

20
YEARS

HELPING CORRECTIONAL AGENCIES BUILD A MORE ENGAGED WORKFORCE

CORRECTIONAL OASIS

A Desert Waters Publication

OCTOBER 2023

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Quote Of The Month

In Memoriam



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

FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

In this issue we are very pleased to introduce a couple of new items:

1. The Armory, and
2. The self-paced online version of our signature course, *From Corrections Fatigue to Fulfillment™* (CF2F).

Read on to see what these are about!

Last month's issue included the topic of peritraumatic dissociation; we continue that topic this month by suggesting ways administrators can respond to a potentially traumatized employee right after a traumatic incident.

Finally, this month's issue also contains our final (for now) article in our three-part series on wellness cultures.

And I want you to know that we continually carry all of you who work in correctional settings on our hearts and minds. We are thinking of your courage, resilience and determination as you take the high road to deal with innumerable challenges. Our desire remains that we continue to come alongside you in the pursuit of ways to make your loads lighter.

We see you, and we care.

Caterina Spinaris



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ADMINISTRATORS' IMMEDIATE ACTION STEPS FOLLOWING A CRITICAL INCIDENT

BY CATERINA SPINARIS, PHD, LPC

*In last month's **Correctional Oasis**, I discussed the phenomenon of peritraumatic dissociation—what correctional staff can experience around the time of a traumatic incident at work. This article addresses what is next on the timeline, how administrators can interact with the employee constructively immediately following the incident. This article is a reply to the query below submitted to Desert Waters by a correctional administrator. In this article, the term administrator includes executive and upper management staff who reach out to staff after an incident of violence, injury or death, but also mid-level managers and frontline supervisors if they are the first to make contact with the affected staff.*

Question: I wanted to check in with you to ask if you have any ideas on where I can find some basic beginning steps on how administrators can act the first moments after a critical incident. Not about the debriefing, not the referrals to EAP. Rather what steps should be taken in the first 1-30 minutes of an event? After talking with someone who was recently assaulted by a client, it really hit me that so many administrators just don't know what to do. So they avoid the situation—they freeze rather than act. I don't think this is done on purpose; it's like a reflex, automatic. I feel if we can begin sharing ideas with all department heads on how to even respond to the incident just after it occurred (for example, don't have them continue to see more clients on that day!! Duh! But so many do to make sure the job is getting done), we can begin to help show the importance of administration being involved in the addressing of the problems.

Answer: Thank you for your commitment as an administrator to keep moving the corrections profession forward by looking for effective ways to respond to potentially traumatized staff. Appropriate supportive responses can reduce the toxic effects of occupational hazards in corrections work, such as a staff assault.

Please note that my reply here only addresses ways to respond to the immediate needs of an assaulted employee, not the needs to lock down units, arrest clients, move justice-involved persons associated with the incident, or respond to the needs of coworkers who witnessed the incident. Please also note that the same general steps apply in the case of employees who witnessed an incident of violence, injury or death directly, yet without themselves being physically injured.

In a nutshell, the focus immediately after the incident needs to be on: **(a) ensuring the assaulted employee's safety, (b) tending to the employee's urgent needs, and (c) facilitating the beginning of the process of the employee's re-stabilization.**

A. Ensuring the Employee's Safety

The first steps in responding to immediate needs of an assaulted employee involve ensuring the employee's safety through their removal from a dangerous setting, and their transportation to the infirmary, where a medical examination will be conducted. Medical personnel need to assess the employee's condition and to provide them with immediate medical care as needed. This is to be followed by access to higher-level emergency medical treatment as their condition requires, which may include transportation to a hospital by ambulance. In that case, administrators should visit the staff member at the hospital as soon as their condition allows, to offer them emotional and moral support. Family members/contacts should be notified as per policy and as agreed upon by the employee.

After a medical checkup, and if no further medical care is recommended or deemed to be warranted, the next step consists in ensuring that the assaulted employee will not be asked to return to the area of the incident at that time. This is done in order to reduce the likelihood of their exposure to possible ongoing threat, and to reduce the risk of them overreacting to anything they may perceive as being dangerous. That may mean getting them away from all justice-involved persons, and also from trauma reminders (such as the location, certain items, or individuals.) There will be time to "get back on the horse" again later. Immediately after the event, the person needs to be able to begin calming down. Distancing themselves from threats and reminders—the perception of danger—is one way to do that.

