

19
YEARS

HELPING CORRECTIONAL AGENCIES BECOME WORKPLACES OF CHOICE!

CORRECTIONAL OASIS

A Desert Waters Publication

JULY 2022

From The Director's Desk

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A non-profit for the health of correctional agencies, staff and families

FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

At Desert Waters we often talk about trauma, given how prevalent traumatic experiences are in the course of corrections work.

However, we also talk a lot about post-traumatic growth, the new life that can spring forth as a result of choices we make in response to trauma we experienced.

Let me give you an example of post-traumatic growth.

A friend, who was a helping professional, lost a loved one in a horrid accident. He was left deeply scarred by what happened, and by the fact that he proved powerless to stop it.

My friend could have chosen to remain bitter, angry, and emotionally disconnected as a result of this traumatic incident. But even though his heart was shattered in a million pieces, he eventually chose a healthy spiritual path and psychological means of healing, sometimes taking one step forward and two steps back during that process. My friend told me that as he set his mind to continue on this arduous journey, he noticed that an unexpected transformation began to happen in him, ever so gradually.

Prior to suffering that traumatic loss and working through it to some extent, he felt that he could never truly relate to grieving or traumatized people. However, after the accident that stretched him to what felt like his breaking point, it was as if when his emotional heart was put together again, it was enlarged, even though it still showed where the breaking had happened. His capacity for compassion was expanded, and he became able to resonate and "connect" with others who are hurting at depths he had never known before.

Although he would have never chosen the means that got him to that end – the “end” being his increased ability to empathize with and speak comfort to people – he recognized that he became far more understanding of others and far more effective as an agent of mercy and healing. My friend was grateful that something beautiful came out of his devastating loss and trauma.

In this issue of the *Correctional Oasis*, among other articles, we once again address learning effective ways to deal with trauma, and we emphasize the invaluable transformation of post-traumatic growth.

May we not waste our sorrows. Or, as we like to say at Desert Waters, less formally and less reverently, let's turn our life's manure to fertilizer.

Caterina Spinaris

THE RESEARCH BENCH – POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH

BY GREGORY MORTON, M.SC.

The Research Bench is a semi-regular column in the Correctional Oasis that reviews academic research and then discusses how the scientific conclusions relate to the corrections profession.

Desert Waters has built all of its programs on a research-based foundation. As guided by the Ph.D. perspective of its founder, Caterina Spinaris, Desert Waters' deliverables are, first and foremost, research based. The actual program content is purposefully translated to the practical, day-to-day corrections world, but the sources are scientific. The Research Bench continues in that vein.

One area of research that sometimes catches people by surprise concerns the positive personal growth possibilities that can emerge following traumatic experiences.

We are all very familiar with negative, emotionally troubling post-traumatic outcomes. The acronym PTSD for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder has become part of our common vocabulary, serving as a standard for signifying long lasting and negative personality changes.

In contrast, we do occasionally try to remind ourselves that “What doesn’t kill us only makes us stronger,” or, “If we can do this, we can do anything.” In fact, the title of the 1996 research on what is now known as Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG) is “The positive legacy of trauma.”¹

This refers to our character development - to becoming more mature and more beautiful as people as a result of how we respond to suffering, horror, hurt and loss.

In the [June 2022 issue of the Correctional Oasis](#), Jeffrey Rude offered his story of resilience and

growth after his assault at work. His article is an example of what Post-Traumatic Growth can look like for a correctional worker.

When I cover this concept in presentations, I frequently use this moment to stop and say, “Pull out your phones. On whatever source you use, enter these two names, ‘Tedeschi and Calhoun.’ Once you have done that, you now have everything I am going to talk about. They are the originators of the concept of Post-Traumatic Growth.”

And since (a) you have all the scientific explanations at your fingertips, and (b) the term Post-Traumatic Growth pretty much defines itself, I will now focus on a couple of basic questions.

Question 1: Is PTG the opposite of PTSD? No, it’s not. In fact, both can co-exist in each of us. As a religious leader notes in a 2020 article, “If I could have my son back, if I could choose, I would forego all of the spiritual growth and depth which has come my way because of our experiences. . . . But I cannot choose.”

