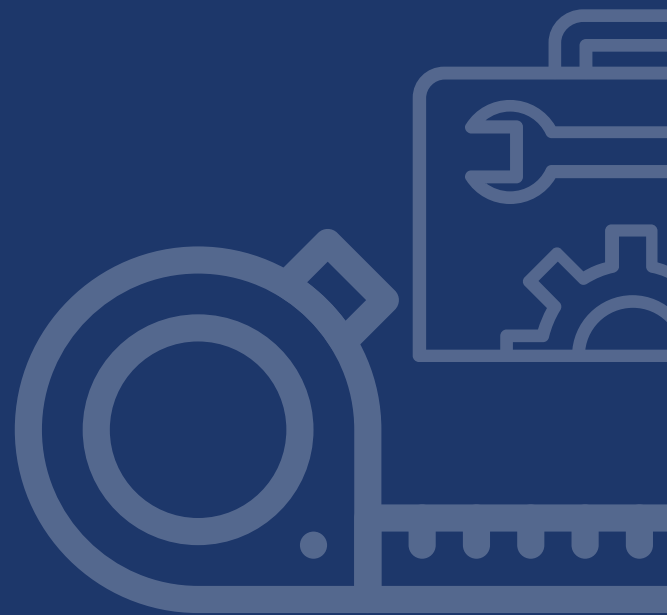


*Wellness Works:
Principles for
Building a
Best-in-Class
Correctional
Staff Wellness
Program*



INTRODUCTION

The wellness crisis in corrections has reached epidemic proportions. Across the country, correctional officers and other frontline staff experience the highest rates of PTSD, suicide, divorce, substance abuse, and mortality among all public safety employees.^[1] These issues—coupled with the absence of wellness initiatives grounded in evidence, shaped by recipient feedback, and regularly assessed for effectiveness—have significantly contributed to widespread staffing shortages, high burnout, and low retention rates.^[2] To address this crisis, One Voice United embarked on a three-year, multi pronged approach to develop a list of wellness principles that would be available to all correctional staff and to advise correctional agencies in their attempts to address these issues and reverse these deadly trends.

This is a living document developed with the input of thousands of correctional staff and fine-tuned by clinicians and professionals. As the field of correctional wellness continues to expand, these principles will need to be reviewed and refined. One Voice United has established a National Wellness Advisory Council (NWAC) to address this need. The NWAC will convene regularly to review new research and to provide suggestions to modify these principles to adapt to new knowledge and techniques. One Voice United will continue to survey staff to ensure that the needs they identify are what drives modifications and measures overall success.

The internet references cited in this publication were valid as of the date of release. Because websites and URLs frequently change, One Voice United cannot guarantee the continued accuracy or availability of these external sources.

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METHODOLOGY

One Voice United's process for developing these principles was multi faceted. The methods we employed and the manner in which we gathered the information included: Surveys and Listening Sessions, Blue Ribbon Commission on Wellness, International Outreach, National Wellness Advisory Council, Annual Corrections Conference.

Details on each method can be found in the appendix.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the following who made this final product possible: Thousands of correctional staff who participated in our surveys and listening sessions; Union leaders who dedicated their time, energy, and resources in making much of this possible and whose credibility and support sustained us throughout the process; Members of the NWAC for volunteering dozens of hours and time away from home to help address this crisis, and to whom we could not be more grateful for their professional guidance, service, and support; Correctional leaders who witness this crisis in their jurisdictions and have shown the courage to lean in on this even when it is unpopular.

We are deeply grateful to the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) for their funding and commitment to advancing the wellness of those who serve in corrections, without which this work would not have been possible. We also extend our heartfelt thanks to the CorWellness team for their expert guidance and dedicated project support throughout this process. CorWellness is a national initiative that provides no-cost training, custom agency support, and resources to enhance the safety, wellness, resilience, and retention of correctional officers and staff.

This project was supported by Grant No. 15BPJA-22-GK-01564-JAGT awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Office for Victims of Crime, and the SMART Office. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

There is much more to do, but as a result of the contributions of all of you, we believe we have taken a major step forward. Thank you.