B. Tending to the Employee's Urgent Needs

Make it possible for the assaulted staff member to change clothes, and get cleaned up ASAP, if they have been soiled (such as by having body fluids thrown on them), or if their clothes have been bloodied or torn. That will reduce their exposure to "triggers" (incident reminders), and help them feel like they are regaining their dignity. Indeed, some facilities stock care packages for staff that have been assaulted. These may include a pair of sweats, socks, a shirt, a towel, shampoo, toothpaste, and a token for a snack or beverage from a vending machine.

C. Facilitating the Beginning of the Process of the Employee's Re-Stabilization

a. Initial Steps

Have the assaulted staff member come to your office or go where they are and spend some time with them one-on-one. Offer them water to drink. Sit down with them in an area where you can close the door. If they come to your office, get around from behind your desk and sit in a chair next to them. Make eye contact. Express to them your caring and deep concern about what they just went through, and your concern about their welfare, and about the impact of the assault on their loved ones.

Absolutely do not drill them about details of the incident. Just listen empathically—that is, listen with a frame of mind of putting yourself in their shoes, trying to understand what the experience was like for them. If they froze, remind them that this is an involuntary and unpredictable brain-based reaction. Absolutely do not reprimand them for it.



Point out what they did well, and what went well overall.

The employee, pumped full of adrenaline, may be angry at this point, perhaps blaming themselves and/or others, possibly including you and other administrators. Give them space to vent. Listen, acknowledge, and validate the horror of what they've just experienced. Suggest that they most likely did the best they could at the time, under the circumstances, and that, like in every situation, lessons will be learned from this incident as well. Reassure them that their immediate reactions are understandable and normal, to be expected.

Absolutely refrain from arguing with the employee about their complaints or accusations, or threatening them with discipline for being disrespectful. Do not tell them to correct their attitude or watch what they are saying if they want to keep their job. The general stance of administrators needs to be supportive—not judgmental, critical, angry or blaming. At this point self-control needs to be exercised by administrators if their own “hot buttons” are getting pushed by the assaulted employee's angry reactions.

I personally know of one such a situation that was handled in an exemplary fashion. The assaulted Correctional Officer went “off” on his warden who met with him after the medical check. The latter, having come up through the ranks, and having experienced being assaulted himself, remained calm and quiet during the employee's tirade. When the Officer finally ran out of words, the warden gently expressed to him his understanding of the Officer's state of mind, and expressed to him his sincere compassion for what he'd just been through. Seemingly surprised by the response, the Officer took it all in, waited for a few moments, and then apologized for coming unhinged.

b. Next Steps

The next step of “being there” for the assaulted employee to help them begin to re-stabilize is tapping into their support network by having their friends at the facility be relieved of their duties so they can come to express their support to the staff member. In some cases, staff may not be comfortable talking extensively to an administrator, but they will talk to a friend or a peer support member. Similarly, engage staff on your specially trained Peer Support Team/Critical Incident Support Team to assist with any immediate defusing by talking to the employee.

Ask the assaulted staff member if they want to make a phone call to family members and/or significant others in their community, and make it possible for them to do so privately.

If the assaulted staff member wants to make a round of the office or unit to show the justice-involved persons that they “are keeping it together”—to walk with their head up in spite of the assault—honor them by accompanying them while they do so.

Additionally, as part of the support you offer, have the assaulted staff member be checked confidentially by a mental health provider at the facility, or allow them access to a room where they can shut the door and call your EAP hotline. These professionals can check for safety concerns, assess the employee's current functioning level and frame of mind, remind the staff member that acute reactions after an incident are

normal, and tell them what signs might indicate that additional care/treatment is needed. They can give/ email them handouts with relaxation exercises and other coping strategies, and remind them to avoid using substances to cope, as these can destabilize their mood further.

Relieve the assaulted staff member of their duties for that day. Ask them if they'd like to take a day off of work. If they decline that, allow them to spend time as needed with peer supporters and/or mental health providers. If they insist on working, consult with EAP or mental health providers at your facility. Depending on their advice, either have the employee spend time with peer support team members, or assign them to an area where they are likely to have minimal contact with justice-involved persons. If they take time off, when they come back to work, do another round of the justice-involved persons with them, to visibly express your support of them.

