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YEARS

HELPING CORRECTIONAL AGENCIES BUILD A MORE ENGAGED WORKFORCE!

CORRECTIONAL OASIS

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

FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

We are pleased to present you with a truly international perspective in this month's Correctional Oasis, with fascinating and invaluable input about corrections workers and corrections systems from sources in Norway, the United Kingdom, Israel, Italy, and South Africa.

During the last several years, much has been said about the Norwegian corrections model. Decision-makers from several States in the U.S. have visited Norway in order to learn about prison reform in that country, and to determine which elements of that model can be transplanted or emulated in the U.S.

The account given here by Tor Erik Larsen, a corrections union leader in Norway, offers many illuminating details and points to ponder. Two key specific details that stood out for me were: (a) the education requirements for Corrections Officers – 2 years of paid academy training, and (b) the correctional employees to incarcerated persons ratio.

It is not hard to see how such practices and numbers can shape corrections systems for the better, “humanizing” the incarceration process and restoring dignity to both the staff (especially the custody staff) and those incarcerated.

Caterina Spinaris

FINDING A BETTER WAY FORWARD

BY TOR ERIK LARSEN

This is the testimony offered by Tor Erik Larsen, Norwegian union leader, at the [Blue Ribbon Commission Hearing](#) on the Correctional Staff Wellness Crisis hosted by One Voice United in Washington, DC, on the 13th of May 2022. This testimony is a captivating account of the evolution of the Norwegian incarceration model, and some of its main ingredients. It is reproduced here with permission, with minor edits.



First of all, my background as a Corrections Officer in Norway, then a union rep and now a union leader, does not make me an expert on change, but it has given me a unique opportunity to be involved in many different change processes, both on the individual and organizational levels. All my years of service have been either as a part of the rank and file or as a union rep, and it is in that capacity that I have been directly involved in so many processes of change. I haven't always loved the process. It hasn't always worked perfectly. But, change is the one thing that we can count on. How we relate to it is what will define us as leaders.

Let me take a step back and tell you a bit about Norway, the country I come from, and about the Nordic model. It may sound to some like I come from a different planet, but believe me it's just a quick plane flight away.

Workers in Norway have a constitutional right to influence their own workplace. There is even a special law (the work environment act) to secure workers' safety and their right to be part of the decision making through union representation.

There is a written agreement, called the Basic Agreement, between the workers' unions and the government that states how the unions and the employers have to work together to create the best result. And in public service the best result will always be to deliver the best possible service as efficiently and cost-effectively as possible.

I am not here to tell you that the U.S. should copy the Norwegian/Nordic model, but it has some valid points that I have seen firsthand can improve almost any private business or public service sector anywhere in the world.

First and foremost, there is a fundamental link between employer and worker, through the unions. The Basic Agreement is a tool to prevent wasteful conflict between workers and employers; it doesn't eliminate tension, but it does reduce waste and distraction.

*The Nordic model has many important points, but the most important thing to understand is the essential purpose of the agreement, which is that **through the model, both employer and the unions have entered into the agreement with the purpose of creating the best possible basis for cooperation.***

Along with the work environment act, this agreement is the basis for worker influence on our own workplaces. It is meant to ensure the workers have actual influence on our own workplace, how work is organized and how the

method and approach to the work is developed.

The agreement is to be used as a tool to develop leadership, workers' influence and the work environment.

The model gives every worker the possibility for both professional and personal growth.

The model provides the opportunity to develop mutual cooperation between the employer and the unions, so that it can contribute to a flexible and user-friendly service, with a good work



environment, good leadership, better results and good relations with society (users).

To achieve this, unions and employers regularly meet to focus on three topics:

1. Information – there is an obligation for the employer to inform the unions of anything that will influence the workers, and the obligation is mutual. The unions also have to inform the employer of their activity that could or would influence the employer. Any issue that could end up as a discussion, or as a negotiation, has to be disclosed here, before it can be discussed or negotiated.

2. Discussion – there is a long list of activities that the employer has to discuss with the unions before he or she can make a decision. In fact, there is also a possibility for the unions to demand a discussion before the employer makes a decision. Budget, building projects, business plans, training, etc., are all examples of matters that have to be discussed before a decision is made. The list goes on, but because discussions can be demanded by the union, it is not a complete list. It's not necessary to reach an agreement in each case, but it is important that the union's voice is heard. It's also a great opportunity for the employer to troubleshoot his or her own ideas.

