

CORRECTIONAL OASIS

BECAUSE ALL ROADS GO BACK TO STAFF WELLNESS

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FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

Greetings,

As we observe **National Correctional Officer and Staff Appreciation Week** this month, it's worth pausing to reflect on what corrections professionals face every single day. A week of recognition, while meaningful, is not enough. What staff truly need is sustained acknowledgment paired with concrete, ongoing efforts to improve their working conditions.

The morale crisis in corrections, now recognized as a widespread burnout and trauma, "Corrections Fatigue" crisis, has become deeply entrenched. No longer occasional or situational, it is systemic and pervasive, creating work environments that are unsustainable if not addressed.

These realities were captured with striking clarity by Lt. Robert Bramblet in his recent guest editorial, [The Invisible Crisis: Examining Morale Issues in Florida's Local Corrections Agencies](#), published in the Q2 2026 issue of American Jails, a publication of the American Jail Association. In his article, Lt. Bramblet gives voice to the daily strain, the cumulative toll, the contributing factors, and the urgent need for meaningful change. As he writes, "...corrections agencies are struggling with pervasive staff burnout and a debilitating lack of retention" (p. 5).

In the article's closing paragraph, he emphasizes the stakes: "The effort to improve officer morale is not a peripheral administrative luxury; it is a direct investment in the core functions of the justice system and an essential matter of public safety. Until agencies commit to competitive compensation, flexible staffing, robust mental health support, and transparent leadership, the high cost of turnover and facility instability will continue to erode the system from within" (p. 79).

This is not an attempt to deepen pessimism or further erode morale, it is a call to attention. The house is on fire.

Remember: Correctional officers are routinely overworked, exposed to abuse, and shaped by trauma yet we expect them to uphold safety, dignity, and constitutional rights without fail.

Caterina Spinaris

“Do You SEE Me?”

Anonymous

This poem reflects what we hear time and again from Correctional Officers across the country. The consistency of these sentiments, often expressed in even more severe terms, should prompt serious reflection on officers' working conditions and the demands placed upon them. It is a stark signal that current efforts are falling short, and that something different, something more effective, is urgently needed.

The situation in many jails and prisons has become untenable. This is not a matter of isolated frustration, but a widespread and deeply rooted strain on the workforce.

Correctional staff are not asking for sympathy. They are asking for solutions—for meaningful relief and support that leads to real, tangible change in their daily working lives.

"Do You See Me?"

Anonymous

*Yeah, real shock—no one wants my job.
Others joke—I've got job security for life.
I work among people shaped by histories
that would make your skin crawl.
I manage people so mentally ill
they shouldn't be here at all.
I see what most people never will—
misery, violence, gore, death.
I'm handed human problems
with no real training to solve them.
I live in the crosshairs.
It's not just shanks and body fluids anymore.
Now it's invisible but lethal drugs, drones, phones.
The public sides with them.
Sometimes, my own supervisors do too.
That makes me the villain.
The rules keep changing.
I'm told to forget what I knew
and master what's new—fast.
The pay?
Low enough that I need the overtime I hate.
After retirement, no pension to count on.
No healthcare to fall back on.*

*Sleep is stolen—
overtime, insomnia, nightmares.
Even in bed, I don't rest.
And yeah, some nights—or days—I drink too much,
just to forget,
just to feel “okay.”
I'm running on fumes.
So is everyone else.
We snap at each other just to get through the shift.
No praise.
No “good job.”
No reminders that any of this matters.
Just the grind.
Call it what it is—
a negative environment.
So I learned to laugh at the dark.
A twisted humor to survive it.
Because without it—
I couldn't walk back in
and do it all again tomorrow.*

Behind these words are **real people carrying real burdens, crying out for help**, day after day. Their experiences call not only for recognition, but for meaningful change because the cost of inaction is too high, for them and for the system they serve.



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What ROI Do You Want?