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#1 Staff Involvement in the Development, Implementation, Evaluation and Modification of the Wellness Program

Effective staff wellness interventions begin with actively listening to those who perform this job every day. Efforts that skip this step in favor of pre-determined solutions, even if offered by outside experts, are likely to miss the mark and lack buy-in from frontline staff.

The first step in addressing correctional staff wellness is asking, "What's causing you stress?" Establishing credible mechanisms to solicit feedback directly from staff will aid in uncovering real issues while navigating the profession's deep skepticism.

A cultural wellness assessment survey to identify baseline conditions and needs or listening sessions, conducted by an independent and confidential source, can provide valuable insights when developing a meaningful wellness program (*see the One Voice United FOCUS survey referenced below*).

Next, staff should be directly involved in shaping possible solutions. Every stage of the process, from planning to evaluation, should include their input and occur during work hours to ensure meaningful participation.

A wellness committee should be formed that includes a staff psychologist or practitioner to serve as a professional advisor along with peer-selected staff members who help steer the program. The professional advisor ensures alignment with mental health guidelines, while staff members maintain focus on practical, mission-driven initiatives.

Participation instills ownership, which in turn drives engagement, enthusiasm, pride, and long-term program sustainability. Empowering staff to define and address their challenges also enhances their sense of agency, a key element in advancing wellness.

Given the nature of corrections, and the likelihood that program modification and employee needs will change over time, wellness programs design, administration, and the metrics used to evaluate them must remain flexible. Evaluation tools should be constructed by an independent third party to ensure objectivity and credibility.

For the purpose of this initiative, we define "wellness" as mental, emotional, and physical health.

“

When directives are top down (and don't involve staff) usually there are mistakes made when interpreting those directives.

anonymous survey respondent

“

When you hear about the Norway model for corrections, remember what made that a success is the Norway model of co-responsibility and cooperation between unions and employers.

Tor Erik Larsen

Evidence

Studies have shown that programs are more successful when employees are directly involved in program development and implementation.

“Employee involvement teams typically perform to a higher standard because they feel they have a stake in the organization. Leveraging their input helps you to provide more autonomy to your workforce.”

Employee Involvement: The Top Benefits and How to Improve It | LeggUP

Over the past several years, employee surveys conducted by One Voice United show that while some promising mental health and wellness programs exist, they are often underutilized, poorly aligned with staff needs, or missing altogether. Additionally, staff have characterized their Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) as being minimal in scope or not used because they were not involved in program design or development, leading to a lack of trust and overall engagement. It is this disconnect that makes evaluation not only necessary but essential to bridging the divide between program availability and actual impact. Without ongoing evaluation, rooted in data and staff experiences and feedback, agencies can't know what's working, what's not, or how to improve.



How to measure once the principle is in place

The percentage of “line staff” serving on the committee and who perceive the wellness program as adequately responding to the needs and concerns of staff.

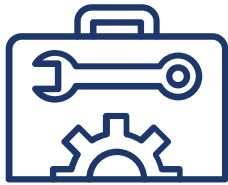
%



Tools and practical applications

- **One Voice United FOCUS Survey**
- **5 Tips on Involving Staff**
- **Activity: *In Our Own Words***
- ***Correctional Workforce Stress Ranking***

(details on next page)



Principle #1 **Tools and practical applications**

One Voice United FOCUS Survey



The *One Voice United - FOCUS Survey* (which stands for *Feedback On Culture, Understanding, and Staff Survey*), is a confidential comprehensive evaluation designed to test the wellness culture within correctional facilities. It aims to gauge frontline staff's perceptions of various aspects of their work environment, including safety, support, communication, training, facility conditions, and personal well-being. The assessment seeks to reduce speculation and gather input from frontline staff to help inform an agency's understanding of the "state of wellness" via personal yet quantifiable and comparable measurements for assessing the effectiveness of wellness initiatives. **Here is a link** to an overview of the assessment and more information on how to administer this survey within your state, department or organization.

