

20
YEARS

HELPING CORRECTIONAL AGENCIES BUILD A MORE ENGAGED WORKFORCE

CORRECTIONAL OASIS

A Desert Waters Publication

JULY 2023

From The Director's Desk

National Correctional Family
Appreciation Week

Prison Reform & Staff Wellness
Are Inextricably Linked

DUI: Deciding Under The Influence

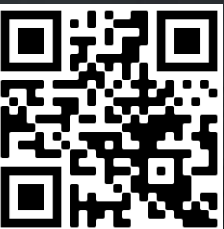
An Act Of Congress

Quote Of The Month



Volume:20

Issue:7



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

FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

This month we revisit the critical need for staff wellness to be recognized as the cornerstone of successful correctional operations – which it truly is.

So, in this issue, we examine the undeniable relationship between prison reform and staff wellness, progress that has been made regarding acknowledging the onslaught of the job on correctional officers' health, and efforts to remedy that through the *Public Safety Officer Support Act of 2022 (PLAW-117-172)*.

We also present an update about our campaign for the National Correctional Family Appreciation Week.

May you have a good and safe summer!

CATERINA SPINARIS

[Link to PLAW-117-172](#)

PUBLIC LAW 117-172

H.R. 6943

One Hundred Seventeenth Congress of the United States of America

AT THE SECOND SESSION

Began and held at the City of Washington on Monday,
the third day of January, two thousand and twenty-two

An Act

To amend the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968 to authorize public safety officer death benefits to officers suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder or acute stress disorder, and for other purposes.

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.

This Act may be cited as the "Public Safety Officer Support Act of 2022".

SEC. 2. FINDINGS.

Congress finds the following:

(1) Every day, public safety officers, including police officers, firefighters, emergency medical technicians, and others, work to maintain the safety, health, and well-being of the communities they serve.

(2) This means public safety officers are routinely called to respond to stressful and potentially traumatic situations, often putting their own lives in danger.

(3) This work not only puts public safety officers at-risk for experiencing harm, serious injury, and cumulative and acute trauma, but also places them at up to 25.6 times higher risk for developing post-traumatic stress disorder when compared to individuals without such experiences.

(4) Psychological evidence indicates that law enforcement officers experience significant job-related stressors and exposures that may confer increased risk for mental health morbidities (such as post-traumatic stress disorder and suicidal thoughts, ideation, intents, and behaviors) and hastened mortality.

(5) Public safety officers often do not have the resources or support they need, leaving them at higher risk for long-term mental health consequences.

(6) Whereas, although the Department of Defense already considers and remembers suicides to be line-of-duty deaths and provides Federal support to eligible surviving families, the Federal Government does not recognize public safety officer suicides as deaths in the line of duty.

(7) In 2017, the Department of Justice approved 481 claims under the Public Safety Officers' Benefits Program under subpart 1 of part 1 of title 1 of the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968 (34 U.S.C. 10281 et seq.), but not one of them for the more than 240 public safety officers who died by suicide that year.

H.R. 6943—5

to Congress a report that details benefits issued pursuant to subsection (c) of section 1201 of title 1 of the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968 (34 U.S.C. 10281), as added by section 3, and includes any recommendations to improve that subsection.

Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House of Representatives.

Patrick Leahy
Vice President of the United States and
President of the Senate, pro tempore

APPROVED

AUG 16 2022

[Signature]

NATIONAL CORRECTIONAL FAMILY APPRECIATION WEEK

To date, 161 individuals from 22 states offered their official support for this day through our QR code form below, from the following states: AK, AR, AZ, CA, CO, FL, HI, IL, IN, KS, LA, MD, MO, MN, MT, NC, NY, OH, PA, TX, VA, WA, WI.