And from a scientific literature review on this concept, we read that “research has moved past the

idea that PTSD symptoms and perceptions of positive post-trauma changes [PTG] are at opposite ends of a continuum.” The psychological injury and the character growth can share space in our thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and memories, and at the same time. Both start with the same traumatic event.

“Growth, however, does not occur as a direct result of trauma. It is the individual's struggle with the new reality in the aftermath of trauma that is crucial in determining the extent to which post traumatic growth occurs.”

And while this wording has been edited slightly in the last 25 years, these five concepts remain the defining characteristics of PTG.

SO WHAT: To quote Tedeschi and Calhoun one more time: “Growth, however, does not occur as a direct result of trauma. It is the individual's struggle with the new reality in the aftermath of trauma that is crucial in determining the extent to which post traumatic growth occurs.”

In other words, what doesn't kill us CAN make us stronger, but that's not guaranteed. We have to . . . well, work at it. Such work may involve cognitive and emotional reframing, acceptance of what cannot be changed, and perhaps processing material using a spiritual lens and age-old teachings about human suffering.

To identify Post-Traumatic Growth in yourself after suffering trauma of some sort, you may want to start by examining the five domains above.

Which domain seems to best correlate with any post-trauma growth experience you have had, no matter how small? Choose one that resonates with you: What you are grateful for? A person who helped you? A strength that you did not have before? A new goal that you have embarked on as a result of your traumatic experiences? A spiritual awareness gained?

Question 2: What does PTG look like in our lives? According to Tedeschi and Calhoun's foundational 1996 research, PTG is generally witnessed in five belief and behavioral domains:

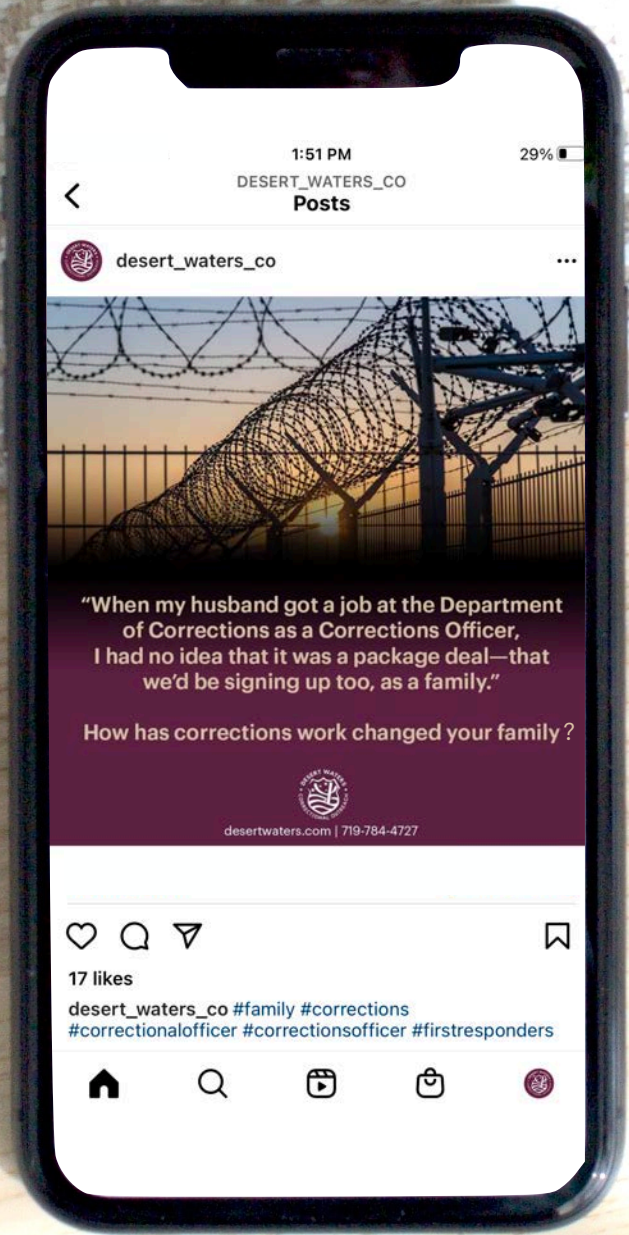
1. greater appreciation of life and changed sense of priorities;
2. warmer, more intimate relationships with others;
3. a greater sense of personal strength;
4. recognition of new possibilities or paths for one's life; and
5. spiritual development.

