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Addressing Correctional Officer

Stress

Programs and Strategies

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Addressing Correctional Officer Stress: Programs and Strategies

by
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Issues and Practices in Criminal Justice is a publication series of the National Institute of Justice. Each report presents the program options and management issues in a topic area, based on a review of research and evaluation findings, operational experience, and expert opinion on the subject. The intent is to provide information to make informed choices in planning, implementing, and improving programs and practices in criminal justice.



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Foreword

Stress among correctional officers is widespread, according to research studies and anecdotal evidence. The threat of inmate violence against officers, actual violence committed by inmates, inmate demands and manipulation, and problems with coworkers are conditions that officers have reported in recent years can cause stress.

These factors, combined with understaffing, extensive overtime, rotating shift work, low pay, poor public image, and other sources of stress, can impair officers' health, cause them to burn out or retire prematurely, and impair their family life.

This publication is designed to help correctional administrators develop an effective program to prevent and treat officer stress. Seven case studies illustrate diverse options for structuring a stress program. The following are among the seven programs' distinguishing features that administrators can consider adopting:

- Run the program in house or contract with external agencies.
- Offer professional counseling, peer support, or both.
- Address chronic stress, stress following a critical incident, or both.
- Conduct academy or inservice training.
- Serve family members.

In addition to these operational aspects, the report discusses options for staffing a stress program; explores methods of gaining officers' trust in the program; lists sources of help to implement or improve a stress program; and addresses monitoring, evaluation, and funding issues.

The various program models presented in this report provide options from which correctional administrators can select program features and tailor them to a particular set of needs and resources. The potential payoff attributed to stress programs—such as reduced stress-related costs, improved officer performance, and increased institutional safety—more than justifies careful consideration of this report's observations and conclusions.

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Executive Summary

Addressing Correctional Officer Stress: Programs and Strategies is intended to help correctional administrators develop an effective program for preventing and treating correctional officer stress. The publication describes a variety of approaches for relieving officer stress that correctional administrators can implement.

Why Establish—or Expand—a Stress Program for Correctional Officers?

A stress program can—

(1) **Save** correctional administrators *money* by reducing overtime costs incurred when officers take sick time or quit because of job-related stress.

A former Peer Stress Program officer, now retired but still volunteering, drove me to a jail and dragged out the scheduling sheet for all five of our jails and all 700 employees and showed me that only 2 were on stress leave—the first time the number had been that low in years.

—Dan Noelle, Multnomah County (Oregon) sheriff

After inmates killed a civilian employee, 17 officers took disability leave. Seven never returned. Of the five who went for individual counseling, four returned. [The one who did not was the officer who found the body.] The officers who returned told me that the counseling helped them to come back.

—Cathy Carlson, Safety Office return-to-work coordinator, California Youth Authority

(2) **Improve officer performance** by enhancing staff morale.

Morale is important—working in prisons is a high-stress job. By its nature, the work is often unpleasant; we often operate short of staff; and it is very hot during the summer. People are more productive,

I believe, if their morale is high. We may also have less sick time and less attrition if employees feel loyalty to the department. It is important that the staff know that the department cares about their well-being.

—Gary Johnson, director, Texas Department of Criminal Justice Institutional Division

(3) **Increase institutional safety** by reducing distractions caused by stress.

If an officer is stressed out to the point of agitation, he or she can't manage inmates as well as if he or she were more clear minded. Officers can cause a riot situation or get injured if they come [to work] with a cluttered mind.

—Don Hunter, Collier County (Florida) sheriff

(4) **Improve relations with the union** by working together on a program that can mutually benefit both parties.

We hope to see better labor-management relations as a result of the FOCUS program [the Connecticut Department of Correction stress program]. There should be spinoffs from FOCUS that will improve relations [with the union] in other areas.

—Maria Houser, deputy commissioner for administration, Connecticut Department of Correction

(5) **Show concern for employees** by demonstrating that the department cares about its staff as human beings, not just as employees.