The following organizations have all backed this initiative so far:

- **Five correctional agencies** – Anne Arundel County Department of Detention Facilities, MD; Apache County Jail, AZ; Kansas Department of Corrections; Orange County Corrections Department, FL; and the Oregon Department of Corrections
- **Five unions** – Association of Oregon Corrections Employees; Fraternal Order of Detention Center Officers' & Personnel, Anne Arundel County Maryland; National Council of Prison Locals 33 AFGE; Union of Norwegian Correctional Services Employees; Suffolk CO Maryland AFSCME Local 419
- **Three corrections-related organizations** – Guardian RFID; One Voice United, Social Purpose Corrections

Using our [sample proclamation](#) on the following page, ask your senators, your House Representatives, your governor, your correctional agency, your union, or other officials to declare the first full week of June as National Correctional Family Appreciation Week.

Remember: Behind a successful correctional professional there is usually a supportive (and perhaps long-suffering) family.

Let's all keep doing our part so the first full week of June next year (2024) is celebrated as National Correctional Family Appreciation Week far and wide across our nation!

Click or scan the code
to join thoes listed above!



admin@desertwaters.com

#nationalcorrectionalfamilyappreciationweek



PROCLAMATION

WHEREAS,

Correctional professionals, especially correctional officers, work in environments that expose them to traumatic and other high-stress events, and continual risk to their personal safety; and

WHEREAS,

Correctional professionals, especially correctional officers, often have extremely high workloads and work excessive amounts of mandatory overtime; and

WHEREAS,

The nature of their work puts correctional professionals at a higher risk for developing mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance misuse, and other related disorders, and at higher risk for suicide; and

WHEREAS,

Undiagnosed and untreated cases of mental health conditions and high degrees of chronic stress among correctional professionals can lead to detrimental effects on their personal relationships and their overall functioning, adversely affecting family relationships, family life, and family health very strongly; and

WHEREAS,

Family members provide essential emotional and practical support and stability to correctional professionals; and

WHEREAS,

Family members carry the burden of responsibilities and demands of family life due to the effective absence of correctional professionals because of their work duties, and due to their functioning difficulties because of the impact of the job on their mental health; and

WHEREAS,

Designating a National Correctional Family Appreciation Week will provide an opportunity to honor and acknowledge the contributions and sacrifices of family members of correctional professionals, while also highlighting the importance of mental health support for those working within the correctional system and the importance of support for their families; now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED:

The first full week of June each year is designated as National Correctional Family Appreciation Week, to recognize, honor, and support correctional families, to raise awareness about their contributions and sacrifices in relation to correctional professionals' demanding working conditions and associated mental health challenges, and to advocate for improved services and resources for correctional families.



Join us for Desert Waters'

CORRECTIONAL FAMILY WELLNESS™

As a corrections staff member, do you feel like you are living two separate lives?
(Work & Home)

Are you concerned that work experiences may be hurting your most important relationships -- those with close family members?

Do you want to gain insight and tools to help you and your spouse/significant other manage work-related challenges?

Do you want to become a DWCO-certified CFW Instructor to help your colleagues better address these challenges?