By Stephanie Rawlings, MSc

I am often asked what the return on investment (ROI) is for staff wellness training in corrections. For years, I struggled to answer that question in a way that felt satisfying to the people asking it—or to me.

So I defaulted to statistics. I cited what little research existed. I referenced outcomes, pilot results, and participation numbers. The reality was, until fairly recently, the only people researching corrections-specific wellness programming were the same agencies offering the programs being assessed for effectiveness. The data pool was narrow, and I knew it.

I also know that during these conversations with administrators at least once I came across as frustrated and defensive. A jail administrator made an offhand comment that I sounded like I was defensively reciting my résumé. At the time, I bristled. But I sat with that feedback for a few months and eventually realized he was absolutely right.

I was frustrated—but not with him.

I was frustrated that the corrections profession, and many other public-facing systems like public safety, child welfare, education, and healthcare have become so laser-focused on proving a product works that **we sometimes absolve ourselves of responsibility for how it is actually implemented. And that, more than anything, is what determines the return on investment.**

ROI



BACK TO TOP

The Vacuum Analogy

To clarify what I mean, consider this example.

I own an expensive vacuum. The kind that maps your house, runs on a schedule, and empties itself. The Cadillac brand. The kind people rave about.



And it sits unused.

Ninety percent of the time, it stays on its home base charger. I jokingly refer to it as “money down the drain”—not because it’s a bad product, but because I don’t fully understand how to operate it or leverage it to its full potential. Friends who own the same type of vacuum cleaner sing its praises.

The difference isn’t the vacuum. It’s how it’s being used.

This is what I see happening with staff wellness programming. We want an ROI in a vacuum—excuse the pun. We ask for proof that a product works without equal regard for how it will be implemented.

How we train it. Who we choose to champion it. The context we place it in. The signaling we pair with it. How we maintain it. How we improve on it. The budget we commit to staff wellbeing resources. Whether leadership behavior aligns with stated values.

I pose to you that those factors have far more impact on ROI than the product itself.

The Credibility Gap

Staff are tired.

They are tired of one-off programs brought in to address what leadership views as “isolated issues,” while they experience the strain as systemic and longstanding. To them, these efforts can feel like fighting a five-alarm fire with a squirt gun.

The decline in staff health and functioning has been generational. Continuing to demand ROI on a \$20,000–\$30,000 training can feel laughable from their vantage point when they have watched millions spent on overtime or on programs targeting specific issues among the incarcerated, often focused on mental health, while their own mental health remains in disrepair.

That disconnect erodes staff’s trust in their leaders.

It signals, whether intentionally or not, that staff wellness is an optional accessory rather than infrastructure.

Wellness Is a System, Not a Product

Staff health and functioning require a system-wide approach. That includes:

- Budgeting for high-quality training and mechanisms to support transfer of learning from the classroom to the floor, including follow-up skills coaching, program evaluation, and clinical oversight
- Aligning policies with stated wellness priorities
- Providing leadership training that reinforces supportive supervision
- Considering advocacy for policy or legislative changes that undermine staff wellbeing
- Addressing workplace culture directly and honestly

Culture, in particular, is a quiet but massive elephant in the room.

***Are we teaching staff wellness principles in leadership training but failing to evaluate whether those principles are applied in practice?
Are performance metrics aligned with the behaviors we claim to value?***

Who is championing this work?

Are they individuals who have worked behind the walls and carry credibility with the people they are trying to support? Do they have lived experience that resonates when we ask staff to be vulnerable and process the hard parts of the job?

And what happens after the training ends?

We often dismiss Employee Assistance Programs outright, but the reality is more nuanced. When I served as the staff wellness administrator for two large state agencies—one in corrections and one in another public safety sector—I received quarterly usage reports from our EAP vendor. No identifying information, just patterns.

In both agencies, more than half of the utilization was related to work issues, and the majority of those were tied to leadership and workplace culture. That data didn't just tell me staff were struggling. It told me where to focus our efforts. If we want to leverage the full potential of wellness programming, we have to be willing to do the work that allows it to succeed.