Now streamline the gratitude, strength, person, or belief into a single positive sentence that you can repeat to yourself whenever you want.

When I tell myself, "After that terrifying encounter, and in spite of it, I have learned to talk to anybody, even to someone other people fear, and I help keep people safe when I do that," I instantly feel stronger.

Gregory Morton started his career at the Oregon State Penitentiary (OSP) as an academic counselor in the mid-1970s, and then served as OSP's Staff Training Coordinator for eleven years. He was the department's Staff Training/Professional Development Administrator, and Labor Relations Administrator until retirement in 2009. He has been a contributor to Desert Waters' efforts and a Master Instructor of Desert Waters courses since 2013. He holds a Master's degree in Industrial/Organizational Psychology, concentrating on the consequences of work-related trauma and chronic stress, and the rapidly expanding field of human neuroscience. Concern for the health and skills of the corrections workforce has been his motivation





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IMPROVING THE WELLBEING OF CORRECTIONS PROFESSIONALS: IMPLEMENTING DESERT WATERS' NEWEST CURRICULUM

BY DARIA MAYOTTE, MA

Due to repeated exposure to all-too-common incidents of violence, serious injury, and death within correctional systems, a large percentage of corrections staff suffer from varying degrees of psychological trauma. In some respects, the environment can be worse than a war zone, due to the knowledge that staff are daily returning, quite literally, to an environment rife with danger and to the “scene of the crime,” never knowing what unforeseen incident their workday might hold.

How does one cope as the first to arrive at the scene of a suicide of an incarcerated individual? How does one manage the emotional aftermath of a coworker’s assault, especially when, typically, the staff are required to write reports and then respond to the next incident or need? What fears haunt you when urine, feces and other bodily fluids are thrown in your face – fluids which can expose you to serious communicable diseases in addition to leaving a psychological impact? How are you to move forward following an assault that could leave you physically altered for life? Sadly, these are not rare events.



Further complicating these traumatic experiences is the fact that corrections staff are steeped in a culture of “toughness.” Admitting that such incidents might bother them may be quickly perceived as “weakness” by colleagues. Psychological walls of self-protection may keep staff from seeking desperately needed help. And this “false resilience” can have detrimental consequences including anxiety, depression, PTSD, and physical ailments, among other concerns.

In mid-2021 Desert Waters was awarded a federal contract to develop a training curriculum for a large prison and parole system in a northeastern state. This has been an in-depth process of literature review; curriculum writing; multiple revisions; graphic design; recording and editing videos; developing instructor guides, participant manuals, appendices, and guidelines for teaching (and particularly for presenting) emotionally-laden material; compiling and mailing materials; interacting with the State Corrections Department and the Office of Victim Services; and training Desert Waters’ Master Instructors to deliver this course. In addition, material was developed to train prospective instructors in classroom management guidelines, with a particular emphasis on training emotionally-laden material to an audience steeped in traumatic exposure.

“One of the best trainings I have received in this department.”

The final product is our brand-new course entitled “Improving the Wellbeing of Corrections Professionals: Understanding, Acknowledging, and Overcoming Traumatic Stress™” (IWCP). This is Desert Waters’ most comprehensive product to date on addressing occupational psychological trauma in the career field of corrections. And this is the first

time that such specialized material is being presented to staff at this large Department of Corrections.

Through Part One of this course, participants learn to define psychological trauma and the impact it has on corrections staff; what post-traumatic symptoms they should be alert to; how trauma affects functioning; and how incarcerated individuals are also impacted by trauma. Additionally, Part Two of the course journeys with participants on strategies for appropriately responding to trauma; how to plan for continually returning to dangerous environments; implementation of preventative measures; and best practices for managing the incarcerated in regard to their trauma as well.

