

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.

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.

Sources of Correctional Officer Stress:

Job-related stress is widespread and, in many cases, severe-and possibly increasing among correctional officers. Many supervisors (lieutenants and captains) also experience considerable job-related, stress, as do superintendents and wardens.

An inherent source of stress for correctional officers is supervising individuals who do not want to be confined and, as a result, try to manipulate staff to make their conditions of confinement as tolerable as possible.

The prison or jail organization, including understaffing, overtime, rotating shift work, and supervisor demands, creates stress for many officers.

Work-related sources of stress for officers include the threat of inmate violence, actual inmate violence, inmate demands and manipulation, and problems with coworkers.

External stresses for some correctional officers include a poor public image and low pay.

Stress can cause impaired health, burnout, early retirement, and impaired family life.

Many offenders serving increasingly longer sentences do not fear punishment or respect the authority of correctional officers

There are more gangs-and more dangerous gangs-in prison.

WHICH OFFICERS ARE MOST LIKELY TO EXPERIENCE STRESS?

According to one researcher, "At this point, there seems to be no clear consensus as to which factors can be consistently correlated with stress in corrections:' Some studies have found that

officers working higher security level institutions or units experience more stress than officers working medium or minimum security areas, while other studies have found no differences in stress levels among security levels.' Staffing an administrative segregation unit can, paradoxically, feel less stressful than working on other units (because inmates are locked down almost the entire day) or more stressful (because every Inmate is a potential time bomb). The evidence regarding stress levels associated with working in direct supervision facilities is similarly inconsistent.

The apparent stresses of a specific post or assignment may be offset by its perceived benefits. For example, tower duty may be boring but valued because it involves little or no inmate contact. All 13 officers posted to the North Infirmary Command on Rikers Island and Goldwater Hospital on Roosevelt Island in New York City for inmates with AIDS saw the assignment as a good one because it was not a prison setting, there were no captains or deputy wardens supervising them on the wards, the inmates were usually more manageable than the general population, the pay was good, and no one else wanted the position-the officers did not have to play politics to get or keep It!

Still other conditions can influence stress levels. Officers who work in rural settings may be related to or personally know other staff-or inmates-which can lead to concerns about privacy. Inmates in jails may present different problems for correctional officers than prison inmates because so many jail detainees have just come into the facility right off the streets. In addition, rapid turnover in jails creates its own set of stresses: While correctional officers must not only establish their authority and make clear the ground rules to a constantly changing population, they are at the same time frequently deprived of the satisfaction of seeing inmates improve their lot through the educational, religious, vocational, and other programs prisons can offer their longer term inmates.

Studies that have attempted to determine whether officers' stress levels are associated with length of time on the job, educational level, race, and gender have produced inconsistent findings.

Stress Can Create Several Significant Problems for Officers.

Excessive stress can result in at least four serious problems for officers:

It may result in physical illnesses, ranging from heart disease to eating disorders. It may also precipitate substance abuse among susceptible individuals."

It can lead to burnout among officers."

It has been implicated in excessive disability retirements." Even when physical ailments are the reason for the disability, the illnesses may have been brought on by stress.

Correctional officers experiencing excessive stress may damage their family relationships by displacing their frustration onto spouses and children, ordering family members around just as they issue commands to inmates (one officer locked his son out of the boy's room and searched it), and becoming distant by withholding information about their work that they feel family members will not understand. Shift work and overtime can create stress by preventing officers from attending important family functions.

As discussed above, the effects of stress on correctional officers can degrade their ability to perform their responsibilities in the prison or jail in ways that compromise institutional safety, cost money, and create stress for other staff. The remainder of this article addresses the approaches stress programs have implemented to prevent and treat officer stress with the goals of enhancing the officers' lives and improving the operations of the correctional facilities in which they work.

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

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

Improve officer performance by enhancing staff morale.

Increase institutional safety by reducing distractions caused by stress.

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

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

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 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.

ADDRESSING STAFF BURNOUT

Because of the intense involvement in other people's problems required of therapists, the counseling profession in general can easily lead to burnout. Peer supporters can also be subject to burnout. Clinicians and peer supporters in correctional officer stress programs may be especially vulnerable to burnout because much of the counseling they do and support they provide revolve around issues of injury and death and because counselors and supporters may periodically have to work long hours, including nights and weekends.

According to James Hollencamp, the Massachusetts Stress Unit's coordinator, "Our biggest problem is dealing with burnout of our own staff because they won't take time off because they feel needed by their clients. The peers are entitled to 4 weeks' vacation a year, but few ever take all the available time."

There are several steps peer supporters and clinicians can take to prevent burnout:

Get daily physical exercise.

Meet with or telephone each other to discuss and resolve problems of work overload. The Counseling Team teaches trainees that "Just because you're a peer doesn't mean you can't be stressed by a client. Go talk to a peer yourself." Dick Gould, one of the Massachusetts DOC Stress Unit's five peers, tells the other peer supporters, "If you get overloaded with pressure, call me:

- Get professional help when personal problems develop. John Carr, Family Service Society's director, says, "Helpers are the last people to ask for help, How can I have marital problems when I'm handling three domestic violence cases a week?"

