

**CARCINOGENIC CORRECTIONS:  
ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS AND CORRECTIONAL EMPLOYEES  
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The modern correctional environment, by choice or circumstance, confines both the employees and the inmates. Because this is an artificial environment, there are many institutional and personal health hazards. Today's inmate population, more than ever before, represents a group of people who are the most prone to a wide range of communicable diseases and poor health: substance abuse and drug addiction, sexually transmitted disease groups (STDs), Hepatitis/A/B/C, tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS, and a full range psychological health problems. Without careful oversight, this is an environment that can easily become a health crisis on both sides of the bars.

Many officers feel that correctional work is more stressful now than ever before. The working environment is perceived as an occupational hazard. Overcrowding, racial tensions, gang activities, institutional violence, forced overtime, complexity of operational technology, and insufficient training are listed as key factors undergirding contemporary work-related stress of correctional officers. Given what the officers contend with, says one psychologist, its not surprising that their rates of alcoholism and divorce rank near the top of the chart, not to mention their dangerously high blood pressure. The qualities of institutional environmental health serve as the framework for responding to and the managing of these stress indicators.

## **NEW GENERATION PROBLEMS - OLD GENERATION STAFF**

What is the method of maintaining environmental health in a correctional facility? Selecting the appropriate environmental health officer is crucial. A full-time environmental health officer, responsible for conducting daily inspections, reporting, and ensuring follow-up is essential. The function and scope of this position are precisely outlined in the Standards of the American Correctional Association (ACA), the Environmental Protecting Agency (EPA), the Office of Safety and Health Standards (OSHA), the American Disabilities Act (ADA), and myriad local public health, civil service, and occupational guidelines.

The titles for this job function may vary from environmental maintenance officer, environmental health or environmental control officer. Ideally the functions should be bifurcated and have a symbiotic operational relationship. Using pre-existing indicator forms, the *environmental health officer* has the primary role to constantly inspect, audit, and report on the environmental health of the facility. The *environmental maintenance officer* has the primary responsibility of immediate repair and on-going maintenance. Both of these environmental specialists should be utilized as instructors in the training of inmates, staff, and supervisors. Preventive maintenance includes the development of an institutional environmental health manual, and, most importantly, a system for reporting environmental health violations.

How do you get the entire workforce on board for maintaining a clean correctional facility? You do it by consciousness raising, by explaining to both correctional officers and inmates the benefits they will receive by a sanitary environment. Remember, the physical plant is a tangible...you can actually use it as a “laboratory for training” and for “symbolic awareness control.” For example, unscheduled tours and inspections of clinics, mess halls, and housing areas, sanitation and sewage are highly effective. These inspections, if conducted by the Warden and accompanied by command officers and supervisors, re-enforce the delegated responsibility for environmental health oversight. For example, common areas of a cell block should be cleaned three times a day, including shower and toilet areas; garbage and refuse should also be immediately taken from the cell blocks at least three times a day.

How do you supervise personal hygiene among the inmate population? The supervision of personal hygiene is a delicate and dangerous situation. Inmates complain about the individual inmate that is “gamey.” This situation often signifies an individual who may be experiencing emotional/mental health problems. An individual who doesn’t keep his body clean is usually not going to keep his cell clean. The danger in these situations is that inmates may take the situation into their own hands: throw the person in the shower themselves. One solution for preventing unsafe situations is to provide a briefing newsletter reporting on the *tricks-of-the-trade*. For instance, aberrant inmates concealing milk containers until the contents are rancid, used for fuel for throwing at officers or other inmates. This trick is regularly accompanied with the throwing of feces, urine and spit (The New York State Legislature has passed an “feces-throwing” law to penalize these disgusting acts).

Maintaining environmental health in the variety of contemporary “ad hoc” facilities such as tents, sprung-structures, trailers, and prefabricated-dormitories present unique environmental control problems. These facilities, often “thrown-up in haste” and filled with highly transient inmate populations, create serious custodial housing problems (e.g. smoking in temporary structures, overuse of pre-fab latrine-areas, high incidence of corroded materials, rotting waste and sewage back up problems). These “temporary” facilities have a tendency to become “permanent” facilities. They may also constitute vulnerable escape-risk features as well as unique and precarious fire and infrastructure hazards.