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The Question We Should Start With

Looking back, my first response to that jail administrator should not have been to cite research or outcomes. It should have been a question:

What ROI are you looking for?

Are you trying to signal to staff that you recognize how hard the job is?

If so, are you going to allow them to attend training on work time without interruption?

What operational barriers exist for its effective implementation and adoption, and what is the plan to address them?

Are you hoping for a comprehensive program that can shift culture over time?

If so, what support are you providing for supervisors, peer support teams, and clinicians who work with staff?

Are you addressing the impact of corrections work on families?

If so, how are you assessing that?

Are you seeking to reduce Corrections Fatigue and increase professional fulfillment among your staff?

What ROI are you looking for?

Are you working to lower rates of sick leave, uses of force, or staff suicides?

If so, how comprehensive, “wholistic,” and long-term is your approach—and over what time frame will you assess change? Because meaningful change doesn’t happen easily or overnight.

If you have a union, what partnership around wellbeing has been built?

Is there an annual, recurring budget for this work? *What policy barriers might undermine it?*

Are you open to ongoing supervisor skills coaching and program evaluation beyond the initial training or other intervention?

Do you have both top-down (administrative) and bottom-up (frontline) support?

Are you measuring success through wellness, retention, or both?

Because while those outcomes—wellness and retention—are directly linked, clarity about the primary goal shapes expectations from day one.

Why This Feels Overwhelming

When I, as a wellness vendor, raise these questions during a product exploration meeting, it can feel overwhelming to the staff involved.

Because it is.

When I worked inside agencies, I was often building the plane in the air—and at least once, it felt like I was doing it during hurricane-force winds without a pilot. That's not uncommon in this line of work.

But the fact that these questions are complex doesn't make them optional. They need to be considered before products are purchased, not after. Otherwise, we risk throwing spaghetti at the wall and hoping something sticks.

For meaningful support to take hold, we can't impulse-buy at the register and then be disappointed later that we forgot the batteries needed to make the thing work.

Can goals change? Absolutely. Is flexibility still essential? Yes.

But setting the table before serving the spaghetti allows for greater efficiency, clearer expectations, stronger partnerships, and better use of already limited budgets.

Returning to the Meaning of ROI

In the end, the most important question is still the simplest one:

What ROI do you want?

We don't need to be embarrassed by that question. The challenges facing corrections are not a secret. The data already tells the story. The strain on staff is visible.

As a vendor, if I understand the outcome you are seeking, I can operate with maximum accuracy. I can tell you which approach is most likely to help you achieve that goal.

I can help you **set realistic expectations for what your level of investment can support.**

Because return on investment means exactly what it says: what you get in return for your investment—both funds and effort.

Somewhere along the way, when it comes to staff wellbeing, we started treating ROI as something that should happen automatically once a check is written.

But in reality, **ROI in staff wellness is built, not bought.**



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Teaching Emotional Intelligence Skills

By Caterina Spinaris, PhD, LPC

*Emotional Intelligence is a process of forming new habits.
There is always room to improve your swing.*

The Foundation of Professional Effectiveness

When we use the term **Emotional Intelligence (EI)**, we are referring to a set of skills that can be intentionally learned and strengthened through practice coupled with corrective feedback. Use of these skills has been shown to have clear benefits for supervisory effectiveness, staff wellness, and ultimately retention in high-stress occupational settings such as corrections.

Working in a correctional environment requires a complex set of self-regulation and relationship-management skills. These skills cannot be mastered at the Training Academy—if they are taught there at all. Rather, they are built, constructed, and strengthened over time through ongoing training, supervised practice with evaluation, and mentoring. In many cases, these skills can make the difference between life and death, or between retaining valuable staff and losing them.