**Sign up today for this online
Train the Trainer course.**

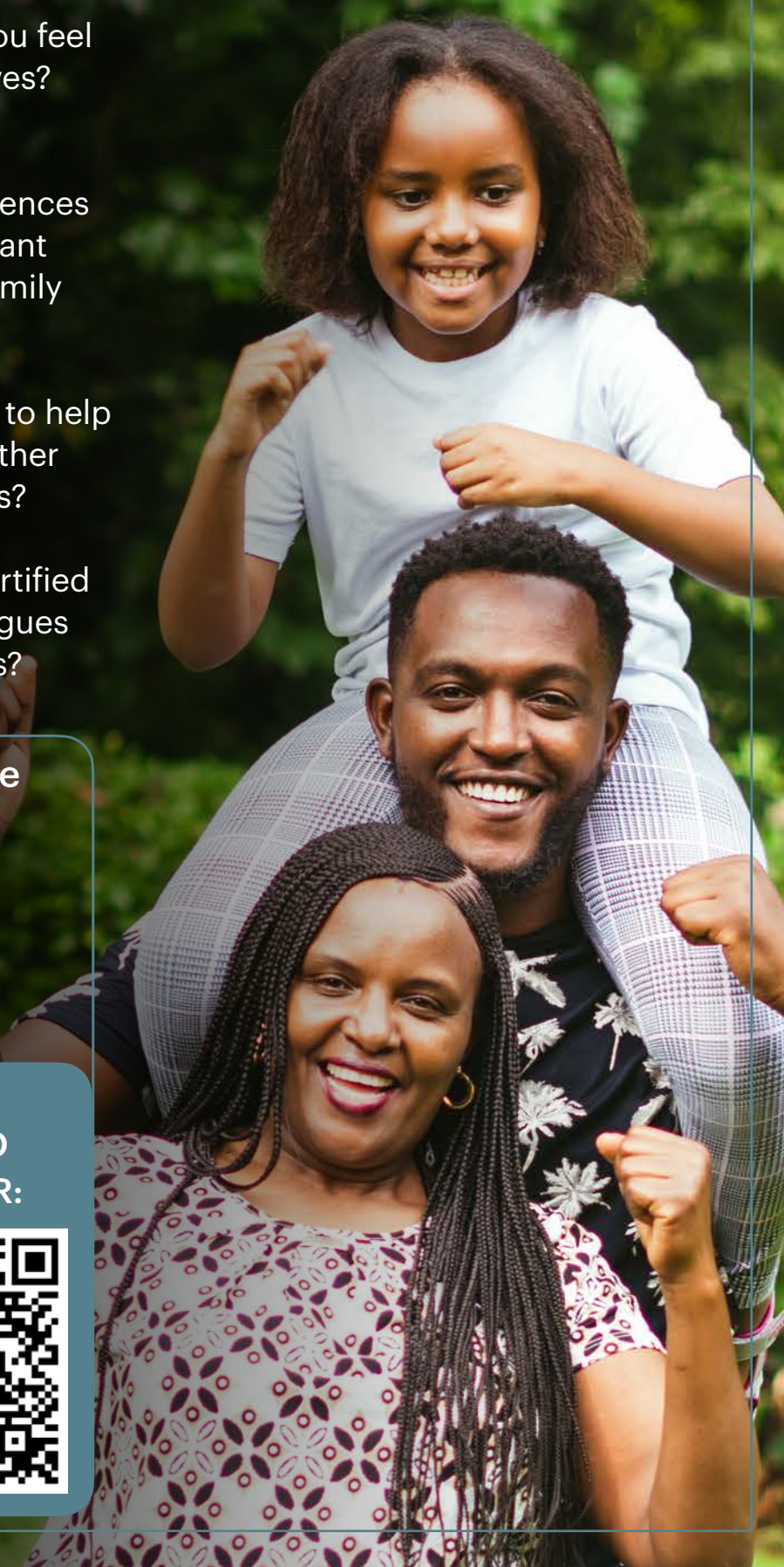
Space is limited!

July 10 - 14

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PRISON REFORM & STAFF WELLNESS ARE INEXTRICABLY LINKED

BY CATERINA SPINARIS

In this article, I share my thoughts on how prison reform and staff wellness are highly interrelated, and why I am firmly convinced that we cannot have one without the other.

Why There Can Be No Prison Reform Without Staff Wellness

Prison reform aims to improve living conditions in prisons, and to provide programming and treatment that increase the probability of successful rehabilitation and reentry of incarcerated persons. For that to be possible, we need a reduction in the destructive US AGAINST THEM mindset of both the incarcerated persons and the staff.

That is, prison reform aims to help incarcerated persons increase their prosocial behaviors, get treatment for various health conditions, and rebuild their lives. Achieving this would help increase the probability that incarcerated persons leave (or live) in better condition than they were when they entered the criminal justice system.

When that happens, we all win – we in the community, and the formerly incarcerated persons and their families, who are now our neighbors.

For that to become a reality, we need optimal conditions in prison environments.

There has been litigation across the country regarding the neglect of mental health needs of

incarcerated persons, and advocacy regarding ways to remedy that.

Yet it may not be obvious at first glance that agencies cannot deliver good mental health care of incarcerated persons if the staff they employ – the tools with which the rehabilitative work gets done – are not well themselves.