Although the IWCP content can be quite “heavy” at times, the course is also interspersed with many quotes directly from corrections staff - leveling the playing field,

assisting in building community among participants, and making it far more personal than it might otherwise feel for this type of material. There are also opportunities for quiet reflection, interaction with other participants, and moments for actually practicing in real time some of the suggested strategies.

Additionally, Part Two of the content is entirely devoted to suggested solutions for managing

the impact of trauma in healthy, research-based ways.

It has been a joy and an honor to begin rolling out this much-needed curriculum in person since April, when four of our Desert Waters’ Master Instructors traveled across the country to facilitate two

The content of the IWCP course is designed to help correctional staff be more **trauma-informed**— to learn more about how trauma can affect people. It is also designed to be **trauma-responsive**—to help staff become more familiar with what they can do if they are negatively affected by exposure to trauma.

Goals of the IWCP course are:

- educate correctional professionals regarding the variety of ways in which staff wellness is negatively impacted by exposure to occupational trauma, and
- present data-driven strategies for potentially preventing, reducing and overcoming distressing experiences related to traumatic exposure, possibly resulting in increased likelihood of protecting and promoting staff wellness.

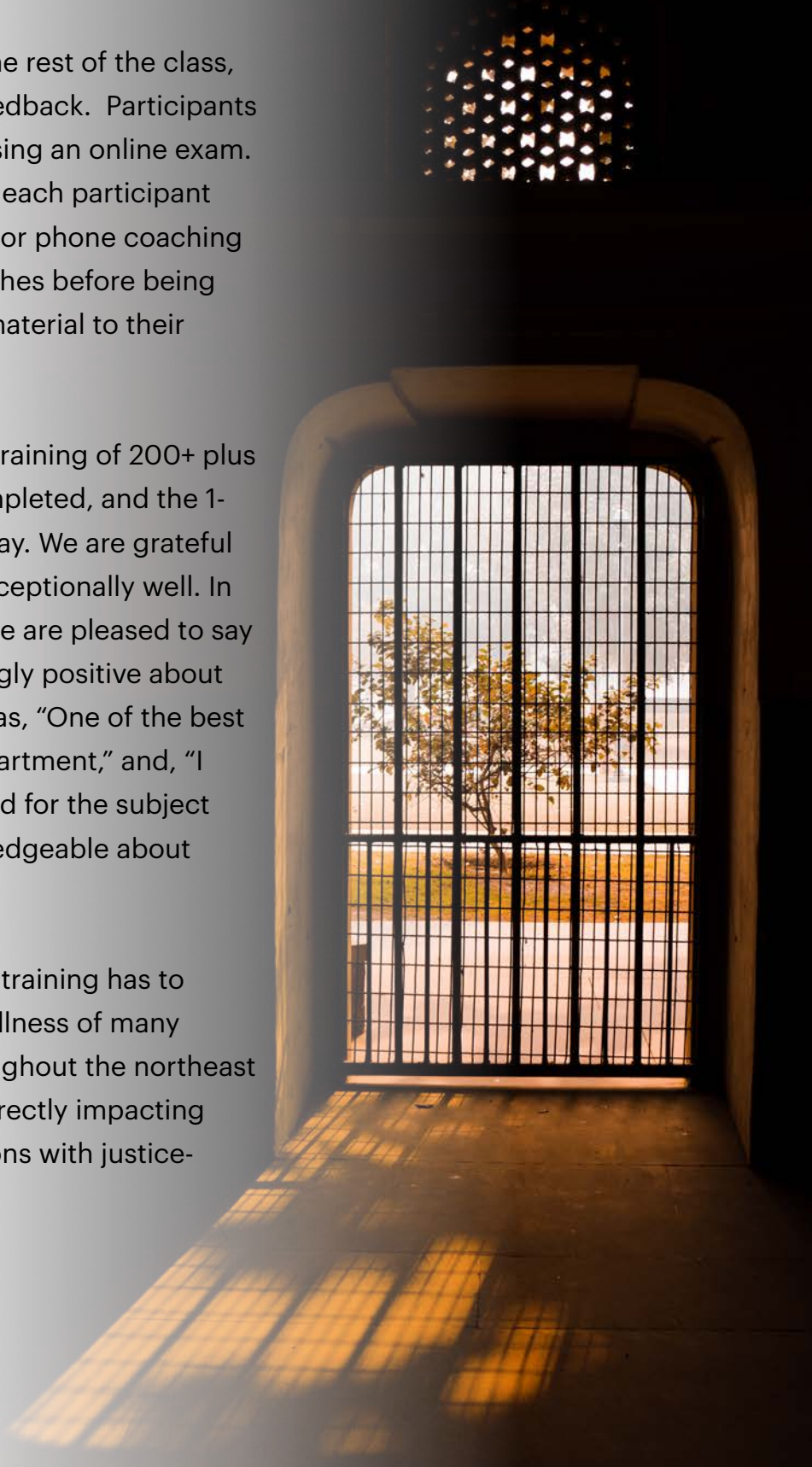
Please note that the IWCP course is not designed or intended to replace getting help from mental health or medical professionals for trauma issues or any other type of psychological, physical or spiritual difficulty or distress.

