

CORRECTIONAL OASIS

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

VOLUME: 21

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In Memoriam

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DESERTWATERS.COM



A NON-PROFIT FOR THE HEALTH OF CORRECTIONAL & OTHER PUBLIC SAFETY AGENCIES, STAFF AND FAMILIES

THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

Greetings! This month we address two main themes.

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The first theme revolves around the need for an accreditation system for staff wellness, and Desert Waters' provision of **SafetyNet Accreditation™** to meet this need. Components of wellness programming are wonderful additions to what agencies offer to the staff and their families. And at the same time, as we learn more and "dig deeper," we realize that our approaches need to become based on organized, comprehensive and data-driven initiatives if we are to maximize the likelihood that wellness programming will have its intended impact. We realize that this adds complexity to correctional systems. However, due to the solidly-documented wellness needs of correctional staff, making systematic improvements in our responses to them becomes imperative—a MUST.

Caterina Spinaris

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The second theme is the scourge of the culture of toughness in corrections that results in reluctance to seek help, and that ultimately can end up in staff becoming emotionally overwhelmed and even suicidal. We definitely understand the realities and pressures that have plagued public safety staff for eons, and that lead to the adoption of this stance of impenetrable toughness. And at the same time, we call on every staff member to reconsider and to start thinking about building bridges with safe others, to "build their village NOW," so it will be available to them in a crisis, and so it can also help them avert crises. Related to that, we address the subject of the impact on staff of suicidal behaviors of incarcerated persons.

Elevate your
correctional
department's staff
wellness program with:

SafetyNet Accreditation™

SafetyNet Accreditation™ was developed to assist in **promoting the wellbeing of the agencies'** most valuable asset – their **STAFF**. In addition to enhancing staff's health and personal/family life, this program aims to **improve** the agencies' **workplace culture**, and **increase** the probability of enhanced staff **retention and recruitment**, and **fulfillment of the agency's mission**.



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WHY WE NEED SAFETYNET ACCREDITATION™

BY CATERINA SPINARIS, PHD, LPC

For the past 21 years Desert Waters has persistently and passionately pursued and promoted correctional staff wellness, primarily through education and research.

The last several years have seen this topic take the front-central seat in national and international discussions. Reasons for that include concerns about work performance, work engagement, legal liability, retention, recruitment, and facilitating positive interactions between staff and justice-involved persons.

Since staff wellness is now recognized as being mission critical, many agencies are implementing components of staff wellness programming—which is great news!

Wellness is a complex area of study and service, and employee wellness programming is a rather new area of pursuit for some employers. Fostering occupational wellness is particularly challenging—a “tough nut to crack”—when addressing wellness needs of correctional staff. Some reasons for that are that correctional employees:

- are often chronically stressed;
- operate in cultures of toughness and denial, where acknowledging being negatively affected by the job and needing help are frowned upon and shamed;
- are exposed to inordinate amounts of traumatic material on the job;
- have alarmingly high rates of symptoms of mental health disorders.

The well-documented mental health struggles of correctional employees are a critical reason why wellness programming for them has to be designed particularly carefully.

As we looked around the country to learn about what wellness programming various agencies offer their staff, it became apparent that multiple and diverse approaches are being used, at times with no clear “rhyme or reason” as to why they were selected or evidence for their effectiveness. And only certain areas of wellness may be implemented, leaving other vital components unaddressed.

While we certainly commend agencies for their efforts at implementing programming that could have a positive impact on the wellbeing of staff, we also recognize the desperate need for a compass, so to speak, such that the variety of tools implemented do in fact lead to an intended destination.

That is why we at Desert Waters spent the last year in partnership with accreditation experts from the Pursuit of Excellence to build an in-depth and systematic correctional staff wellness program.

That program, SafetyNet Accreditation™, is now ready to be implemented by correctional agencies.

It is important to note that SNA does not introduce entirely new notions and practices. Rather, SNA takes existing wellness-related information from the arenas of corrections and other public safety professions, the military, healthcare, and psychology, and organizes it by creating data-driven functional areas and standards, with accompanying compliance indicators, and comments and justifications per standard.

To our knowledge, SNA is the only staff wellness accreditation program available to date, for any profession.

What makes SNA of unique value to the corrections profession, and the way of the future for staff wellness, are the following characteristics.