If the assaulted employee is asked to write up an incident report immediately after it happens, keep in mind that the reported order of events may be jumbled or unclear, or have gaps. That can be due to memory processing and retrieval being disrupted during an episode that is experienced as being traumatic. Therefore, this initial report should be regarded as part one or incomplete, with the understanding that the employee may recollect or re-order material a few days later. Adding or re-ordering details may be controversial to some, primarily for legal reasons, yet we are dealing with realities of the neurobiology of human memory following exposure to a traumatic event. The brain is not an impassive video camera.

When it is time for the assaulted staff member to leave the office/ facility, arrange for someone to drive them home, and for another employee to drive their vehicle to their house.

Before they leave, make sure your Critical Incident Support Team has made plans for a debriefing a few days later.

And remember, it may not only be the assaulted staff member who needs your immediate attention. Those who witnessed the incident and those who responded are also likely to require your expressions of caring, consideration, validation, and support, sooner rather than later.

Additionally, your initial contact with the assaulted employee immediately after the incident is only an initial step. Follow up periodically with the employee for several weeks and months. Your social support may have more power to help encourage your employee (and others around them who are watching how you are handling this situation) than you can imagine.

Note: Dr. Susan Jones was consulted on this piece, and she offered several comments and suggestions which helped shape this article.

THE ARMORY

noun

1. a place where weapons are kept.
2. an array of resources available for a particular purpose.

In this issue of the *Correctional Oasis* we are starting our new column, *The Armory*, to provide you with snapshots of strategies and skills to practice, actions to build healthy self-help habits that can promote your wellbeing. And when you are in a healthier, more positive “head space,” you will inevitably have a positive influence on those around you.

Let’s start with this simple “weapon” in the armory of the soul: **Note what has gone well in your day so far.** Just that. Think of what you may consider to be big things or small things. They all count. Do it even (or, perhaps, especially) when the going gets rough. Do it multiple times each day. And create a way for you to remember to do this, perhaps whenever you look at a clock.

To further reinforce the power of this “what has gone well” mindset, “rewiring” your brain, so it becomes habitual:

- Write it down.
- Share it with someone else.
- Think about *why* that something has gone well.
 - ▶ Jot that down too.
 - ▶ Share that with someone else

Identifying positives encourages and empowers us. It gives us hope for the future. Think of this practice as your life jacket. Unless trained otherwise, the mind’s default setting when feeling threatened physically or psychologically is to focus on the threat, on the negative. This automatically drags mood and thoughts down the depths of high seas of negativity. Making it a habit to look for positives counters that default drag, buoying us and keeping us afloat. And the habit of looking for positives can even help us make headway in turbulent seas.

SELF-PACED CF2F

At a time when correctional staff wellness programming is more critical than ever before, we are thrilled to announce that, thanks to expert help, we will soon be offering a self-paced beautifully designed, asynchronous online version of our signature award-winning course, CF2F. This version of CF2F is highly interactive, with reflective, self-examining questions; content quizzes; video; audio; and a certificate of successful completion available as you finish. With a completion time of under four hours and the opportunity to fit it into convenient parts of your day, this SELF-PACED CF2F provides a variety of advantages:

1. If an agency has not opted to offer the course to their staff or is unable to do so, staff can still take it on their own, privately, anywhere in the English-speaking world, at any time, stopping, re-starting and reviewing sections as needed.
2. If an agency has difficulty sending employees to class due to short-staffing, it can now purchase blocks of licenses to view this course, and send one or more staff at a time to take it; all that is needed is internet access.
3. Staff who have already taken the course and desire to take it again, can now do so on their own time and at their leisure as an excellent means of reviewing content.
4. The course content is delivered with 100% fidelity.

While this version excludes the opportunity for participants to build community through listening to others sharing in class, we have tried to compensate for this by sharing in some sections anonymous input from prior participants.

Despite this drawback, we would rather have staff take the course, even without the “bonding” component of sharing with others in real time, than to miss out on the course altogether. The beneficial potential of the CF2F material deserves to be multiplied, even in the absence of sharing the content within a classroom community.

WELLNESS CULTURE- PART 3

[Click here to read part 1](#)[Click here to read part 2](#)

RECRUITMENT/RETENTION

Frontline Staff

Are new employees given a realistic view of the profession, or have staff shortages created a marketing response that ignores the profession's challenges?

Unquestionably, a corrections agency's frontline staff are its primary informal recruiting team. And just as unquestionably, having that team be emotionally and physically healthy is a distinct selling point for the profession - just as the opposite presents a reputation problem, and therefore a marketing problem.

