them to us at <https://desertwaters.com/admin-contact-page/>. Or you may want to share with us how your agency has been supporting its employees during these challenging times.

In our next issue we plan to print what some correctional agencies have been doing to support their staff during the pandemic.

And, in closing, here are the thoughts of one correctional officer about the subject:

“I would just like to say that while our governor issued a stay at home order we had no choice but to go to work. We didn't get to say we would like to stay home because we are afraid of getting sick and dying and absolutely terrified of getting our family members sick or possibly causing them to die. Nobody asked us how we felt. We were expected to show up to work. And we have. Day in and day out. People talk about essential workers and they talk about nurses and police officers. We don't get recognized. The public doesn't have to deal with what happens on the other side of those walls. And the politicians don't care to know what happens as long as they can operate our facilities as cheaply as possible without any negative publicity and without any regard for the health and safety of those of us that walk in to prison every day not only to work around murderers and rapists, but also risk bringing COVID home to our families. I'm not

saying we should have a parade. But I do believe that (staff) needs to be compensated financially for what we have endured over the last year. We signed up for a job that involves more risk than most. We could be murdered on any given day as we were reminded by the recent murder of _____ at the hands of an inmate. But we understood we would be compensated for that risk when we took the job. Well, now we are dealing with even more risk. And that risk comes from being exposed to COVID because of our job and possibly causing our own death or the death of our family members. And I believe that because we are now enduring more risk we need to be compensated to reflect that.”

The Man Next Door By the Old Screw

The Old Screw left this world on the 18th of April 2021. The Old Screw was the pen name of Wes Connett who, after he retired, served as a DWCO volunteer from 2005 on, writing articles for the Correctional Oasis and operating as a peer supporter on our hotline, the Corrections Ventline. Wes worked for over 35 years in corrections, all in penitentiaries in Missouri, Kansas and Colorado. He was proud of his profession to the end. He said that the secret of his successful career was that he treated everyone with respect, even when he had to confront them or deny a request. Wes loved mentoring new staff, especially new Officers, and was delighted when they had successful correctional careers. And even though he retired with the rank of a Lieutenant, he always remained a Correctional Officer at heart. This short article, which in many ways describes him, is reprinted from the June 2007 issue of the Correctional Oasis.

The man next door was a strange one. He was quiet, and on the outside appeared to be the same as you and me. Yet there were signs that he was different.

When I talked to him he never looked me in the eye. Instead, he kept looking all around him, checking out everything that was going on.

I wondered about this man with the guarded look and some sadness in his eyes. We went out to eat one time. He was almost rude in making sure he sat with his back to a wall where he could see all entryways.

As I grew to know and understand this man I couldn't help but think, "He sure acts strange, yet he seems to be so nice!" He was gentle with children and animals. With grown-ups he was sometimes short, gruff.

Then one day I found out why this man was the way he was.

He told me some things about his work and I thought, "How can he go into that place every day and do his job? How can anyone do that job?"

He was the first Prison Officer I had ever met. He told me that even women worked in there around killers and rapists. I wondered, "How can they do that and remain human?"

That day I knew then that I had met a unique person. Not some fake who brags about having a dangerous job, but one who did his job with no fanfare or glory. And it made me proud to call that Corrections Officer my friend.

Upcoming Online DWCO Instructor Trainings

"From Corrections Fatigue to Fulfillment™" Nov-Dec 2021

https://desertwaters.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/CF2F-online-flyer-Apr-Nov-Dec-2021.opt_.pdf

"Correctional Family Wellness™" July 2021

https://desertwaters.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/CFW-Flyer.2021.opt_.pdf

"True Grit: Building Resilience in Corrections Professionals™"

https://desertwaters.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/TG_T4T_Online_2021_b.pdf

IN MEMORIAM

Wes Connett, Lieutenant, Colorado Department of Corrections (retired)
Mark Elam, Corrections Officer Putnam County, Florida
John Hubbard, Douglas County Department of Corrections, and Sarpy County Jail, Nebraska
Christopher Wilson Knight, Jail Deputy, Bibb County, Georgia
Shane Owens, Detention Sergeant, Broward County Sheriff's Office, Florida

Quote of the Month

“Free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having.” ~ C.S. Lewis

Desert Waters Correctional Outreach, Inc., is a non-profit corporation which helps correctional agencies counter Corrections Fatigue in their staff by cultivating a healthier workplace climate and a more engaged workforce through targeted skill-based training and research.

Many Thanks

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DWCO Mission

Advancing the well-being of correctional staff and their families, and the health of correctional agencies,
through data-driven, skill-based training

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