Debrief together after providing support or counseling after a critical incident. In Texas, members of the regional team debrief the unit team after a crisis to make sure the peer supporters are all right. Similarly, New York State's debriefing teams meet among themselves after each session to make sure no one goes home upset.

Above all, set limits on how much time to spend providing support or counseling, and refuse on occasion to accept assignments. According to Dick Gould, "We have a tendency to try to fix everything. " Kristy Paine, a lieutenant with the Riverside (California) Sheriffs Department, says, "I learned [during peer training with The Counseling Team] that it's OK to say my plate is full, and I can't help you. We were taught a graceful way out: Tell them, 'Your problem is very important, but I have my own problem just now. So let me refer you to someone else.'"

POST TRAUMA RESOURCES MENU OF RESPONSES TO A CRITICAL INCIDENT

Post Trauma Resources (PTR) chooses from among a variety of interventions in helping officers and departments respond effectively to critical incidents.

Below is a partial list of the organization's menu of available responses.

Telephone hotline, providing 24-hour crisis counseling to all employees between the time the institution first notifies, PTR of the incident and when the first onsite services are provided.

Telephone check-ins, before going onsite, with individuals reported to have been most affected by the incident or to be currently experiencing emotional symptoms independently of the incident to make sure they are all right, to provide basic information about initial stress reactions, and to offer further help.

Humanitarian assistance, including coordinating the benefits to which the individuals are entitled.

Immediate onsite response, assisting employees in leaving the site of the incident, reconnecting with their families, and resting.

Crisis intervention, involving spending time individually with critical incident responders.

Psychological debriefing, the group meetings that have been the mainstay of critical incident response.

Educational debriefing, more like a seminar or workshop that teaches basic information and support skills after an incident to individuals with less exposure to the crisis.

Post-trauma Individual counseling that focuses on developing the skills necessary to facilitate recovery

Followup debriefings, 10 days to 3 weeks after the initial debriefings, to determine who is experiencing continuing difficulties and refer them to counseling.

Telephone followup to check in with officers and show continued concern for those still struggling with recovery.

Return-to-work strategies for helping employees increase their exposure gradually to the prison or jail and tasks associated with the incident and for monitoring their reactions carefully.

STRIKING WHILE THE IRON IS HOT

The best time to institute organizational change is after a critical incident (eg., riot, hostage taking, officer suicide) when administrators and local government leaders will want to be seen as individuals who care about the wellbeing of correctional staff and may therefore support steps to prevent a recurrence of the incident.

After inmates killed an officer at a California Youth Authority facility, staff blamed management for the murder because they felt the killing would not have occurred if there had been adequate staff on duty. After 2 weeks of debriefings, Nancy Bohl suggested to upper management that the department should get staff involved in the institution's policymaking process to reduce the officers' anger. As a result, the facility broke the staff into several groups, assigning each group

to examine one department policy and recommend how it could be improved. The Youth Authority then implemented the feasible suggestions. According to Cathy Carlson, the facility's Safety Office return-to-work coordinator.

It was a terrific idea. For example, the facility used to have inmates go to the Youth Authority hospital and crowd into the waiting room, tying up officers who had to transport the inmates and leaving their facilities short staffed. One staff group said, why not have a nurse go to the facilities and have onsite sick call? We implemented the change.

Bohl also recommended that the superintendent and assistant superintendent make themselves visible - "talk to the staff, go to the control, centers, let them know you're here just as they are." They did. Later, Carlson and the assistant superintendent brought food they baked to the institution on Thanksgiving and Christmas. "We piggybacked this idea off Nancy's idea to be visible:" Carlson said. "Staff have said to me, 'My gosh, the super was in the control center at 6:00 am. this morning and actually chatted with me.' "

DO MIDDLE LEVEL CORRECTIONAL MANAGERS EXPERIENCE STRESS?

Midlevel managers (lieutenants and captains) interviewed report they experience several types of stress:

Dealing with subordinates (in particular line officers acting without consultation), poor line officer productivity, the need to discipline or terminate officers, and contending with understaffing-including having to ask stressed- out line officers to work overtime. Attempting to follow unclear policies and procedures and frequent modifications to policies and procedures as top- level supervisors change their minds or are replaced. Completing all the required documentation and paperwork-yet still being on the line to supervise and be seen by line officers.

A lieutenant with a State department of corrections reported that the stress is worst for middle management: You decide on staff deployment and everyone looks to you for guidance. You make the critical decisions; as watch commander, you run the prison. On two shifts out of three, I'm the highest ranking person in the facility because the higher-ups leave at 4:00 p.m. It's a tremendous responsibility. The decisions are tough. Also, someone is Monday morning quarterbacking you, your decisions are scrutinized, and they're life-and-death decisions.

Top correctional administrators also experience stress. Wardens, deputy wardens, and jail administrators may be saddled with a "24/7" commitment-carrying a beeper around the clock. They have to deal with typically adversarial labor relations with the officers' union, staff hostility or mistrust, pressures from central administration, political scapegoating, and media exposure. Furthermore, top-level administrators are typically reluctant to share their feelings of uncertainty, helplessness, or inadequacy with anyone for fear of appearing weak, incompetent, or indecisive.