Such skills equip frontline staff with the ability to interact effectively with incarcerated persons from diverse backgrounds. Similarly, these skills enable sergeants, lieutenants, captains, and wardens to influence correctional cultures for the better.



The Limitation of Traditional Training

There is a catch, however. Traditionally, Emotional Intelligence skills training, if provided at all, has relied on telling trainees about these skills, offering examples, and perhaps conducting a few role plays. After that, trainees are largely left on their own.

Within days, most are likely to forget the majority of the training content. As a result, the tools they were introduced to are rarely transferred to the workplace or incorporated into daily interactions with justice-involved individuals or fellow staff.

Cognitive vs. Emotional Learning

Emotional Intelligence—**skillfully managing one's own emotions, attitudes, and responses and those of others**—requires a very different type of learning than acquiring factual information.

In subjects such as history or arithmetic, information is presented for intellectual understanding or memorization. This type of information is straightforward and emotionally neutral, free of personal values, biases, prejudices, or attitudes. Logical thinking and rote memorization are sufficient to learn it.

EI skills, by contrast, follows a very different "brain route." Here are three ways that this type of learning is unique:

1. The Requirement of Repetition

Acquisition of Emotional Intelligence skills requires hands-on doing with repetition. You cannot learn how to drive a vehicle or how to swim by reading a manual or after one try. These skills depend on growing new connections in our brain—laying down new pathways connecting A to B. This happens through the process of neuroplasticity*. Think of adding new strands to a rope each time you use such skills; the rope gets thicker and stronger with every repetition.

****Neuroplasticity** refers to the brain's ability to reorganize itself by forming new neural connections throughout life. In order to form these new connections, nerve cells in the brain need to be stimulated through activity. Neuroplasticity allows nerve cells to compensate for injury and disease, and to adjust their activities in response to new situations or to changes in their environment.*

[Reference](#)

2. The Engagement of the "Heart"

El learning engages both the mind and the values we hold dear—our gut-level beliefs about what constitutes a threat and the emotions associated with those beliefs.

As these skills are learned, core beliefs are often stirred up, along with fears, resentments, and deeply held sensitivities. Unless an instructor is highly skilled at "putting out fires"—addressing participants' anxieties about handling interpersonal situations in new ways—some individuals may shut down or reject the material altogether.

For example, discovering that we have difficulty identifying our own emotions can be an unpleasant surprise. Similarly, when empathy is discussed, sorrow may surface as we realize how much empathy we longed for as children but did not receive. Such moments can leave participants feeling vulnerable—stripped of their defenses or embarrassed.

3. The Challenge of Unlearning

Developing EI skills often runs counter to long-standing ways of managing ourselves. This process requires unlearning counterproductive behaviors and replacing them with more effective approaches.

For example, learning to de-escalate conflict through validation may initially feel uncomfortably "soft," as though using these tools makes us appear weak. We may feel tempted to fall back on familiar strategies such as gruffness, disengaging in frustration, or using force. Instructors must skillfully address this discomfort and actively work through the audience's resistance.

Conclusion: A Continuous Practice

At its core, Emotional Intelligence is a prime example of the habit formation. This type of learning transcends simple memorization; it requires consistent practice, critical evaluation, and ongoing fine-tuning. Much like mastering a game of golf, there is always room to improve one's swing. While the investment of time can be discouraging, the payoff is substantial.

The EI Return on Investment (ROI)

For public safety and corrections agencies that effectively implement EI training and reinforce it through ongoing skills practice, both financial and organizational benefits can be expected to emerge:

Reduced Corrections Fatigue: Diminishing the combined impact of burnout and trauma in the workplace, leading to several key outcomes:

Enhanced Safety: Fewer avoidable confrontations, use-of-force incidents, and misconduct allegations—reducing legal exposure and investigative costs.

Increased Retention: Lower turnover, resulting in reduced recruiting, training, and overtime expenses.

Improved Wellness: Stronger mental health and resilience, leading to decreased sick leave and disability claims.