Using the analogy of tools, it is self-evident that properly maintained tools used properly are needed in order to manufacture a good product.

If tools are broken, bent, chipped, cracked, not well-oiled, or otherwise defective, a good product is not a likely outcome, no matter how skilled the people who use these tools, and no matter how good those individuals' intentions may be.

Correctional staff, especially Correctional Officers (COs), are the segment of the population that incarcerated persons are most in contact with, other than other incarcerated people. COs are the ones with the greatest influence, and the greatest opportunity to role model prosocial behaviors to incarcerated persons, through constructive professional interactions with them.

It is to be expected that COs' state of mind would have a significant impact on how they interact with incarcerated persons. Their mental, physical, and spiritual health (or lack thereof), plays a critical role in whether they are willing or able to implement interpersonal skills and other constructive

approaches in their interaction with incarcerated persons as well as with other staff.

For example, COs' state of mind and overall health have much to do (dare I say, sometimes have EVERYTHING to do) with whether they will de-escalate a potential conflict, patiently talking incarcerated persons down, as opposed to being too tired or too agitated – “on a ledge” themselves – to logically process what is happening and respond to it professionally. When the latter is the case, staff may react with indifference, impatience, verbal provocation, aggression, or unwarranted use of force.

In addition to irritability and outbursts of anger, staff who are stressed and struggling with their own health and wellness issues are likely to forget important details, take procedural shortcuts due to being weary, or fall asleep on the job.

Even when staff WANT TO care about incarcerated persons or coworkers, they may not have the energy or presence of mind to do so, thus impacting the whole workforce culture negatively.

They are also likely to go home and try to “self-medicate” their anxiety and other symptoms through the misuse of alcohol and other destructive substances or activities. This of course further affects their wellbeing, their family lives, and their level of functioning when they report back to work.

Staff are human beings too. They are not Supermen and Superwomen. They have limits, no matter how tough, resilient, and well-trained they may be.

That must be pointed out especially when we consider that a large proportion of custody staff are being crushed under the weight of partial chronic

sleep deprivation due to working excessive mandatory overtime. Insufficient and poor-quality sleep undermines a non-negotiable biological need – that of having sufficient and good-quality sleep on a regular basis, and there is no way to get around that inherent biological reality.

Consistent statistics across the country and beyond sound the alarm regarding the state of unwellness of correctional staff, COs in particular.

Here are some of these numbers. They are worryingly high, multiple times higher than these of the general population, and even those of other first responders.

- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: 34%-43%
1, 2, 3, 4
- Depression (moderate to severe): 24%-48%
1, 2, 3, 4
- Generalized Anxiety Disorder: 32%-60%
1, 3, 4
- Alcohol Abuse: 26% ³
- Higher risk of death by suicide: 39%-41%
5, 6
- Thought of suicide in the past 12 months
(active duty COs): 11% (1 in 9) ⁷

These statistics indicate that alarmingly significant proportions of staff are experiencing symptoms such as those listed below, which are a sampling of symptoms of PTSD, depression and anxiety.

As you read them, pause to reflect on how each of the symptoms may shape staff's interactions with incarcerated persons, especially on high-stress days.

- Restlessness, agitation, feeling keyed up or on edge, irritability, anger outbursts, reckless behavior

- Hopelessness, helplessness, negative expectations, inappropriately blaming others or self for negative outcomes
- Difficulty thinking, concentrating, remembering, or making decisions
- Fatigue or low energy
- Excessive worry, difficulty controlling the worry
- Persistent “down” mood
- Recurrent thoughts of death or suicide
- Distressing and involuntary trauma recollections (dreams, flashbacks)
- Hypervigilance, strong startle response
- Avoidance of trauma reminders

It stands to reason that these symptoms are bound to interfere with staff’s functioning at work, negatively affecting their interactions with incarcerated persons and also with coworkers. (Naturally, they also inevitably affect home life negatively.)

The folk saying which states that we cannot get blood out of a turnip, comes to mind here. This is the equivalent of the ancient Greek proverb that says, “You cannot get from the one who does not have.” Staff cannot engage in what is needed for effective and successful prison reform initiatives if they are running on empty in terms of their own well-being, physical and emotional energy, morale, training, and skill sets. They cannot pour out from empty cups.