reference link: https://onevoiceunited.org/ovu_focus_survey-overview-doc/

5 Tips on Involving Staff



The **5 tips on involving staff** are actionable strategies for addressing workforce challenges in correctional facilities. They emphasize the importance of acknowledging the current staffing crises, prioritizing safety, engaging staff as key stakeholders, promoting mental health and wellness, and recognizing the vital role of correctional professionals to foster a supportive and effective work environment.

reference link: <https://onevoiceunited.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Engagement-Tips-Best-Practices-OVU-Wellness-Principles.pdf>

Activity: In Our Own Words



To develop a shared understanding of what is most impacting the lives of correctional officers and what they most need, small groups will work together to answer the questions on the **“members hope/needs/dreams” poster** (each group has their own printout to work on). Once each group has answered the questions they will then report out to the full group and end by identifying key themes.

reference link: <https://onevoiceunited.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/InOurOwnWords-OVU-Wellness-Principles.pdf>

Correctional Workforce Stress Ranking

The Correctional Workforce Stress Ranking sheet outlines the factors contributing to stress and trauma among correctional staff. Furthermore, they provide a means to identify key stressors, as indicated by staff, to inform strategies for creating a more supportive work environment and address areas of immediate concern.

Download the document here (<https://onevoiceunited.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Stress-Ranking-OVU-Wellness-Principles.pdf>).



#2 Mental Health Skills Training

Fortunately, the need to physically engage and use self-defense tactics is not a daily occurrence for most correctional staff members. (Although there are exceptions, especially in higher security units). However, the job can be psychologically challenging on virtually every shift. Today's training academies understandably focus on physical self-defense as those dangers are well known and very real. What the statistics tell us, however, is that a greater emphasis should be placed on training staff to recognize and manage the psychological impacts of their work. Mental health skills training on par with physical self- defense training should be a requirement in all academy training protocols. Agencies are recommended to seek out evidence- and research-based models in developing this skill set and hire unbiased, professionally trained mental health specialists to develop and oversee all mental health skills training initiatives.

“

The state initiated a Desert Waters program that was very successful that they intended to expand and then shut it down – I think because it was too successful and opened wounds.

anonymous survey respondent

“

Most parole officers don't have any training on emotional intelligence and de-escalation techniques. We deal with explosive personalities at our office, in the field, and with each other. The training is desperately needed.

*annual corrections
conference attendee*

Evidence

Correctional staff lead all other public safety employees in the areas of PTSD (34.1% for custody staff, 27% for noncustody) and a suicide rate that is twice what it is for police officers (38/100K to 19/100K).

*Denhof, M. D., & Spinaris, C. G. (2013). Depression, PTSD, and Comorbidity in United States Corrections Professionals: Prevalence and Impact on Health and Functioning. Desert Waters Correctional Outreach.
Ferdik, F. V., & Smith, H. (2017). Correctional Officer Safety and Wellness Literature Synthesis. US Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice.*



How to measure once the principle is in place

Does a facility have mental health training and how often is it offered? Statistical data should be maintained on PTSD rates and suicides to track the impacts of existing training protocols.



Tools and practical applications

The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) is a great resource in helping execute this principle. See next page for a few tools from NAMI.



Principle #2

Tools and practical applications

National Alliance on Mental Illness Resources

Corrections officers face challenging situations that few others can fully understand. Encountering unthinkable experiences is part of the job, which is why peer support is essential. Fellow officers understand these realities, share the same perspective, and are prepared to help their colleagues through difficult times. No one has to face these challenges alone.

- **Responder Health** (<https://www.responderhealth.com>) For First Responders by First Responders. Responder Health offers first responders and their families confidential and full-service solutions that support them through stress and traumatic events, and provide them with the education, resources and community they need to live healthy, happy lives.



- **Next Rung** (<https://www.nextrung.org>) offers free peer support via talk, text, social media messaging, email, Skype, or FaceTime. If you are in immediate need of help, please text "SUPPORT" to 1-833-NXT-RUNG (698-7864).