Healthier Workforce Cultures: More positive daily interactions among staff, leadership, and the incarcerated population, supporting higher morale and greater organizational stability.

Desert Waters has developed Emotional Intelligence trainings, such as [The Supportive Correctional Supervisor™](#) and [True Grit: Building Resilience in Corrections Professionals™](#), that are to be used agency-wide, facility-wide or office-wide. We recommend that these be accompanied by a suggested periodic coaching to practice the skills to become an integral part of the facility's or office's culture.

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Peer Support Perspectives

By Stephanie Rawlings, MSc

Q:

How do I support someone who refuses help but, in my opinion, clearly needs it?

A:

The most difficult thing you will face as a peer support team member is standing face-to-face with someone who in your estimation clearly needs help and knowing you can't fix it. Worse yet, they don't even want the help. It's like watching a house burn while you're holding a hose to a tanker full of water, and the homeowner is yelling, "Get off my lawn."

That tension sits heavy. In corrections, we are problem-solvers by nature and by necessity. Lives depend on it. So when you see someone struggling and you can't step in, it goes against every instinct you have. And if you do this work long enough, you'll learn this truth the hard way: sometimes the job is not to solve the problem.

The hardest part of peer support isn't showing up—it's walking away without closure. Humans crave resolution. We want the story to wrap up neatly, the person to accept help, the situation to improve. But peer support doesn't always work that way.

So what can you do?



First, make it easy for them to come back.

Stay accessible. Let them know through your words and your demeanor that when they're ready, you'll be there. And when that moment comes, meet it without a trace of "I told you so." Instead, thank them for trusting you.

Second, normalize getting help.

Keep it low-key. Share your own experiences if appropriate. When help feels routine, not like a big, dramatic step, it becomes easier for someone to take it.

Third, understand your limits.

You cannot solve their problem, and you cannot accept help on their behalf. Know when it's time to step back. Pushing too hard or stretching the interaction beyond its natural end can create boundary issues and shut the door for future trust.

Fourth, resist the urge to argue or "wake them up" to how bad things are.

You don't know the full picture of their life and you likely never will. Sometimes people only share pieces. Sometimes they share nothing at all and suffer in silence. Meeting them with judgment or urgency can push them further away.

And sometimes, the most powerful thing you can do is sit in the ashes with them. Don't hand them a broom. Don't point out what needs fixing. Just be there—quietly, steadily. Presence without pressure can speak louder than any advice.

Finally, don't carry this alone.

Situations like this run directly against our moral wiring—the instinct to help, to step in, to fix. Find another trusted team member to talk it through with, while maintaining confidentiality. Processing your own frustration and concern is not a weakness; it's necessary. This work is heavy.

Because the reality is, in corrections, it can feel like we're in a daily battle for the wellbeing of our coworkers. And in many ways, we are. But the hardest battle isn't out there—it's staying committed to the principles of peer support. We don't force help. We don't rescue.

We support people in asking for—and accepting—help on their terms.

And one more thing. Allow for the possibility that your coworker may not need help to the degree you believe they do. We can misread situations, especially when we're viewing them through our own lens of concern or past experience. What looks like struggle to one person may be a coping style to another. Staying open to that possibility helps us avoid overstepping and keeps our support grounded in respect rather than assumption.

Desert Waters provides corrections-specific in-person and online [Peer Supporter Training™](#). Contact us for more information.

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IN MEMORIAM

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**New York Department of Corrections
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Ryan C. Peterson

Corrections Officer

**Harrison County Sheriff's Department,
Mississippi**

Isaiah Hampton Watkins

Corrections Officer

**Camden County Department of
Corrections, New Jersey**

QUOTE

of the month

“Compassion is the basis of morality.”

-Arthur Schopenhauer



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Mission

Improving the wellbeing of corrections and other public safety professionals through training, consulting, and other essential resources to foster resilience, mental health, and overall wellness in these challenging professions.

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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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