3. Negotiations – unlike discussions, the list for negotiations is exhaustive, and all elements that can be negotiated have to be within the

employer's area of authority, within the approved budget, and in line with the instructions and the political priorities that have been determined for the business. A change in the organizational chart or an increase in staffing are examples of cases that have to be negotiated.

This is a very rough summary of the agreement. And, I haven't said anything about what happens if the employer and unions can't agree or what if one of the parties breaches the basic agreement. And I could say a lot. But, for today's purposes, all I need to say is that the point of the agreement is to further cooperation between unions and employers, and to make sure that we provide the best service possible, create the best outcomes, and do it efficiently.

Before I came to the U.S. to testify at this commission, I had a talk with the assistant director of corrections in Norway, I told him that I was coming here to talk about the basic agreement as an instrument for making a better way forward and that I wondered what he would say if he was here.

Right away he said, "I am all for it." After a while he said, "I don't think that involving the unions in the decision-making makes it flawless, but it certainly gives me a better basis for making better decisions. And the fact that the unions sign off on a decision, gives it more legitimacy with the workers. The bigger the decision, the

more important it is to have talked it through with the unions before the decision is made.”

So what, if anything, does this have to do with change and finding a better way forward? Well, whether you want to improve staff health and wellness, inmate conditions, or the financial structure and cost of corrections, you have to ask the questions, ‘What led to this? Why are we here? And, are we satisfied with the way things are currently?’

In the 1950s these questions were asked in Norway, and that’s what has led us to where we are today – a total rehabilitation of how we thought of corrections.

To improve staff health and wellness we realized that we also have to improve living conditions in prison, and we had to look at the financial cost in a different way (investing versus saving).

The commission that asked these questions in Norway understood that to improve the impact prisons have on everyone they touch, the government had to actually invest more money directly into corrections, but in the long term the savings would make the total cost of corrections lower. With more money, the staff in corrections could get better training, have better staffing plans and ratios, and work with more rehabilitative measures and prepare the inmates for meeting life on the outside in a much better way. Increased staffing gives you

better work hours, better possibilities for training and continuing education, better possibilities to positively influence the inmates and get to know them as people and not just inmates. But all that costs more. All that requires treating the people who work in the prisons as the true professionals we are.

Crucial to succeed in this model is the focus on dynamic security. At its core it made the staff feel more secure at work. Next to dynamic security, we use the term static and organizational security.

The dynamic security complements static elements (walls and fences around the prison, cameras and more) and the organizational measures (overlap between shifts, time for training staff/inmate ratio, work hours etc.), and consists of dialogue between officer and inmate. The general idea is that if the officer knows the inmate, it’s easier to influence the inmate. And if the inmate trusts the officer it’s less likely that he/she will attack the officer and more likely that the officer can influence the inmate in his or her decision-making. The important thing to remember is that to implement dynamic security, you need both static and organizational security. If all three are not there, it will be impossible to create a safe framework for dynamic work.

In Norway, we come from a history of thinking that incarcerating should be a time for solitary

penance and prayer, and many citizens still think it should be that way.

Today we have evolved from that and we use the principle of normality, which is basically just to try and make life on the inside as similar to life on the outside as possible.

We believe that the deprivation of liberty is the punishment and nothing more. We try to use the time an inmate is incarcerated to make a positive change, so that they are better equipped to live a life without crime when they are released.

It has been a long journey from the 1950s and up to today's correctional principles. One of the main reasons we have been able to make this change is the Basic Agreement and the fact that employer and union have to cooperate in the decision making.

This effort to change has also changed the nature of the job for those of us working in corrections.

First, our training academy programs changed. In the past 70 years, **we have gone from on-the-job-training to a two-year paid academy training.** The academy in Norway combines academics with practical training, and it has one year of mandatory service after you graduate.

The ratio of those who are incarcerated to officers differs, but the staffing ratio is one staff member to one incarcerated person.

Small but important things like the "overlap" between when officers leave from one shift and arrive for the next shift, is a part of the organizational security. This is important so the officers can discuss follow-up on certain inmates and do a general run up of the day. Information is important and saves lives.

We have not reached our goals yet, and corrections in Norway is anything but flawless. But we have made progress. We still have work to do on stress, PTSD and wellness. We have learned a lot from our brothers and sisters here about this issue and our work isn't done. But the expectations and conditions of the incarcerated have changed, and we are safer and more satisfied as a result.

It takes time to reform anything but especially, corrections, because you are not just reforming a sector of public service, you are changing parts of a cultural identity in a nation. To do that, it's important to have as many allies as possible when you start.

