

CORRECTIONAL OASIS

HELPING CORRECTIONAL & OTHER PUBLIC SAFETY AGENCIES BUILD A MORE ENGAGED WORKFORCE

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In Memoriam

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THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

As the Roman calendar announces that it is the 1st day of January and that the year is now 2024, my thoughts go to new beginnings, our personal evolution built on lessons taught to us by life's experiences and spurred by visions of a better tomorrow.

Fresh starts take courage, but they can be so very much worth it! We all have expiration dates, so, with eyes wide open, let us grab hold of the present and invest it wisely.

Let us ask ourselves:

- What did we learn last year about living in ways that leave us feeling satisfied deep inside?
- What did we learn about ourselves this past year?
- What did we learn about the ones we love?
- What do we want to learn more about this coming year?
- What do we want to become better at this coming year?

It is such a good feeling to know that no matter where we've been, what truly counts is where we choose to go from this point on. May the past be the fertilizer for our present and our future.

Blessings to you for a new year of much good fruit in your personal life, your family life, your work life, and your community life.

Your being here and your contributions make a difference.

Caterina Spinaris

DESERT WATERS' MISSION EXPANSION

Many a time over the years we were approached by public safety agencies outside of corrections, such as Sheriff's Offices (Road Patrol) and Police Departments, to offer our services to them.

We always recognized that similarities among correctional and other public safety organizations, especially other law enforcement organizations, tend to be greater than the differences, and the needs for staff wellness are just as vast and as urgent in all these sectors.

When we started on our journey of serving correctional staff, their families, and their agencies in the year 2003, we focused singularly on corrections, because this was our calling, and because there was no organization we knew of that was dedicated to the well-being of this segment of criminal justice professionals. We intentionally opted to focus specifically on corrections in order to build a solid foundation of specialized wellness services for this population.

Today, we believe that we have reached that point of a secure footing in the area of correctional staff wellness, even while further progress continues to be made daily, based on new research and fresh experience.

Consequently, after much contemplation and consideration of requests from public safety agencies, Desert Waters' Executive Board voted in October 2023 to expand the mission of DWCO to embrace and provide services to other public safety professions, in addition to corrections. Consequently, our new mission

statement has now been expanded to, *“Advancing the well-being of correctional employees and other public safety employees, and their families, and the health of the agencies where they work, through data-driven, skill-based training.”*

In our hearts, considering corrections staff will always be “our first love,” and that is why our organization’s name remains the same—Desert Waters Correctional Outreach—and our mission statement still refers to corrections first.

However, our desire to serve all those who serve and protect burns brightly, expanding to embrace all who work in public safety, as they are on very similar paths. As a first step, we have adapted our award-winning course, *From Corrections Fatigue to Fulfillment™* to law enforcement personnel, naming it ***“From Fatigue to Fulfillment: For Law Enforcement™”***

May all who serve our communities in these underappreciated professions find greater hope and fulfillment as we expand our mission to include an even broader population of public safety employees.

DOING MORE WITH LESS?

BY CATERINA SPINARIS, PHD, LPC

Late last year I was asked what I thought was the biggest challenge confronting correctional staff in 2023. This was my response.

Stress has been described as the outcome of demands exceeding available resources. This statement captures the biggest challenge facing correctional agencies today.

Due to conditions outside of their control, correctional agencies may have been operating for years under the motto of “doing more with less.”

What is problematic about this approach? To put it simply, “doing more with less” is unsustainable, resulting in staff malfunctioning and agency malfunctioning. If resources are insufficient for shoring up burdens, and conditions continue unabated, whole systems eventually buckle under the excess weight. As one sergeant sarcastically told me, “Doing more with less is doing less with less.”

Outcomes of such malfunctioning at work are many. Individually, chronic stress and partial chronic sleep deprivation caused by mandatory overtime disrupt brain functioning, and decimate health and wellness. Operationally, policies are not followed; mistakes are made; accidents happen; angry outbursts and other inflammatory reactions replace de-escalating responses; unprofessional conduct abounds; lawsuits ensue. Consequences of Corrections Fatigue snowball. People die.

Agencies have also been requiring that staff focus on rehabilitative efforts of justice-involved persons in their care, a necessary but Herculean feat under the best of circumstances. For rehabilitation to have a chance to happen, key ingredients are needed, starting with staff safety, training, and wellness. When employees operate chronically under-staffed, under-trained, and exhausted, and while navigating considerable policy changes about the management of violent individuals, veritable rehabilitation remains a pipe dream. As one employee told me, staff are “being hit over the head with **unachievable expectations**. Make the most violent people behave like saints, with just good vibes.”

The end result is that all who are touched by the correctional system—staff, justice-involved persons, and their respective families—may end up harmed in some fashion.

So, correctional staff with years of invaluable experience disengage or leave, doing the minimum, or opting for other jobs, or taking early retirement. And the word gets out about the extremely stressful and dangerous working conditions, discouraging potential candidates from applying, further exacerbating the staffing crisis.