That is why we cannot have prison reform without staff wellness.

We cannot try to change only one side of the equation – incarcerated persons’ wellness – without also looking at the other side of the equation – staff wellness. Any efforts that involve

making changes to only one side of the equation are guaranteed to fail for the reasons presented above. These two populations operate in the same environment.

Why There Can Be No Staff Wellness Without Prison Reform

We know that corrections staff operate under work conditions and in environments that research convincingly shows are GUARANTEED to produce poor health and undermine the wellbeing of those who function in them ^{8,9}.

To name a few, custody staff in particular deal with excessive workloads, time pressure, low social support, low rewards, exposure to traumatic and other high-stress events, and the ever-present, endemic partial chronic sleep deprivation. Physically harsh environments add to the negative conditions.

Staff-to-incarcerated person ratios understandably leave employees feeling (and actually being) physically unsafe, with all the implications they have about their experiencing chronic anxiety and the activation of “fight or flight” reactions. Short-staffing also leaves incarcerated persons feeling unsafe, thus contributing to their agitation as well. Not surprisingly, this feeds the destructive US AGAINST THEM mindset of both parties, the very mindset that prison reform aims to reduce or eliminate.

I strongly believe that unless prison reformers intentionally and deliberately pursue the improvement of staff working conditions, the desired outcomes of prison reform will remain elusive and be doomed to fail.

Promoting staff wellness should no longer be viewed as a discretionary option, an afterthought, or “icing on the cake.”

Staff wellness must be recognized as the fundamental pillar, the **“sine qua non”** of prison reform – that **without which** (prison reform) **is not** (will not happen).

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DUI: DECIDING UNDER THE INFLUENCE

BY STEPHANIE RAWLINGS

This is when staff, subjected to huge workloads, mandates of consecutive overtime shifts, exposure to trauma, and other high-stress situations, are called upon to make decisions, sometimes in a split second, that could have far-reaching impacts. Equip your staff so that when these moments come, they are working within their safe limits, prepared to make the best decisions that have good outcomes.



AN ACT OF CONGRESS

BY DARIA MAYOTTE

Desmond Tutu once said, “There comes a point when we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they’re falling in.”

In the world of corrections, there is an inordinately low percentage of individuals or organizations doing either one. But when you find people doing *both*, it’s cause to stop, pay tribute to the efforts, and recognize the value of the lives being rescued.

At a recent conference, Shane Fausey, President of the National Council of Prison Locals 33, American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), took the opportunity to announce a very significant turn of events in the battle towards alleviating the plight of corrections staff.

When the challenges are beyond comprehension and it seems as if there’s just no way to turn the tide, you will hear someone say, “It will take an Act of Congress...” Well, that is exactly what has happened.

Largely through the tireless efforts of a precious few organizations advocating for the lives and families of corrections staff, a new law has been passed.

The Public Safety Officers’ Benefits (PSOB) Program, established in 1976, provides death benefits to the survivors of law enforcement officers, firefighters, and other first responders whose death (or catastrophic injury) was the direct and proximate result of an injury sustained in the line of duty*.

On August 16, 2022, President Biden signed the Public Safety Officer Support Act of 2022 (PLAW-117), recognizing for the first time in the history of the PSOB Program the impact of exposure to traumatic events to public safety officers and their mental health and well-being, including the consideration of claims for officer death (or catastrophic injury) due to suicide (or an attempt to die by suicide) *. According to PLAW-117, law enforcement officers include, but are not limited to, police, **corrections, probation, parole,** and judicial officers. (Emphasis added.)

The PSOB Program provides three types of benefits:

- Death benefits
- Disability benefits
- Education benefits

This is truly a significant step in the right direction. The inclusion of death by suicide as a line of duty death, and the inclusion of attempts to die by suicide as being work-related are truly revolutionary and long overdue, reducing the unwarranted shame associated with these occurrences, and offering survivors some comfort and support.