- It is data-driven, research-supported, to the degree that research is available.
- It provides structure and organization to current wellness knowledge through the creation of standards, aiming to answer agencies' wellness-related questions of, "What?", "Why?" and "How?"
- It is comprehensive and systemic, to include all interested parties and stakeholders—staff of all ranks and job roles, families, and retirees.
- It is "wholistic," addressing all eight of SAMHSA's wellness dimensions.
- It is corrections-specific, designed specifically for prison, jail, probation staff, and parole staff and their families.
- It collects data on program effectiveness through annual staff surveys and other outcome measures, providing accountability and ways to improve the wellness offerings.
- It provides coaching and consulting to agencies as they build their wellness programming.
- It provides a number of wellness and programmatic resources.
- It is adaptable to meet the realities of agencies of all sizes and budgets.

We recognize that building SafetyNet will take commitment, concerted effort, time and resources. That is why we want to come alongside interested agencies and help assist them in this process. Implementing this program over time can be expected to positively impact staff wellness, morale, performance, engagement, retention, and even recruitment as the word gets out that an agency "is taking care of its people." In the long run, benefits are expected to outweigh the costs and will include staff being able to interact in prosocial and constructive ways with the justice-involved individuals they manage, and by so doing fulfill a key part of their agency's mission. And what price can we put on human lives and on the health of family lives?

In addition to the benefits of such success when SNA standards are adhered to, administrators can have peace of mind that they are providing a defensible, effective, and relevant program, and the satisfaction that they have indeed done the best they can to protect their most valuable asset—their staff.

That is why we believe that **SafetyNet Accreditation™** is the way of the future in corrections, and why we invite you to **contact us** with your questions about it.



FREE INFORMATIONAL WEBINAR

Building Blocks of Staff Wellness

Thursday March 7, 2024

12:30 PT | 1:30 MT | 2:30 CT | 3:30 ET



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SafetyNet Accreditation™ provides unique value to the corrections profession, and is the way of the future for staff wellness.

- It's data-driven & research-supported
- It provides structure and organization
- It's comprehensive and systemic
- It's corrections-specific
- It's "wholistic" (SAMHSA's wellness dimensions)
- It's adaptable to meet realities of agencies of all sizes and budgets

safetynet@desertwaters.com



THE GARDENER

BY HEATHER RIVINO

You hear it all the time, that old self-help mantra... “Grow where you are planted.” But sometimes, no matter how hard you try, you simply can’t, and it leaves you all the more despondent. Sometimes where you are is too dark and devoid of light... Sometimes, the soil is barren, lacking every single nutrient you need to succeed. Sometimes you can’t even pick yourself up to move, and the words needed to ask for help shrivel on the tongue... Sometimes, all you can do is pray for a gardener to come along.

In a world where we are inundated with “self-care” tips and flaccid “fake it till you make it” manifestation slogans, we often find ourselves hiding from the truth, forcing ourselves to wear a positive mask that prevents those around us from seeing the pain that lays beneath the surface. We call those who are emotional and vulnerable “weak,” and we question those that are kind, looking for ulterior motives, because we are taught that behind the walls, we must be tough in order to survive.

But what is the cost? Are we surviving or just slowly dying? If we look around, there are gardeners to be found, but we often overlook them and undervalue their worth, bristling as we pass them by because our true emotions might emerge.

There are no easy answers, that is true, but what a beautiful garden we could create if we had an unfiltered view! In this place of hard concrete upon desolate land, let us strive to be each other’s gardeners whenever we can.

And when we find ourselves the depleted seed, let us welcome the help of a gardener’s outstretched hand, admitting the need; because it is here in these raw and broken moments we can save each other.



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PLEASE...HEAR WHAT I'M NOT SAYING

BY ANONYMOUS

Don't be fooled by me. Don't be fooled by the mask I wear. For I wear a mask. I wear a thousand masks, masks that I'm afraid to take off, and none of them is me. Pretending is an art that is second nature to me, but don't be fooled.

I give the impression that I'm secure, that all is sunny and unruffled with me, within as well as without. That confidence is my name and coolness is my game—that the waters are calm and that I'm in command and I need no one. But don't believe it; please don't.