With the stress program, things that were never addressed before get attended to: If there is an accident or an assault and an officer is hospitalized, Dick [Gould, a staff member] is there. He makes sure they are cared for and talks to the officer's wife. A paramilitary organization can get impersonal, so the program gives credence to the fact that the DOC cares about its employees.

—Dennis Cullen, deputy director for labor relations, Massachusetts Department of Correction

How Severe Is Correctional Officer Stress?

A review of the literature and interviews with more than 50 knowledgeable individuals make clear that job-related stress is widespread—and possibly increasing—among correctional officers. Many supervisors (lieutenants and captains) also experience considerable job-related stress.

There are many sources of stress for correctional officers, including—

- Organization-related conditions, such as understaffing, overtime, shift work, and unreasonable supervisor demands.
- Work-related sources of stress, including the threat of inmate violence, actual inmate violence, inmate demands and manipulation, and problems with coworkers.
- A poor public image and low pay.

A few facts illustrate the stressful nature of correctional work:

- Many officers do not answer their home telephones because it might be the institution calling for overtime. Some officers get a second, unlisted telephone number that they keep secret from the department.
- Between 1990 and 1995, the number of attacks on correctional officers in State and Federal prisons jumped by nearly one-third, from 10,731 to 14,165, at a time when the number of correctional officers increased by only 14 percent.
- Except for police officers, the number of workplace nonfatal violent incidents is higher per 1,000 employees for correctional officers than for any other profession, including taxi drivers, convenience store staff, mental health workers, and teachers. From 1992 to 1996, there were nearly 218 incidents for every 1,000 correctional officers, for a total of 58,300 incidents.
- One officer said, “The public hasn’t a clue as to what correctional officers do. Someone asked me just the other day if I beat inmates all the time.” Another officer reported she routinely tells other people, “I work for the State,” refusing to specify her precise job. The

end result is some officers come to feel isolated and estranged from friends and family.

Seven Programs Have Taken Steps to Address Officer Stress

This report presents seven case studies of well-established and replicable stress programs, which vary significantly in their operations and services. The wide variation creates a challenge for correctional administrators, who must decide which models to adopt. However, while the choices may be daunting, the options give commissioners and sheriffs the freedom to tailor program components to their particular department’s needs and resources. In addition, coordinators of the seven programs are available to offer telephone consultation regarding the suitability of their structure and services to other departments (see the end of each case study in chapter 3). A number of correctional officer stress experts are also available to provide assistance in setting up or improving a stress program (see “Individuals With Experience in Stress Programming for Correctional Officers” in chapter 7).

Keys to Program Success

Developing and maintaining a successful stress program is not easy. Correctional and sheriff’s departments need to address several considerations to make their programs effective.

- Appoint talented and dedicated staff who can stand the stress of helping others who experience stress.
- Get the wholehearted participation of top administrators, union officers, line officers, and family members.
- Maintain confidentiality; provide an array of services, not just debriefings, after critical incidents; train supervisors to spot and refer officers who may be experiencing stress; and change the correctional organization itself in ways that will reduce officer stress.
- Monitor program activities and evaluate their effectiveness in reducing stress and saving the department money.

What Does a Stress Program Cost?

Program costs vary tremendously depending primarily on how much programs rely on volunteers and existing staff and the services the programs provide. The Post-Incident Stress Debriefing Program developed by the New York State Department of Correctional Services costs almost nothing because it relies entirely on officers who have received training as debriefers at their own expense or through department training funded by Federal Government grants. Other programs described in this report have annual budgets ranging from \$27,500 to \$87,289.

Departments should recoup their expenses manyfold by reducing excessive sick time and officer turnover. A few departments have data suggesting their programs may have saved them money.

We compared the number of stress-related retirements officers and deputies took after critical incidents for a 10-year period before the contract and found they cost the county \$20 million in unfunded liability to the county retirement system [see the full explanation in chapter 7]. Six years after the [stress] program was in place, there were none. We estimated that the program saved the department \$13 million by avoiding the unfunded liability fee increases. —Deputy Chief James Nunn, San Bernardino Sheriff's Department