- **American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress** (<https://www.aaets.org/frontline-groups>) offers online support groups for emergency responders and health care workers.



#3 Family Awareness and Outreach

The tendency to want to protect one's loved ones from the reality of the dangers that correctional staff face is natural, but not sharing what staff witness at work can take a tremendous toll on mental health and relationships. Unlike many professions, corrections requires an ability to deny one's own compassion and empathy at any given moment. This changes a person and often the first ones to notice and be impacted are family and friends. If alerted to these signs early in the process as part of a cadet's academy program and in ongoing ways, family members can add another layer of protection that something has or is changing that needs to be addressed. Corrections not only changes staff, its impact can change the way our loved ones view and interact with us. Family members should be provided with the training and resources they need to navigate the ups and downs their relationships will undergo when a loved one has a career in corrections. For far too long, we have failed to realize that the negative psychological impacts the carceral system has on staff and those incarcerated extend far beyond the walls of our prisons and jails affecting our families, friends, and relationships.

“

My mom tried everything she had in her toolbox to try to help him [my dad], but unfortunately, we just did not have the right tools.

***Bryanna Mellen, OVU Blue
Ribbon Commission Testifier***

“

I wish more families understood how and why we act the way we do.

***annual corrections
conference attendee***

“

I fully encourage this portion of awareness and outreach. Had I known this 28 years ago I would likely have a different relationship with my family.

***annual corrections
conference attendee***

Evidence

When someone accepts a job in corrections, their families unwittingly do too. Family members of correctional staff rarely have the opportunity to learn what their loved ones will go through as they embark on their corrections career. Additionally, we have found through surveys, group discussions, and one-on-one interactions that in most instances staff rarely speak with loved ones about the day-to-day stresses that often accompany such a career. By closing this gap, both staff and family members will be better able to help each other and identify warning signs that the corrections career is negatively impacting their relationships. An informed family can provide a tremendous safety net for correctional staff's mental wellbeing and their own as well.



How to measure once the principle is in place

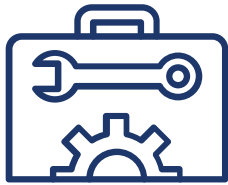
Does the agency have a family outreach program? Are resources and contact points provided to correctional families? Is there an orientation program for staff families when staff attend the academy?



Tools and practical applications

- **Correctional Family Wellness Awareness Program**
- **Desert Waters Correctional Oasis Issue**

(details on next page)



Principle #3

Tools and practical applications

Correctional Family Wellness Awareness Program

The One Voice United Family Wellness Awareness Program was developed by a team of frontline correctional staff and their loved ones with two major goals in mind: 1. to help families understand the psychological challenges a career in corrections poses to the employee and their loved one and to provide tools to mitigate those challenges, and 2. to train teams to facilitate these training sessions in their jurisdictions and to make it available to as many staff as possible. To learn more and bring this program to your state, department, or organization **visit here**. (reference link: <https://onevoiceunited.org/ovu-family-wellness-overview-doc/>)



Desert Waters Correctional Oasis

Desert Waters Correctional Outreach (DWCO) dedicated **a full issue to the families of correctional staff and other public safety staff in its monthly publication *Correctional Oasis***. DWCO was founded in 2003 to address the profound stressors and unique mental health challenges faced by correctional staff and their families. Through specialized wellness programs, trauma-responsive care, and research-based initiatives, DWCO provides vital resources and training to improve the wellbeing and resilience of those working in corrections.



(reference link: <https://desertwaters.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Correctional-Oasis-06.2024.pdf>)

#4 Annual Wellness Training

Studies have proven that stress is cumulative and unless addressed becomes more toxic with time. Annual wellness training in stress management, mental health awareness, developing emotional intelligence, and de-escalation skills should be mandated for all employees. Training should emphasize not just how to survive a career in corrections but how to thrive. Training should be realistic, practical, effective, and mission driven. Annual training cannot be a matter of simply checking a box every 12 months. One example would be the work of Dr. Michael Pittaro, Ph.D, Northampton County Director of Corrections, "Emotional intelligence is a powerful component of leadership which pertains to the ability to recognize, understand, and positively manage your own emotions, the emotions of others, and among groups. Emotional Intelligence Training (EIT) can effectively address some of the multifaceted challenges that corrections professionals frequently encounter, many of which contribute to higher-than-average levels of stress, burnout, and organizational attrition." The four components of Dr. Pittaro's EIT focus on self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management.