This has not been an easy reform, and I don't think it would have been possible without the cooperation between the employer side and the unions to think outside the box, to imagine a different way of doing things and to ensure that those of us who work on the frontlines

everyday have our interests and voices recognized and so that the new system works for us and for everyone it touches.

That cooperation is based on the Basic Agreement as a tool for building cooperation and for facilitating change. It is based on respecting correctional staff, and it is based on a national culture that decided more than 50 years ago to do something different.

So, in closing, when you hear about the Norway model for corrections, remember that what made that a success is the Norway model of co-responsibility and cooperation between unions and employers.

Thank you

Additional details regarding correctional employees to incarcerated persons ratios provided by Mr. Larsen to Desert Waters by email on the 18th of May 2022:

The new standard of overall staff vs. incarcerated persons is 1.1 staff members per incarcerated person. This is a substantial increase from 0.7 staff members per incarcerated person in older facilities. Because the facilities differ in how they are built, it is hard to say exactly what the ratio of incarcerated persons to corrections officers is, but it is somewhere between 10 to 10.5 incarcerated persons to every corrections officer.

“Correctional Workers Concerns” Questionnaire

START

Correctional Workers’ Concerns

Are you concerned that you or other employees at your agency may have been negatively impacted as a result of working in corrections? We invite you to take this anonymous questionnaire as a means of gauging how you or others might be affected by this work.

Please note: This is not a study, and we do not aggregate the anonymous data or perform analyses on them. This is simply for you to do a self-check in order to help increase your awareness about areas where you may potentially need assistance and support.



THE RESEARCH BENCH – INTERNATIONAL FINDINGS

BY GREGORY MORTON, MSc

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 throughout.

Would it surprise you to learn that the stressors you experience in your correctional employment are also found in correctional workers internationally? In other words, that Corrections Fatigue is an international consequence inherent to the profession?

This month we are going to examine three studies that demonstrate that to be true. One is from the United Kingdom, one from Israel, and one from Italy.

Study 1 – From the United Kingdom¹

This quantitative study used an online questionnaire allowing the wellbeing scores of prison officers in the United Kingdom to be compared directly to the scores of other “safety critical” professions.

Three different assessment instruments were used. The first, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) Stress Indicator Tool is a nationally standardized survey that uses a red/yellow/green traffic light guide to measure psychosocial “hazards” in the workplace. The second, the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) measures psychological distress in workers. The third was a job satisfaction questionnaire that assessed both intrinsic (variety, skills required) and extrinsic (pay, work schedule) elements.

In all cases, prison officers scored worse than other comparable job groups, with 6 of the 7 psychosocial hazards on the HSE scoring in the red zone, indicating urgent action is required. These included job demands, job control, management support, and organizational change.

Peer support, the seventh hazard category, scored yellow, indicating definite need for improvement. 72 per cent of the respondents scored the GHQ-12 items above the threshold on anxiety, social dysfunction, and depression, compared to 47 per cent for police officers and 32 per cent for ambulance personnel. The intrinsic and extrinsic job satisfaction scores were lower than other professions as well.



Study 2 – From Israel²

This Israeli research is one I cite quite frequently. Not that it tells us anything we don't already know, but because, (a) part of it is longitudinal, meaning that samples were tested twice to measure changes over time, and (b) it is so well written. Their phrase, "ongoing quasi-traumatic situation" (p. 636), is my favorite description of the inherently stressful prison work routine.

Here, a standardized personality assessment was given to four cohorts: two with 3-4 years between testing upon initial hire and the second assessment (one cohort of COs and a second cohort being a matched sample from other professions), and two at initial hire only – again, one COs and one from other professions. (A cohort means a group.)

The results are easy to describe. "Correctional officers are likely to see the world more negatively, to have more negative feelings and physical symptoms, and to fall ill more frequently" (p. 638).

Additionally, the COs scores became worse at the 3- to 4-year mark from date of hire, in contrast to the non-corrections employees whose scores on anxiety, anger, and depression actually improved after three years of employment in their fields.



Study 3 – From Italy³

This Italian study is a qualitative study, meaning that the results come from direct interviews rather than scored surveys or questionnaires. The interviews were conducted on “the detention block” during working hours, with care taken to “not interfere with the regular job duties” (p. 873).

This allowed the researchers to drill more deeply into employee’s concerns, so that a generic challenge such as “Demanding contact with prisoners” (the most frequent stressor mentioned) could be made more specific: “Feeling overwhelmed by the prisoners’ requests”, and “Management of the emotional reactions and aggressive behavior of the prisoner/s” (p. 876). Sound familiar?