Caterina explains further, "Since Desert Waters' inception in 2003, my heart's desire has been that the adverse impact of the job on correctional staff - especially regarding their work-related traumatic exposure - be publicly acknowledged at the highest places in our government, and that steps be taken to mitigate the damage through steps of prevention or intervention.

"Staff, especially Correctional Officers, feel so much toxic shame when they develop symptoms of emotional wounding, especially post-traumatic symptoms. They often feel that this means that they are "weak" and unfit for the job, and that they've failed their colleagues.

"Tragically, some of them succumb to the lie that the only honorable way for them to deal with their 'breaking' is to kill themselves.

"Others can no longer work due to psychological difficulties, but this may not have been recognized or accepted as a work-related injury and disability. That of course leaves their families devastated both emotionally and financially.

"PLAW-117 deals a serious blow to this unwarranted shame, but making it clear that due to occupational hazards, Public Safety Officers can be wounded invisibly at the soul and spirit level,' and also at the brain/ neurological level, in addition to possibly being wounded physically in ways that are visible.

"PLAW-117 validates staff's experiences, de-shames, and offers much-needed financial and moral support and opportunities to them and also to their surviving families - especially in the case of a 'line of duty' suicide or catastrophic injury - acknowledging suicide as a line of duty death."

Caterina has been prioritizing the needs of corrections staff since 2003 through the establishment of Desert Waters and her tireless efforts providing for the needs of corrections staff through it. The groundbreaking research conducted by Desert Waters in 2012 showed for the first time ever highly disturbing rates of post-traumatic symptoms in U.S. corrections professionals. Subsequent studies by Desert Waters and others corroborated these initial findings, confirming that the mental health of a large proportion of corrections staff is severely compromised due to occupational hazards. It is for this reason that she as well as Andy Potter and Brian Dawe, Founder/Executive Director and National Director of One Voice United, respectively, were all three honored with Congressional copies of the law, signed by President Biden, Nancy Pelosi, and Patrick Leahy.

The presentation of these was an emotional moment, recognizing that decades of effort were paying off. Just 20 years ago, no one was even willing to talk about the impact a career in corrections can have on individuals. Now the highest Office in the country publicly acknowledges some of the reasons behind why corrections staff are "falling in" the river, as Desmond Tutu so aptly put it.

During our chat about this, Caterina added, "During that announcement, I flashed back to when I told the Lord in my heart way back that I wanted Him to use Desert Waters to put PTSD permanently 'on the books' as an occupational hazard facing all correctional staff, and especially the frontline staff, the officers. To me, the announcement was a heavenly confirmation of 'mission accomplished' regarding the havoc traumatic

exposure confers on staff, and with the consequences inevitably also trickling down to adversely impact the staff's families and also incarcerated persons.”-

Indeed, one mission is accomplished. There's more to be done. Thank you for partnering with us as we, by God's grace and favor, continue "pulling [staff] out of the river."

*<https://bja.ojp.gov/doc/psob-fact-sheet.pdf>

You can read more about this law also here:

<https://www.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh241/files/media/document/fs000066.pdf>

QUOTE OF THE MONTH

“Every time I did something that robbed an incarcerated person of his dignity as a human being, something in me died.”

Andy Potter

Former Correctional Officer
Founder & Executive Director
OneVoice United



Click the image to watch Caterina's interview with Andy!

MEET THE CORRECTIONAL OASIS TEAM



CATERINA SPINARIS, PH.D., LPC
Founding Director

CONTENT CURATION, PRODUCTION & EDITING



DARIA MAYOTTE, M.A.
Deputy Director

CONTENT DEVELOPMENT, EDITING



JUDY MYERS, B.SC.
Executive Assistant

EDITING



STEVEN MAYOTTE, B.DES., LEED AP
Chief Operating Officer

GRAPHIC DESIGN & LAYOUT

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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

Caterina Spinaris, PhD, LPC, Executive Director
431 E. Main Street, P.O. Box 355, Florence, CO 81226
(719) 784-4727
<https://desertwaters.com>
Your donations are tax-deductible.

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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