classes of approximately 30 corrections staff each. Since then, Desert Waters has trained a total of 208 corrections staff who will in turn train thousands of coworkers throughout their state! This IWCP Training the Trainer course starts with 40 hours of in-person training. As the 40-hour week draws to a close, each of these participants teaches part of the material

back to the Master Instructor and the rest of the class, receiving further instruction and feedback. Participants finish the week by successfully passing an online exam. In the weeks following this training, each participant then schedules two hours of virtual or phone coaching with one of our Desert Waters' coaches before being fully certified to present the IWCP material to their colleagues throughout the state.

The first phase - the 40-hour IWCP training of 200+ plus instructor candidates has been completed, and the 1-on-1 coaching sessions are under way. We are grateful to say that the process has gone exceptionally well. In reviewing the course evaluations, we are pleased to say that participants were overwhelmingly positive about the course, giving comments such as, "One of the best trainings I have received in this department," and, "I loved the passion the instructors had for the subject matter. They were extremely knowledgeable about everything covered in the course."

We are thrilled for the potential this training has to positively impact the health and wellness of many thousands of corrections staff throughout the northeast United States and beyond, also indirectly impacting their family lives and their interactions with justice-involved individuals.



SEDUCTION'S SLIPPERY SLOPE

BY CATERINA SPINARIS, PHD



A dramatic jail break occurred in Alabama a couple of months ago, when a murder suspect escaped with the help of the jail's assistant director. How could that happen? We will never know what transpired to lead to the relationship between these two individuals and the escape. However, the article below presents some general thoughts about such a process.

One of the greatest sources of demoralization for corrections staff of all disciplines is "losing" one of their own to justice-involved individuals. What I am referring to is the crossing of professional boundaries by staff in ways that violate policy and/or break the law.

Why and how do these violations happen? And what can be done to help render staff immune to them?

A common boundary violation in corrections is staff befriending justice-involved individuals. This "overfamiliarity" may or may not involve sexual/romantic involvement. It may result in staff turning a blind eye to incarcerated individuals' rule violations, the introduction of contraband into facilities (tobacco and other drugs, cell phones, weapons, etc.), or staff acting as

messengers between incarcerated individuals and people on the outside.

In discussions of professional boundaries, psychologists talk about the slippery slope, the boundary erosion between psychotherapists and their clients. This term refers to ethical or criminal violations which may be small initially, but which might eventually progress to major infractions.

How might the process of sliding down the slippery slope play out in corrections settings, including prisons, probation and parole?

Corrections staff do not start out their careers intending to cross professional lines with justice-involved individuals. The early stages of professional boundary erosion may seem quite harmless. "I just said, 'Thank you' when he complimented me about my haircut, and I smiled. What's wrong with that?" Or, "Oh, I'll go ahead and give him an extra piece of chicken. It's just food. He's been so helpful to me. And he looks like he can use some extra food." Or, "I'll mail her letter to her kids, like she's begging me to. It's harmless, and nobody has to know about it." Or, "I'll bring him the piece of religious literature he asked for. He seems so sincere in his new faith."