## **THE PHYSICAL PLANT**

There have been enormous changes in correctional architecture in the last several decades. New generation correctional facilities have brought more light into the darkness of confinement. They are better designed for the flow of people and enhanced security. However, new generation correctional facilities are also identified with a new generation of security, custody, and inmate care problems. They haven been perceived as a panacea to traditional custodial oversight. Veteran correctional officers are now expressing concerns that these new generation facilities are becoming “incubators” ...sealed prisons...where there is little to no internal human interaction. Communication is done through microphones and wall speakers, wristbands triggering door and gate movements, and in providing access to inmate program services. In this atmosphere, a sense of “Robo-Cop” is occurring among the officers and, concurrently, a sense of “Silence of the Lambs” is occurring among the inmates. There is a potential for extreme psychological deprivation on both sides of the bars

From a historical perspective, the public health aspect of this situation is intriguing. The majority of our new generation facilities, as with most modern office buildings, are operated as “sealed buildings” with controlled, ventilated, air systems...we are feeding back air (like on a plane). The air filtration system should be checked weekly and monthly inspections of the entire physical infrastructure are essential. It is the responsibility of management to make sure that these venting system are properly maintained. Unfortunately, in the scheme of running a correctional facility the inspection of air filters and vents are usually “ the last stop on the A-train.”

How is the quality of inspection ensured? Does the warden have access to the architectural plans...wardens change...plans get lost, the maintenance staff is changing all the time --- retirements, transfers? How is effective oversight guaranteed? Every facility should have an environmental health manual. This manual should clearly state management's responsibilities, the responsibilities of supervisors, officers and support staff (food service staff, plumbing, electricians). The manual must be secured in the warden's office and include a scaled-down version as a check-off sheet for every supervisor and line correctional officer and the operations control center – side-by-side with the master-binder of institutional rules and regulations. It should include an addendum, consisting of the parallel correctional standards of the American Correctional Association and Commission on Accreditation in Corrections. The interface between private/contracted inmate service personnel and departmental security and environmental control personnel represent a new domain of oversight concern. If there is no environmental health manual available or if supervisors and officers are unable to interpret the manual...the evacuation plan...the technology...the facility floats in a Titanic drift.

#### **ADVANTAGES/DISADVANTAGES OF NEW GENERATION FACILITIES**

New generation modes of inmate-sabotage acts are far more effective than plugging-up the toilets in the old traditional jail or prison. Depending on the level of computerization, the growing wonderland of Star-Trek features of modern correctional facilities offers new opportunities to sabotage the physical plant. A parallel to this situation is found in the changing patterns of auto theft and theft from autos. With the new generation cars, forget the theft of the radio or tape deck; the "score" is now in stealing the "computer chip." In one swift hit the modern high-tech car reverts to a metal armadillo...barely able to move. Correctional officers now report incidents of inmates short-circuiting the entire high-tech locking systems via the simple act of putting a piece of metal or toothpaste cap between a door and the electric jam. For the inmates, jamming the institutional computerized security system is considered a highly prized sabotage attack. Often in these situations, staff could not remember the emergency operational training and guidelines required to rectify the

crisis. (Let's face it: most people can't even properly program their own VCRs.) Where was the back-up plan?

## **EVERY SYSTEM SHOULD HAVE A BACK-UP SYSTEM**

In many cases, the computer-techno system has not advanced pragmatically into the inherent basic institutional operations. How many other correctional systems have had to turn off this hi-tech stuff and revert back to the old system? In fact, in some cases the high tech system could not even be turned off! How many facilities have long stretches of vacant cells that they can't use because they can't lock the doors? High-tech breakdowns have resulted in law suits, retrofitting costs of converting cell areas to dormitories requiring more officers, more staff --- we end up "Rube Goldberging" the entire system. Ironically, the litany of environmental health issues effecting both the keeper and the kept are as acute today as they were in the Bastille of past times. They mirror the increasing public health role of correctional agencies in modern society.

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