But once recruitment is completed and the new employees are on board, frontline staff have even more influence over retention. And this is where the whole concept of a positive, healthy workplace culture bears fruit. (Just as the opposite is also true.) Time after time we hear comments such as, "The problems I have with the offenders are nothing compared to the problems I have with fellow staff." And "I have worked in other settings, and I have never seen such gossiping and backbiting as I do here."

Even in an environment that is known for its physical dangers, corrections employees may feel safer physically around offenders than they do psychologically around one another. It is our experience that all of the quoted comments above are not only accurate, but likely being said right now in multiple locations of the profession. And each time they are repeated, they create a reciprocal environment that causes them to take root and continue to grow.

Desert Waters' efforts, through, for example the upcoming *SafetyNet Accreditation™* staff wellness program, intend to provide the tools, strategies, and motivation to turn that completely around, making employee retention easier. In a 24/7/365 environment, frontline staff can be the leaders of that redirection if they simply reflect on the effect that negative comments about coworkers have on workplace health.

First-Line Supervisors

As a group, First-Line Supervisors are also on duty 24/7/365, and have a constant effect on workforce retention. Do they reinforce staff strengths and

help staff overcome challenges? Or after being promoted, do they retain their offender supervision skills and simply re-purpose them to staff supervision activities? And if so, what is the impact on the workplace culture and staff retention?

As we noted in the very beginning of this series, a workplace culture is defined as the customary way of thinking and doing things in that setting. And since workers in any setting get promoted because they are high performers in their current position, agencies are advised to take a good hard look at the supervision skills they promote. Requiring evidence of wellness program awareness and support in the promotional process is a crucial element in maintaining a wellness supportive culture into the future. Your frontline staff will benefit immediately, and your future promotional process to the next level in the agency will have a head start.

Mid-Level Managers

This level and above are where resource assignment and wellness program implementation take place. Look back at the positive workplace culture examples in the beginning section of this series. Who sets aside the space needed for an employee fitness center? Who is responsible for funding an employee dining room, much less deciding on a salad bar? Who gave the go ahead on the incident decompression room and the peer support program, both of which may cause staff to be pulled off a daily duty assignment when in need? We may not think of the decisions for or against these resources as recruitment and retention tools, but a new employee and an employee candidate definitely will. For frontline staff and first-line supervisors, these managerial decisions set the tone for the wellness culture.

And yet we need to say that focusing only on the Mid-Level Manager's pet interest, whether CrossFit or yoga, nutrition or substance use, is a mistake too. Wholistic wellness is different for everyone, and resource decisions need to take that into account.

Further, as time goes by, and these wholistic resources become used in the way the wellness program describes, they become all important word-of-mouth recruiting tools when employees describe their job to members of the greater community. And in a challenging economic climate, where correctional staff salaries are barely above those of fast-food workers and other less skilled jobs, these are signs of a genuinely professional environment, not just a place to receive a paycheck.

Managerial decisions like this provide two things: (a) settings in which wellness behavior can be actualized, and (b) the removal of all doubt that employees are truly treated as the agency's most valuable resource. This is where the agency's espoused wellness values and enacted wellness values either align or they don't.

Administrative and Executive Staff

As we observe corrections agencies in communities around us, it is clear that employee recruitment and retention are among the highest priority responsibilities faced by agency leadership. Agencies everywhere are fighting with competing professions to fill their job openings. What must be said here is that filling positions is one thing. Keeping them filled is another. While the two may overlap as we have noted previously, planted seeds need sufficient nourishment in order to sprout and grow. It is Desert Waters' position, highlighted through the *SafetyNet Accreditation™* program, that retention is fundamentally based on a wholistically healthy workplace. If corrections agencies are going to do for the public what our mission statements say we will do, employee wellness is a crucial element. Employee Wellness is Mission Critical.

In addition to the above, there is one other thing to remember about leadership: "Leaders go first." That is what leading means. We know that you already have multiple objectives, many of which are serious challenges. We know that you have multiple stakeholder constituencies. With those, we also know that you have fewer resources to address them than you would prefer. If we leave you with anything, we hope it is the belief that a workforce bolstered by programming such as *SafetyNet Accreditation™* will help in conquering those challenges with you and for you. And if Desert Waters Correctional Outreach can be of assistance in those endeavors, we are always available to help.