SO WHAT: First of all, be kind, since everyone you work with is carrying a heavy burden. There are all types of reasons that work hours and physical safety are going to be built-in, systemic stressors in a 24/7 correctional setting. But there are no justifiable reasons that peer support and management support should be stressors too. If anything, we should provide the opposite – understanding, encouragement, caring. No one “gets us” like we “get us.” The oasis of support starts with each of us.

Secondly, these studies were conducted by high-ranking universities. At this point, that may be the best news of all. If you have any influence on the research decisions of your agency, I urge you to contact the departments of Criminology, or Psychology, or Occupational Health at your local academic institution, and ask them to study how wellness is impacted in corrections work environments.

No, you probably won’t get good news as the outcome of research studies that assess corrections staff wellbeing. But ignoring a temperature of 103.7 by refusing to use a thermometer doesn’t make the fever go away. And even more than that, finding outcomes that allow you to tailor solutions to the identified needs of your agency is just good problem solving.

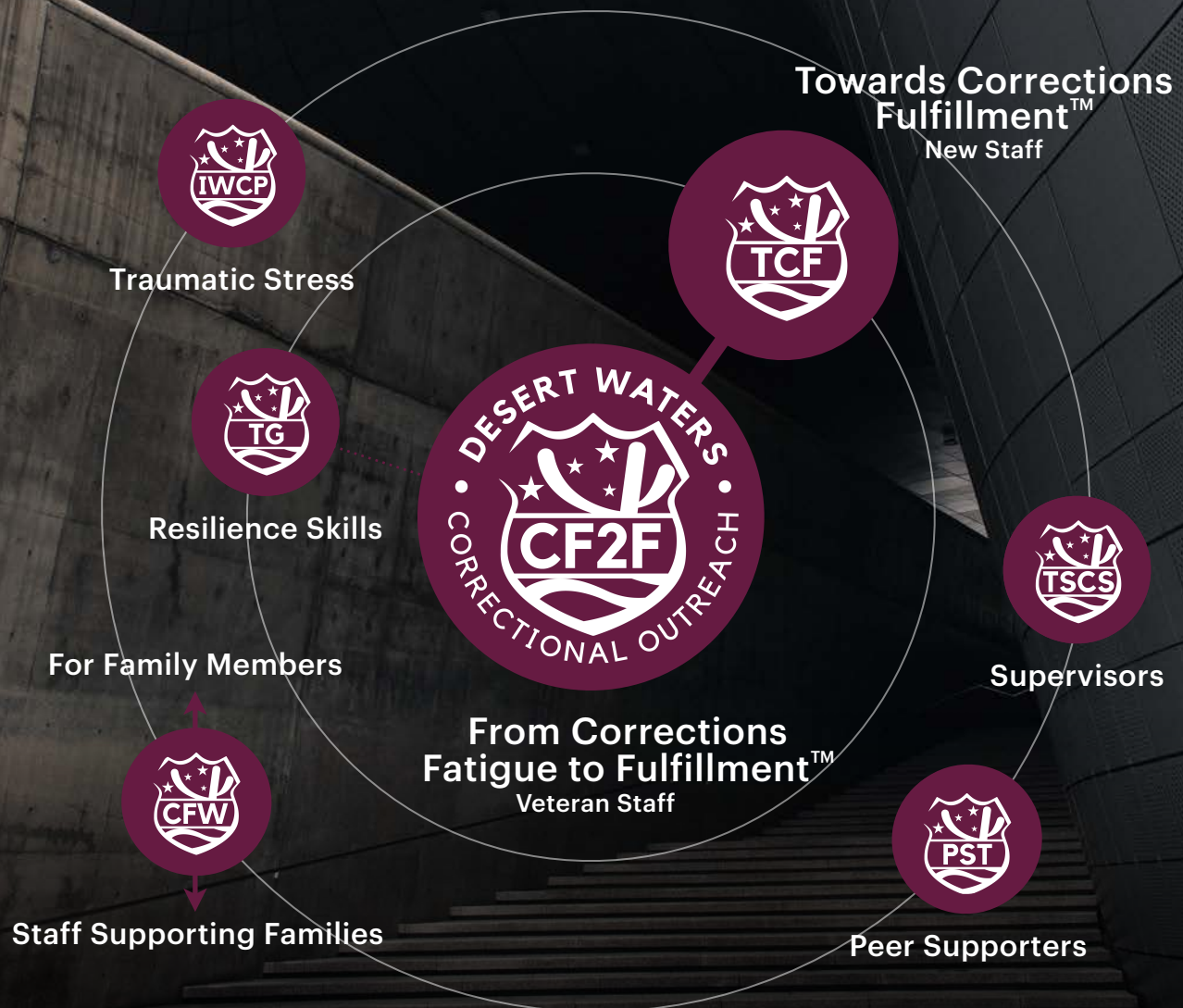
And then, tell us what you learned.