What can be done, if this noble and much-needed profession is to be salvaged and advanced? In 1950, Norway was at a similar crossroads. Decision-makers opted to tear down the old malfunctioning system, and renew their thinking about the purpose of correctional systems. They ended up choosing to invest in the front end, starting with staff selection, education, and working conditions, and treating custody/security work as a true and respectable profession. Their reasoning was that even though this approach was expensive at the front end, the long-term savings would make the cost very much worth it. Today the Norwegian prison system* is a light in the darkness, recognized worldwide as a best-practices model. Similarly, good places to start in the United States begin with educating top levels of our legislature about correctional realities, and investing in improved working conditions, including staff numbers and staff training. May the resources finally match and even exceed the demands.

This of course is the ultimate big-picture, top-down solution that involves massive systemic changes. In addition to this substantial intervention, and while it is happening, there are steps that can be taken by staff at all three levels of organizations—top-down, horizontal, and bottom-up. No one needs to feel powerless to bring about positive changes in their sphere of influence, big or small. We plan to share more on these possibilities in future issues of the *Correctional Oasis*.

*For a detailed description of this approach, see the article *Finding A Better Way Forward – What Needs To Change? What Do You Want To Change? How Do You Change?* by Tor Erik Larsen in the **August 2022 issue of the Correctional Oasis**.



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THE ARMORY

RECOVERY TIME

Professional athletes and personal trainers are well-acquainted with the fact that for best physical performance, muscles need down time in between workouts—recovery time, in order to repair themselves.

Depending on the type and intensity of the workout, recovery time may be only 24 hours or two or more days—up to a week. Rest days are essential, non-negotiable, if performance is to stay at a high level or improve. Insisting on pushing through, continuing to work out without recovery time, will result in diminishing returns and eventual damage to the body.

Recovery time is based on the principle that the body cannot sustain being indefinitely “on.” Being “on” needs to alternate with being “off,” otherwise health is undermined by the relentless experience of the “on” stress response. An example of that is the heart muscle, which cannot only be contracting in order to pump blood throughout the body; it also needs to relax. Our heartbeat exemplifies that beautifully. Systole (contraction) is followed by diastole (relaxing); otherwise we end up with arrhythmia (irregular heartbeat) and medical conditions of a range of severity, including the stopping of the beating of the heart altogether.

Similarly, if we are to remain resilient, able to endure and persevere through adversity and bounce back, we need time to rest. We need to push, and we need to rest. As the author of the book of Ecclesiastes wrote, there’s a time for everything. There should be a time for driving hard and a time for relaxing. Relaxing does not mean waffling. It means making time to have certain “repairs” done to our person, and to “refuel.” Recovery time makes it possible to refill our tank, so to speak, so that we have fuel to run on, to keep going if we are to be able to stay in the race.

That is why working long hours on a regular basis, such as due to ongoing, chronic mandatory overtime, can be so damaging. To stay healthy and to function optimally, our bodies, including our brains, need times of rest and recovery—down time.

DOWN TIME

BY THE OLD SCREW

There are two words in corrections that are very critical but not understood by most families and even new staff—DOWN TIME.

The need for down time can be the cause of a lot of misunderstanding and arguments among officers and their spouses. The spouses usually have difficulty grasping why the officers need space when they get home from work, why they need to exercise, watch TV, read a book, or work on something instead of talking with their partners. The need for down time can also cause a lot of hurt and anger from children who do not comprehend why daddy or mommy wants to be left alone for a little while after getting home from work.

Some staff will argue that they can leave work and step right into family life—that they feel no stress from their work, that “there’s nothing to it.” Only God knows how many times this was said before the divorce. (I know. I am on my second marriage.) Anytime we put our life on the line day after day, no matter what type of facility we work in, the thought that someday we may not come home is always in the back of our minds. We fear (here’s the forbidden word!) that someday that lovely wife or husband or small child might not see us again.

Male officers have a real problem with their emotions. They think it makes them less of a man to admit to experiencing stress, and so they try to hide these feelings. In my opinion it takes a braver man to admit to the stress.

The truth is that in our line of work the adrenaline starts pumping sometimes even before we get to work. Just thinking about what happened there the day before, or what we have to deal with once we get there, can get us going. And the adrenaline surge doesn’t stop just because we’re heading home at the end of our shift. It continues to circulate in our system when we walk in the door.

That’s why we need the down time. We need the time and space to shift from the stress-filled work world to family life.

Some staff think that a few beers or other drinks after work with fellow officer is the way to relax, and that they even deserve that kind of break. Many an affair has started during “choir practice.”

Affairs also happen because an officer thinks that only another officer will understand them. Officers can come to believe this when their spouses don’t accept and respect their need for down time.

It seems at times like getting a divorce is a requirement for the job. Most of the problems seem to start with the unmet need for down time.

For those of you married to an officer, it is rough when your spouse comes home from work and doesn’t want to talk or do anything with you for a while. You may think, “What did I do wrong?” The answer usually is,

“Nothing.” It’s just that **your spouse needs Down Time!** Officers don’t like to bring their work home. Some of the things that happen in our profession are very crude or downright sick. By not talking about them, they think they are protecting you. Even when both spouses work in corrections it is sometimes hard to relate. Yes, even these families need down time.