My surface may seem smooth, but my surface is my mask, my ever-varying and ever-concealing mask. Beneath lies no smugness, no coolness, no complacency. Beneath dwells the real me—in confusion, in fear, in loneliness. But I hide this; I don't want anybody to know it. I panic at the thought of my weakness being exposed. That's why I frantically create a mask to hide behind, a nonchalant, sophisticated façade to help me pretend, to shield me from the glance that knows. But such a glance is precisely my salvation. And I know it. It's the only thing that can liberate me from myself, from my own self-built prison walls, from the barriers that I so painstakingly erect. But I don't tell you this. I don't dare. I'm afraid to.

I'm afraid your glance will not be followed by love and acceptance. I'm afraid that you will think less of me, that you'll laugh, and your laugh will kill me. I'm afraid that deep down inside I'm nothing, that I'm just no good, and that you'll see me and reject me. So, I play my games, my desperate, pretending games, with a façade of assurance on the outside and a trembling child within. And so begins the parade of masks, the glittering but empty parade of masks. And my life becomes a front.

I idly chatter with you in the suave tones of surface talk. I tell you everything that's really nothing, nothing of what's crying within me. So when I'm going through my routine, don't be fooled by what I'm saying. Please listen carefully and try to hear what I'm *not* saying; what I'd like to be able to say; what, for survival, I need to say but I can't say. I dislike the hiding. Honestly, I do. I dislike the superficial phony games I'm playing.

I'd really like to be genuine, spontaneous, and me; but you have to help me. You have to help me by holding out your hand, even when that's the last thing I seem to want or need. Each time you are kind and gentle and encouraging, each time you try to understand because you really care, my heart begins to grow wings. Very small wings. Very feeble wings. But wings. With your sensitivity and sympathy and your power of understanding, I can make it. You can breathe life into me. It will not be easy for you. A long conviction of thinking I must always be tough builds strong walls. But love is stronger than strong walls, and therein lies my hope. Please try to beat down those walls with firm hands, but with gentle hands, for a child is very sensitive, and deep down inside, I *am* a child.

Who am I, you may wonder. For I am every coworker you meet.

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- Equipping staff with strategies for better team functioning

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Administrators,

What are you waiting for?



DON'T SUFFER IN SILENCE!

BY LIEUTENANT BRYAN HUGHES

I'm going to do something most Correctional staff don't do enough, and that's **open up**. I broke down today, I cried. I don't break often, and NEVER talk about it or do it in front of anyone else. At first, I couldn't comprehend another coworker suicide, but then I got to thinking about our lives. We as Correctional staff SUFFER IN SILENCE.

Some of us deal with the daily stress better than others. Some of us can't cope at all. Some of us have seen some horrendous things that people should never witness and things we will never forget. Some of us have even had to do things that haunt us daily, and are the things nightmares are made of. When we are working in the moment, it just turns into our daily grind. It sadly becomes our normal, but when we retire or let these things creep into our minds, things change. When we go from working every day to retired, we have to face those demons that we have spent 20, 25 or 30 years burying daily.

I can say the last 4-5 suicides have been great Officers and amazing people that no one would imagine in 100 years that they would ever do this. That is the thought that is haunting me. Demons are real, and we can't escape them. These last several suicides were people who would have never taken their own lives. That tells me these demons are stronger than we realize and can overtake any one of us. I used to say I would never commit suicide. Now I wonder if these demons will catch me one day. I have many Correctional demons that haunt me and bring me to tears when I give them even one second of my time. I guarantee these men never thought they would succumb to suicide either.

We SUFFER IN SILENCE and don't share these things with our families because we never want to expose our loved ones to the things that torture us. We work in such a negative atmosphere. Many of us will take things to the grave without ever speaking of them again. Stress also lowers our immune system causing many premature physical illnesses that take so many lives of Correctional staff.

So, I used to wonder why these great, amazing people never reached out to anyone, even one of us that understand the struggle. But I totally understand. We are trained to be non-human and emotionless. We are weak if we show any emotions, so we compartmentalize these demons. We stay silent and fight the demons in our heads. I have a love and respect for the people I have worked with past and present. I hope this will be the last suicide we have, knowing damn well there will be many more.

For those of you that continue to suffer in silence, just know you are never alone in your battle. I know it feels lonely, but we are all dealing with our own battles right with you.