“

'I am not fine.' I've heard I'm fine over and over again. It becomes a mantra and if you say it enough you begin to believe it.

anonymous survey respondent

“

We're hungry for a wellness program. This is going to save lives.

Eric Murray

“

It's an environment that is essentially a minefield of fear, desperation, distrust, and uncertainty.

Stephen Walker

Evidence

Studies show that PTSD can be cumulative and is not always the result of a single defining incident. “Cumulative PTSD can be even more dangerous than PTSD caused from a single traumatic event, largely because cumulative PTSD is more likely to go unnoticed and untreated.”

Cumulative PTSD In Law Enforcement - United Police Fund



How to measure once the principle is in place

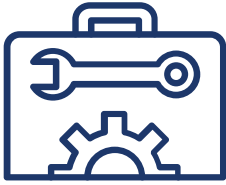
Is there annual wellness training for staff? If so, is it hands on or virtual? In house or third party? Track off-time usage rates (sick leave, FMLA utilization, self-separation from service) over time to evaluate the effectiveness of the training. Track retention and Employee Assistance Programs utilization trends.



Tools and practical applications

- **California Correctional Peace Officers Association (CCPOA) and California Correctional Peace Officers Association Benefit Trust Fund (CCPOA BTF) Mental Health Resource**

(details on next page)



Principle #4

Tools and practical applications

CCPOA and CCPOA BTF Mental Health Resource

The California Correctional Peace Officers Association Benefit Trust Fund fosters a culture of wellness, courage, and support for correctional officers by addressing the stigma around mental health. It provides comprehensive services, including healthcare coverage, round-the-clock mental health access, peer-led support, and legal and financial assistance. Through open conversations and education, the program normalizes vulnerability, empowering officers to seek help without shame. This holistic, empathy-driven approach shifts workplace culture and promotes resilience, strengthening both the individuals and the broader corrections community. **Learn more about this program and how it can be replicated**

(<https://onevoiceunited.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/CCPOA-and-CCPOA-BTF-Mental-Health-Resources-OVU-Wellness-Principles.pdf>).



Support Teams: Principles 5A-5C

#5A Mentoring

When new staff enter the academy, they often have limited exposure to the realities of the occupation. Many hesitate to ask basic questions, not out of lack of interest, but due to a workplace culture that doesn't always promote or encourage seeking guidance. This dynamic undoubtedly contributes to high turnover and vacancy rates, with reported statistics suggesting that "security officer vacancy rates reached a high of 55% and turnover rates as much as 48%" ([Source: ACA, Corrections Today, Jan/Feb 2024](#)). It is important therefore that new hires have a mentor or "coach" they can trust. Mentors provide skills-based support for new staff and deal with issues surrounding policy, procedure, and the culture of the facility. These coaches can play a key role in helping new staff assimilate and experience a smoother transition into a career in corrections. A mentorship program can also provide the opportunity to activate interested and qualified retirees to assist new cadets. This could add additional meaning to retirees' post-corrections careers and retain their value to the agency.

“

I got very lucky when I started on the 3x11 shift and got grabbed up by some senior staff to show me the ropes. Some cadets may have had a whole different career if they had a good mentor to follow.

anonymous survey respondent

“

I love this idea and would like to see it at the beginning stage of hiring and continue on a regular basis.

*annual corrections
conference attendee*

Evidence

Mentorship is key to both confidence and connections and can be a powerful tool for organizations. Mentorship provides someone with an open line of communication to learn and ask questions as well as create their own career projections. Additionally, depending on how the program is structured, mentoring can help employees develop leadership skills by supporting the growth of others, boosting their sense of pride and increasing their likelihood of staying with the organization.