Baby steps down the slippery slope are usually taken without stopping to consider potential consequences, and without consulting with peers and supervisors. Even worse, sometimes

these first steps down are taken willfully in spite of dire warnings by coworkers.

Why and how might this happen? Justice-involved individuals, stripped of power due to their incarceration status, seek to devise ways to get leverage in the "system." (Seeking some control in one's circumstances is not at all unusual. Most of us, if not all of us, do that regularly.) An obvious way for justice-involved individuals to gain some power is to tap into the staff's authority. To achieve that goal, justice-involved individuals continuously study and inquire about staff, always looking for "chinks" in everyone's armor. These "chinks" may be feelings of insecurity and unworthiness, anxiety about finances, loneliness, or a sense of lack of appreciation by coworkers, among others.

How might some justice-involved individuals manage to work the staff's vulnerabilities against them?

In the case of sexual/romantic seduction, for example, a justice-involved individual might initially offer a low-key, "Oh, by the way" personal compliment to a staff member. On its own, the comment appears to be innocent. Unless one is vigilant, the flattering statement does not raise red flags. The justice-involved individual, on the other hand, is observing the staff member's reaction to his comment. If she responds to the ego stroke with even a hint of positive emotion—such as blushing, a smile, or

a giggle—the justice-involved individual knows he “scored”, he “got to” that staff member.

By that I mean that the justice-involved individual’s carefully guided “missile” has managed to burrow beneath the staff member’s professional armor and struck her on a personal level, satisfying a personal emotional need and longing. That is the level where our needs for acceptance and worth reside. At that place in our soul people are not classified as justice-involved individuals vs. staff, but rather as people who satisfy our needs vs. people who don’t. And the persons who gratify us are granted preferential treatment. We are motivated to try to get along with them and not to alienate them, because, after all, they are “feeding” us emotionally.

When staff members allow themselves to receive ego strokes from justice-involved individuals, they have stepped onto the slippery slope. They are starting to be seduced. They may end up becoming lenient and friendly with these incarcerated individuals, favoring them over the rest of the incarcerated population in their facility. As the pattern of seduction advances, professionalism unravels accordingly. Staff members may begin to feel emotionally closer to the justice-involved individuals in question - more understood, valued or admired by them —than to coworkers or loved ones at home. They might develop romantic feelings for them, derive pleasure from interactions with

them, and actively seek to be in their presence. They may be drawn to the excitement involved in finding ways to secretly communicate with them.

Unless staff ask for help at this critical time, they run the risk of becoming a correctional statistic. They may become sexually involved with justice-involved individuals, and/or bring in contraband for them, and/or even try to help them escape.

Alternately, justice-involved individuals may “read” staff members by, for example, making comments about money and observing what the staff’s response is. If a staff member shows signs of anxiety or other emotion when money is mentioned, justice-involved individuals may have identified a potential victim. Carefully placed comments plant seeds in the staff member’s mind about possible “safe” avenues for extra income - “for just one time.” Or justice-involved individuals might stir up staff’s sense of entitlement. “You work so hard, and yet you make so little money. This is a way for you to get a little extra cash to help your family with extra expenses.”

In other cases, staff members may give in to seemingly insignificant demands by justice-involved individuals’ either to get them to go away and stop asking for things, or to gain their cooperation or even protection in violent settings. When the door gets opened a crack, however, the justice-involved individuals make

sure that it stays propped open. Getting the incarcerated even something as seemingly insignificant as an extra packet of salt can progress to providing them with fruit, which later advances to cigarettes, and eventually can culminate to bringing them drugs.

Justice-involved individuals might also target staff members who seem to be “lone wolves” who are rejected by the rest of the pack of staff. The manipulation efforts would again involve flattery - “You’re the best. You’re the only one who’s fair/smart/understanding/professional.” The goal is to offer lonely and disgruntled staff members the semblance of friendship. Vulnerable staff could soon be on a steady diet of ego gratification by justice-involved individuals, and end up feeling obligated to do them favors in return.