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Desert Waters offers a variety of trainings either for Direct Delivery or Instructor Training to meet a variety of needs that Corrections Staff encounter daily.

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COMPLICATING FACTORS FOR SOUTH AFRICAN CORRECTIONAL STAFF

BY DARIA MAYOTTE, MA

Corrections staff throughout the world face incredible challenges - amazingly similar challenges from country to country in regard to the unique stressors common to the field. Despite the country you select, staff are forced to cope with the fact that prison is a 24/7 operation that is typically well understaffed (with few exceptions). It's a place in which emotions often run quite high and individuals are tested to the limit as to how they will respond to the intensity that is often involved in interactions between staff and the incarcerated; the incarcerated with others incarcerated; and even staff interacting with other staff. These issues can be significantly amplified due to the compiling of traumatic incidents that can be frequent in the arena of corrections.

But are you aware of the additional stressor current to corrections staff in South Africa at this time? It is called "load shedding," and it has been an ongoing problem for many years. Put very simply, there is not enough electricity being generated for the growing population,

and therefore regularly scheduled power outages are common. The severity of these power outages has increased to Stage 6 and is potentially soon moving into Stage 8. This means that South Africans are facing up to 12 hours a day without electricity! You can imagine the implications in regard to refrigeration; heating capabilities (it is winter there now); cooking options; alarm systems (common to many in this high-crime environment); charging phones and other devices to name just a few challenges!


As it relates to corrections staff and the incarceration environment, there are further implications. Although generators are to switch on when the power goes out, there can be concerns there as well. One staff member recently told me that the generator switch at their facility is broken. As a result, when the power is out not only do things like office work and meal preparation come to a standstill, but female staff need to exit the interior of the prison where the darkness further compromises safety. Stressors such as this

can be a massive frustration on top of an already extremely intense environment. Other corrections staff are equipped with flashlights and/or camp lanterns. Can you imagine walking through the halls of a prison under such circumstances?

Further, these men and women are then leaving at the end of shift, not knowing if the stop lights will be functioning; if a gas station will be open for business (not all are able to

operate during load shedding); whether or not the food in the refrigerator will be safe to eat; and, if it is, whether there will be electricity with which to cook it.

As we navigate the challenges of the times we all find ourselves in, let's also remember South Africa, and the corrections staff there in particular. Let's pray they experience an outpouring of God's grace as they (quite literally) journey through a dark place.



POLLSMOOR MANAGEMENT AREA - CAPE TOWN SOUTH AFRICA

STATE OF THE STAFF?

BY CATERINA SPINARIS, PH.D., LPC

"I'm really tired of things being so hard. I'm tired of my symptoms not being taken seriously. I'm tired of crying almost every night. I'm tired of not being able to sleep. I'm tired of not being listened to or understood. I'm tired of anticipating what my work day will be like. I'm tired of defending myself. I'm tired of other officers' opinions. I'm tired of constantly asking my Sergeants to stop putting me in a position where I have to work with the inmate who assaulted me. I'm tired of fighting and not being fought for. I'm tired of pretending I am okay. I'm tired of the nightmares and intrusive thoughts. I'm tired of feeling like a disappointment. I am tired."

~ Anonymous Correctional Officer

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We receive emails such as the one above rather frequently these days. It is obvious to us that just about every corrections employee is stretched more than ever before, sometimes in ways that they had never experienced pre-COVID.

That is why EVERYONE needs understanding, encouragement and to be treated with kindness, perhaps more than ever before.

So, what can you do?

What will you set your mind to do to lighten someone's emotional burden while at work today? And what can you do while at home to promote an emotionally safe atmosphere with your loved ones? (Because your families endure "collateral damage" due to what you may bring home, especially on particularly challenging workdays.)

IN MEMORIAM

Larry Valdez
Correction Officer
FCC Florence, Colorado



Quote of the Month

“The greatest compliment that was ever paid me was when one asked me what I thought and attended to my answer.”

Henry David Thoreau

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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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.

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