Police Chief Magazine - International Association of Chiefs of Police



How to measure once the principle is in place

When are mentors assigned to new employees? Do training instructors engage with the mentors? Such discussions may also lead to changes in the curriculum as new hires' questions will direct staff to what if any disconnects are occurring in the training they receive and the actual job. Track training curriculum changes as a result of mentorship discussion with new staff. Survey mentors on the disconnects discovered in working with new hires.



Tools and practical applications

- **Advice for Establishing a Successful Mentoring Program**

(details on next page)



Principle #5A

Tools and practical applications

Advice for Establishing a Successful Mentoring Program

Law enforcement agencies are starting to see mentoring programs as an instrument to help strengthen recruitment and retention efforts as well as improve employee performance and job satisfaction. However, many agencies still lack the knowledge on how to go about developing a program. To address this need, the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) and the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) hosted a workshop at the IACP Officer Safety and Wellness (OSW) Symposium where three experts from the field shared their experience and advice for how to establish a successful mentoring program for differing agency needs. **Read more here** (https://cops.usdoj.gov/html/dispatch/04-2023/law_enforcement_mentoring.html).



Support Teams: Principles 5A-5C

#5B Peer-to-Peer Support Teams

Few outside the prison walls can comprehend the unique psychological demands that corrections places on its employees. This particular form of trauma needs to be recognized and treated by those who understand it. This will require a commitment to seek and train staff willing to take on peer-to-peer support roles. Peer-to-Peer Support Team members will provide confidential and emotional support and specialize in recognizing and dealing with the day-to-day stress placed on employees. These team members act as sounding boards and early warning detectors, can open conversations where others can't, and know who to refer the employee to if professional counseling is needed. They must be properly trained and provided with annual training refreshers.

Evidence

Peer supporters, who often share their own lived experiences, play a crucial role in providing practical and emotional support to others.

Fraternal Order of Police Power in Peers



How to measure once the principle is in place

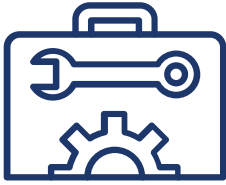
Track employee turnover and attrition rates with an eye towards comparing those rates between those who do and don't participate in peer support services.



Tools and practical applications

- Ring Resiliency program
- Stand T.A.L.R. Program
- Power in Peers[©]

(details on next page)



Principle #5B **Tools and practical applications**

Ring Resiliency Program

The Ring Resiliency Boxing Program is a trauma-informed, non-contact boxing program for correctional officers and staff as well as first responders. This boxing program utilizes boxing as a modality for reducing trauma related stress. The classes provide boxing skills instruction and creates a non-threatening environment that reduces stress, improves resiliency, and provides a sense of community, safety, and belonging. For more information about joining the Ring Resiliency Boxing classes, contact ringresiliency@gmail.com.

Stand T.A.L.R. program

The Stand T.A.L.R. (Talk, Ask, Listen, Refer) program aims to reduce stigma and improve mental health among correctional staff by fostering open dialogue and providing practical steps for seeking professional support. Developed by experienced corrections professionals, the program uses contextualized, honest discussions to address stress, anxiety, depression, and suicide, emphasizing resilience and self-care. It is highly customizable for different correctional environments and includes a Train-the-Trainer component to ensure sustained impact. Since its launch in 2017, Stand T.A.L.R. has been widely implemented in Australia, New Zealand, and the United States, achieving notable success in increasing mental health service engagement and receiving exceptional feedback from participants. **Learn more about the Stand T.A.L.R. program** (<https://onevoiceunited.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/STAND-T.A.L.R-OVU-Wellness-Principles.pdf>). If you're interested in implementing the program contact wapou@wapou.asn.au.