The best solution is when the spouses are open and explain things to each other. This can be hard to do, but the reward is a more stable marriage and better understanding of one another.

So, when your spouse who works in corrections seems to be withdrawn and quiet, give them breathing space. Take the kids and go for a ride, or do something that your spouse can join in on later, when he or she is ready.

I am not a counselor or psychologist, but I will try to explain corrections to any family member who wants to ask. To me, we are all brothers and sisters, and I will try to help in any way I can. I neither know all the answers nor claim to, but I come from over three decades of working in corrections and know very well the need for down time.

I am proud of the fine men and women that I have worked with over the years. No matter what anyone says about corrections, be proud of who you are and what you do. Not everyone can walk among killers and rapists on a daily basis, sometimes **with only a pen** to help control the people milling around them.

Take care,

The Old Screw



PREPARING CORRECTIONAL STAFF & THEIR FAMILY MEMBERS FOR LONG-TERM WELLNESS

BY DARIA MAYOTTE, MA

Although spending more than 20 hours on Zoom over the course of five days might not sound inviting to many, the enthusiasm expressed by our recent online *Correctional Family Wellness (CFW) Train the Trainer* participants exceeded our expectations.

There was even one day we had to sincerely apologize before signing off, having realized that over the course of four hours we had only taken one five-minute break! While we absolutely hope to never repeat that mistake, it was hardly noticeable due to the sincere engagement and conversation that flowed throughout our time together.

In true corrections style, at least two of our participants eagerly engaged with us throughout the course having worked double shifts or overtime and not going to bed the night before, prior to jumping online to engage with the material and one another. And yet their passion remained palpable.

Brent Parker and I appreciated the opportunity to engage with corrections staff throughout Illinois and Kentucky over the course of five days as participants learned how to teach two courses: **Correctional Family Wellness for Staff (CFW-S)** and **Correctional Family Wellness for Families (CFW-F)**. These twin courses are indeed unique - one, by means of the focus on family; and two, by means of the fact that the Family course is to be taught to *family* of corrections staff - a very different population than those on whom we typically focus.

Corrections staff are accustomed to training in which they learn skills and demonstrate having acquired the abilities to effectively do their jobs - training that includes firearms, CPR, verbal judo, etc. When they engage with courses offered by Desert Waters, there is almost a weight that is lifted as they discover this course is truly "for me." It's not about how to improve security or learn how to implement the latest policies or even how to engage effectively with the incarcerated. Instead, the content focuses on who these men and women are as individuals, the changes that have taken place in them and their families as a result of working in corrections, and how they can begin to tackle resulting challenges with the goal of well-being for both themselves and those they love.

Topics throughout the week included realities of correctional work that affect family members; how metaphorical walls of protection can turn into walls of separation between staff and family members; and 16 areas to address for the purpose of moving families in the direction of positive change. Each area was

relevant to each participant in some fashion, and, for some, it was the first time they had considered a few of these topics. They were encouraged as they engaged in the material personally, but also as they considered how they would subsequently present this information to colleagues and family members in the weeks and months ahead.

The participants truly took this material to heart and began to internalize it almost immediately. One participant went home after Day 1 and simply chose to begin asking her spouse what went *well* at work and highlighting what went *well* for her throughout the day also - rather than automatically zeroing in on all the negative that's so easy to rehash. It certainly wasn't rocket science, but intentional implementation practices of even the simplest of tools can make a world of difference.

The participants finished the week with even more passion to teach these courses. Here are a few comments as to what they most appreciated about the training:

- "How relatable the material was and how I feel it will be very helpful for families to better understand that everyone in the household has a sense of being employed with corrections when a loved one signs up for a position."
- "I go out of my way to focus on family during CF2F so having this course in my toolbox I'm really excited about!!!"
- "Nature of the material is so relevant. This is gonna be a great segue to repairing home life."
- "The knowledge and feedback from the instructors."
- "I am very excited to share this with staff and their families. Very well put together!" "Loved everything about this training!"

The material offered through CFW-S and CFW-F has the potential to truly and positively impact families in significant ways. These new Instructors will complete their two hours of coaching each to finalize their certifications and then begin to roll this out to their colleagues and their colleagues' family members. We are confident lives and families will experience beneficial transformations as a result.

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QUOTE OF THE MONTH

“The most important responsibility of leaders, no matter how busy they are and how many priorities demand their attention, is to make their people feel like they belong.”

General Martin Dempsey

IN MEMORIAM

Aron Iseman

Jail Corporal
Tarrant County Sheriff's Office
Texas

Russell Earl Lavarl Jones

Detention Officer
Pamlico County Sheriff's Office
North Carolina

George Chadwick Mumpower

Corrections Officer
Homewood City Jail
Alabama

MEET THE CORRECTIONAL OASIS TEAM



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Mission

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

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Desert Waters Correctional Outreach is a non-profit corporation which helps correctional and other public safety 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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