When we ask someone how they are doing or if they are all right, do we really want the truth or are we just speaking in generalities? We are so conditioned to ask a question that we already know the answer to. Ask yourself, "What if?" What if you ask someone if they are all right and they say "No"? Now what? Where do we go from here? We need to be open and ready to hear an honest response, but more importantly we need to be prepared HOW to respond to a response of, "No, I'm not all right."

But the thing about correctional staff is we lie. We lie a lot. Before we can expect others to know something is wrong, we must be honest with them when they ask. Most importantly, we must be honest with ourselves. Some of us are not okay. Some of us are in crisis.

I know the hardest thing for us to do is ask for help, but why? Is it ego, pride, embarrassment, feeling inadequate? I would say yes to all of these and more. If I am in a dangerous situation and I use my radio to call for assistance, staff will come running from places we didn't even know staff were. That's one amazing thing about us. Even if we have our differences, when that call for assistance comes, we come running as fast as we can. We don't hesitate to get on that radio or activate our personal alarm if our lives are in danger, but when it comes to our mental health, we freeze. Even though our mental health is a life and death situation.

So why don't we call for help when it's our mental health? Is it because weak people need help? People that have lost control need help? Incompetent people need help? Ignorant people need help? The fact is that couldn't be farther from the truth. It takes real strength to ask for help. It takes someone that doesn't want to lose control to ask for help. It takes competence to realize that you are in crisis and need help. And it's not ignorance, but knowledge to know you need help, accepting the fact you need help and seeking that help.

Asking for help can be one of the scariest things you ever do, but it can save your life, your marriage, your relationship with your children and family, and your relationships with your friends. It can also be a testimony for someone else that needs the courage to step up and ask for help. You asking for help may save someone else's life. The life you save may be that of a family member.

This career affects us in so many ways. Ways that we don't even realize until years later. If you are feeling the effects of this job, so is your family. "I leave work at work. I don't take work home with me." You absolutely do take this job home with you! That's just another lie we tell ourselves.

I was that guy that was an expert at leaving work at work and home at home. I (thought) I never took the job home with me. I never went home after a hard day and told "war stories." I wanted to protect my wife and children from the evil world I know. Instead of protecting them, I was isolating them.

It is okay to not be okay! Read that again. Now read that again. It is okay to not be okay. The anger, depression, anxiety, etc., are normal feelings. The important thing is that we don't stay there. We feel what we feel. We acknowledge it and move on. If we can't then it is imperative that we ask for help. We must drop the pride and ego and ask for help. Help is out there. We feel alone, but we aren't. We must start somewhere with changing our culture of the macho image. We must stop suffering in silence. There are so many resources available to us. If you can relate to anything I have said, change starts with us. Please don't be a statistic. Please don't put your loved ones through the trauma of losing you. Reach out and someone will reach back.

I have been doing this job for 25 years. I am glad I have learned that I really don't leave work at work. I acknowledge it. I accept it and now is the time to correct it!

ALWAYS STAY FOCUSED

BY A RETIRED OFFICER

One of the true risks of the corrections profession is losing one's sense of compassion for other human beings. When in the presence of their colleagues, many a time Officers told me that a completed or attempted suicide by an incarcerated person didn't bother them, because "It was just an inmate." Yet, oftentimes later on, in private, I was given a different message. The story below shows what can really be going on in the hearts of staff due to the suicidal behavior of incarcerated persons.

It was a Friday afternoon and I was working our Disciplinary Segregation unit in our institution. Though I was late in my career, I liked working in this unit. It was very stressful and extremely tough at times, and busy a lot of the time. It just suited my personality. It was a very challenging environment, and for some strange reason, I really enjoyed it.

It was getting close to quitting time, and it would be my last tier check of my day. As I walked the tier, I looked inside each cell to make sure everything was okay. So far it was. As I passed by one cell, I noticed that the inmate was sitting on the floor of the cell with his back up against the front of the cell. I thought that was a bit unusual, but I passed it off as it was hot in the unit, and he was simply trying to stay cool. I got to the end of the tier and turned around to make my way back to the Officer's area. But something was nagging me. Something about that cell just didn't seem right. That little voice in my head was speaking to me. I always instructed new officers that over time you will develop an intuition that might one day save your life or someone else's, or tune you into something that was happening.