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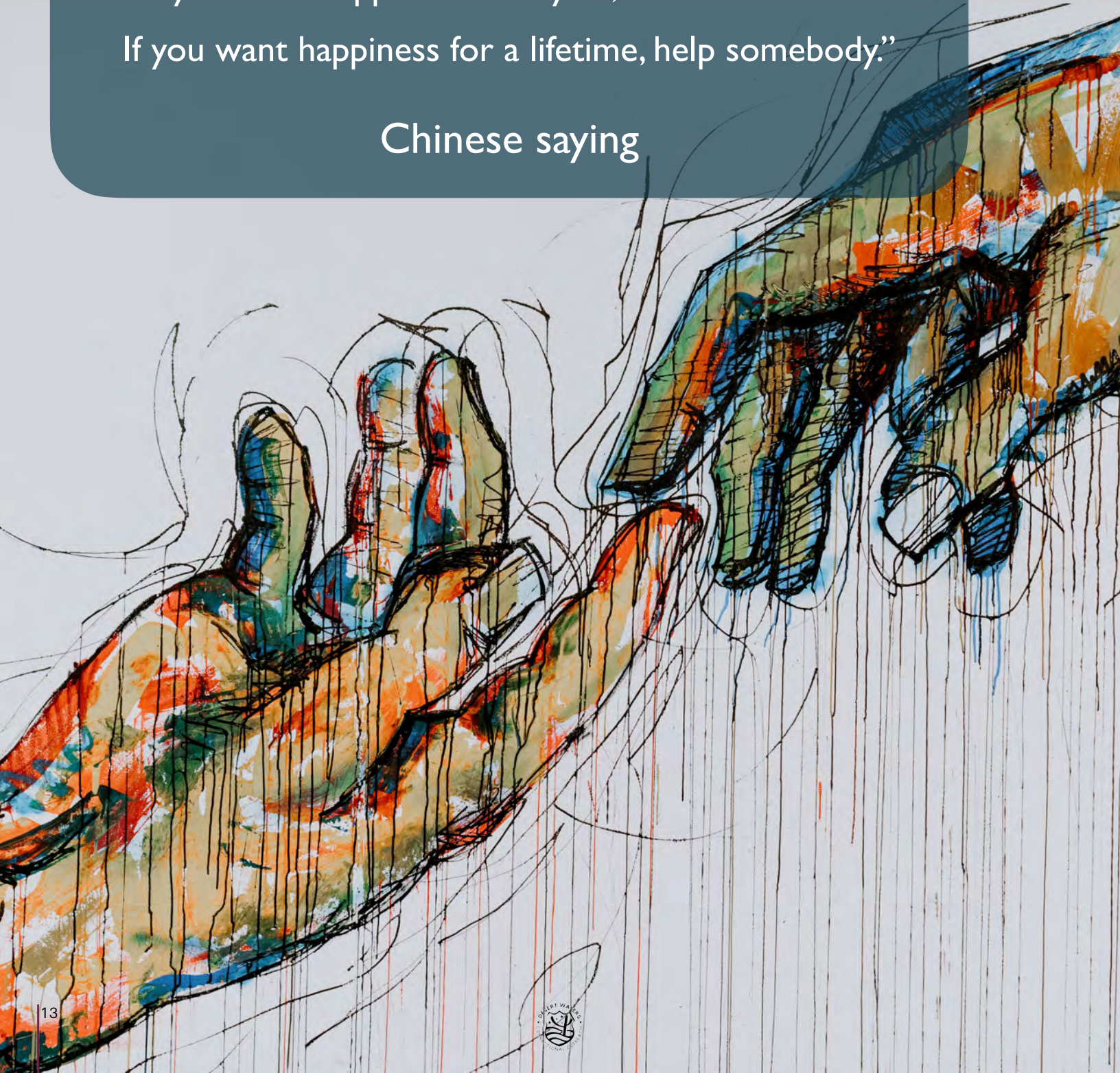
“If you want happiness for an hour, take a nap.

If you want happiness for a day, go fishing.

If you want happiness for a year, inherit a fortune.

If you want happiness for a lifetime, help somebody.”

Chinese saying



IN MEMORIAM

Emiliano Serrano

Senior Correctional Police Officer
New Jersey DOC

Dan Spaeth

Correctional Officer,
Washington Department of Corrections

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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 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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