The key to keeping staff away from the slippery slope has several components. Here are some:

1. Supervisory staff must ensure that all correctional employees are repeatedly reminded of the stark realities of seduction and manipulation by justice-involved individuals. In conjunction with that, staff need to be able to openly discuss this issue during supervision times, in-services, and continuing education trainings. Sharing with one another about ways staff members identified, exposed and countered potential justice-involved

individual manipulation, would help keep staff away from the slippery slope.

2. Staff need to be alerted against complacency which makes staff believe that “it would not happen to me.” Anyone can be seduced, and justice-involved individuals have time to wear down staff’s resolve. (As the saying goes, “There, but for the grace of God, go I.”) No one is exempt, unless they continually hold themselves accountable for their behavior and even for their thoughts.

3. Staff also need a safety net to fall back on when they realize that they are contemplating committing policy violations. Several options, such as confidential counseling with professionals educated in the corrections culture or confidential peer support, must be in place for them to get preventative help without jeopardizing their careers.

4. Staff are responsible for ensuring that they seal “chinks” in their armor as they become aware of them. This may require a variety of interventions, ranging from asking trusted coworkers to give them feedback about their conduct to seeking counseling to address personal insecurities and psychological needs.

5. Staff are responsible for looking out for one another. If they sense that one of their

team is starting to compromise their professionalism, they need to approach that employee with their concerns and support. If the pattern persists, they have to take it to a higher level, as boundary violations obviously undermine the safety of the entire institution.

We all seem to have a phenomenal ability to deceive ourselves. So, the bottom line is, how could staff tell if they are approaching the slippery slope in their dealings with justice-involved individuals? The easiest diagnostic test is to ask themselves if whatever they contemplate doing with justice-involved individuals is something they would be comfortable discussing with their supervisors or spouses. If they intend to keep their activities secret, then that is sure-fire proof

that they have left the solid professional ground and are about to slide downhill.

Corrections work can be like swimming through shark-infested waters. Staff need to be vigilant and honest with themselves and others. They also need courage and the ability to think on their feet. And they need to keep from being overconfident. If you think you're beyond temptation, watch out!

And one more thing to remember:

Staff need to also be on the lookout for manipulation and seduction by other staff. This is a sad reality, and the subject of a future article.

TESTIFYING AT ONE VOICE UNITED'S BLUE RIBBON COMMISSION

BY DARIA MAYOTTE, MA

On May 12-13 Desert Waters' Founding Director Caterina Spinaris had the privilege of participating in One Voice United's (OVU) Blue Ribbon Commission in Washington, D.C. - **A Hearing on Correctional Staff Wellness** - in which she testified before 14 Commissioners and a diverse crowd of +/- 150 attendees. Alongside other distinguished representatives, Caterina shared from her research, her clinical experience, her training experience, and perhaps most importantly from her heart, as she highlighted the continuing plight of corrections staff throughout the nation.

The purpose of this first-of-its-kind Blue Ribbon Commission was to shed light on the deadly wellness crisis sweeping through our correctional system, yet not recognized by most Americans. OVU's goal was that more stakeholders would begin to recognize and address this crisis by listening to first-hand testimony of officers, staff, and stress management experts in the field while also giving officers and staff the opportunity to tell their stories. The testimonies and responses from Commissioners will become a national report with recommendations to address the correctional wellness crisis and build on One Voice United's Wellness White Paper **"I Am Not Okay."**



IN MEMORIAM

Aida Costa-Ouillette
Correction Officer (retired)
Bristol County Sheriff's Office, Massachusetts

Rhema Harris
Corrections Officer
St. Joseph County Jail, Indiana

Edward Roman
Correction Officer,
New York City Department of Correction

Daniel Sincavage
Senior Corrections Officer,
New Jersey Department of Corrections

Jeremiah Story
Detention Officer,
Perry County Sheriff's Office, Arkansas

Quote of the Month

"And yet I decide, every day, to set
aside what I can do best and
attempt what I do very clumsily -
open myself to the frustrations and
failures of loving,
daring to believe that failing in love
is better than succeeding in pride."

Eugene Peterson

MEET THE CORRECTIONAL OASIS TEAM



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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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