I came up to the cell, and the inmate was still in the same position as when I passed by moments earlier. I stopped this time though. "Hey," I called to him in a loud voice. No response. "Hey! Are you alright?" Again, no response. By this time, I was quickly getting very concerned. I opened the handcuff port, which is what we use to restrain an inmate before bringing them out of their cell. I needed to find out if he was okay. That's when I saw it. A bed sheet was tied around his neck that was blocked by the handcuff port, and it was tight around his neck. He had tied a bedsheet around the bunk, then around his neck, and then sat down on the floor. I quickly called for assistance, and in a matter of seconds fellow officers were at the cell with me. We had the cell door opened, got him cut down, and placed him on the floor to evaluate him. He had a pulse. Within a short time, Health Services was on the scene to evaluate further.

He was transported to a local hospital for a few days before being transferred to the infirmary at another institution. Being a person of faith, I prayed for him all weekend. You see, they are inmates, but they are humans just like us. After checking in when I got to work on Monday morning, I wanted to find out if he had survived. When I found out that he had in fact survived, I voiced a quiet pray of thankfulness, and breathed a huge sigh of relief. I hoped that he got the help that he needed.

This would not be the last suicide attempt that I dealt with in my career, but it was the greatest reminder to never let down, never lose focus. It had been my Friday, and I could have easily been focused on my upcoming weekend instead of the job at hand. I cannot possibly tell you how grateful I was, and thankful for not just the intuition that had been developed in me over the years, but also for the great training our department had given us over the years for just this type of situation.

And I will never forget the phone call I received that evening from a Sergeant at the institution asking me how I was doing. What an incredibly kind gesture! Please take care, and be safe.

SUPPORT THE CAMPAIGN FOR NATIONAL CORRECTIONAL FAMILY APPRECIATION WEEK

We at Desert Waters Correctional Outreach have launched a grassroots campaign to annually celebrate **National Correctional Family Appreciation Week (NCFAW)** during the first week of June, paralleling the National Correctional Officer and Employee Week in May.

Let's recognize the immense value of correctional families, and honor their admirable resilience, commitment, loyalty, courage, tireless efforts, and untold sacrifices.

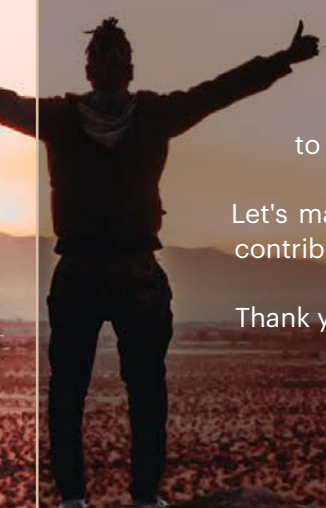
Correctional families are the unsung heroes who provide vital support to our dedicated correctional professionals. Spouses and domestic partners in particular are the glue that holds families together, often quietly and in the background. Formally recognizing their value and contribution is long overdue. Let us not keep correctional families waiting any longer for the recognition they deserve.

Join us in marking the second annual **National Correctional Family Appreciation Week from June 3-9, 2024**. This week, we salute the families who provide steadfast support to our correctional staff. Reach out to colleagues, friends, and community leaders to celebrate these unsung heroes.

To learn more about our **National Correctional Family Appreciation Week** campaign, go to desertwaters.com/familyweek/.

Let's make **National Correctional Family Appreciation Week** a reality, and celebrate the remarkable contributions of these unsung heroes!

Thank you for your support.



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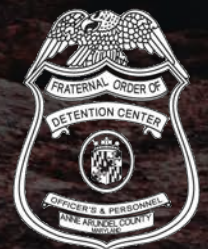
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SOCIAL PURPOSE
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#nationalcorrectionalfamilyappreciationweek

QUOTE OF THE MONTH

“The future belongs to those who
believe in the beauty of their dreams.”

Eleanor Roosevelt



IN MEMORIAM

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Middlesex Sheriff's Office
Massachusetts

Joshua Maloy

Deputy
Adams County Sheriff's Office
Colorado

Marc McIntyre

Sergeant
Spalding County
Georgia

Justin Whipps

East Mississippi Correctional Facility
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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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