Power in Peers[©]



Power In Peers[©] is a standardized curriculum in peer support designed by law enforcement for law enforcement. The course provides a national certification and is considered to be a comprehensive course for both beginners and those with previous peer support experience. **Learn more here**. (<https://fop.net/officer-wellness/power-in-peers/>)

Support Teams: Principles 5A-5C

#5C Confidential Support Services (CSS)

Confidential Support Services (CSS) specifically relates to the ability of staff to access culturally competent confidential professional counseling throughout their career via a third-party provider. When seeking CSS providers, it is important to consider that staff may have a high level of distrust when it comes to their confidentiality within their agency. Due to the nature of the work and cultural environment there is a common perception among staff that the admission of a possible mental health issue is a potential career ender as they may be deemed unfit for duty. For that reason, the purpose of a CSS is to provide an independent provider that will ensure confidentiality.

“

We have tried to normalize the use of EAP. Don't feel embarrassed or weak for using EAP – it's okay to not be okay.

anonymous survey respondent

“

If you talk about mental health you can lose your job.

*annual corrections
conference attendee*

“

Illinois is piloting an outside licensed clinician for any corrections, police, or firefighter to speak to someone with any issue regarding mental health. They do not report to a union rep or the administration.

anonymous survey respondent

Evidence

Real or imagined, correctional staff in general, do not trust their personal and private information in the hands of the agency they work for. When they feel that information could be used to derail their career or in fact potentially end it, the reluctance is even greater. The availability of a confidential third party to provide counseling is essential for the mental well-being of staff and the credibility of the overall program. The reluctance of the agency to provide a third-party opportunity may raise multiple flags and make the entire program ineffective and the motivation behind it suspect.



How to measure once the principle is in place

Initiate an evaluation process whereby staff can anonymously provide feedback via an online survey. Track CSS usage rates over time and compare to other relevant employment factors. Solicit feedback from confidential support service staff on other key markers of staff wellness.



#6 Critical Incident Response Teams (CIRT)

After critical incidents there should be a debriefing and cool-down period available for all staff directly involved. The administration should also provide accurate and timely information to all other staff. Keeping everyone in the loop will help to quell rumors and build confidence in the response and the team. Debriefings should be attended by all personnel directly involved to conduct and assess strategic and tactical procedures. Debriefings should also include the opportunity to discuss any emotional trauma, but attendance in those discussions should be encouraged by CIRT personnel and not mandatory. CIRT members should be composed of fellow staff and led by a trained, culturally competent psychologist. Depending on the severity of the incident there should be after-the-fact check-ins to follow-up with staff directly involved, as well as some capacity to engage with indirectly impacted staff.

“

Gives a chance after incidents for supervisors to debrief situations and utilize an opportunity to train young staff.

*Jon Corey, Corrections
Officer Deputy*

“

Mandates can create resentment; cannot be a burden on top of shifts, must be well done without cutting corners.

anonymous survey respondent

“

I did not learn until today, after 4 ½ years, there were certain resources available. I have personally been through divorce and lost my daughter. If I knew these resources were available my path may have gone in a different direction.

anonymous survey respondent

Evidence

The members of the National Wellness Advisory Council comprised of five experts in the field of employee wellness, EAP team members, and past and present correctional staff agreed unanimously that there is a need for CIRT teams to be available to debrief correctional staff after the occurrence of a critical incident. (*Elevating Our Profession Conference, Chicago, April 2024*) Yet to be determined is whether CIRT debriefings should be mandatory or voluntary. On this issue the research and members of the Council are divided and will look to the results of future studies. The members believe that these teams should be led by a staff psychologist.



How to measure once the principle is in place

Initiate an evaluation process whereby staff can anonymously provide feedback via an online survey on their post-incident experience as well as their trust and confidence in CIRT staff. When possible, try to track employee morale in the weeks following debriefs and when analyzing survey feedback make note of any differences between debriefings that are mandatory vs voluntary.



#7 Pre-Hire Interviews

Corrections is not for everyone. It is important that the selection process includes a pre-hire interview conducted by a panel of corrections professionals who understand the unique challenges of correctional staff. Panel members should have both a working knowledge of the current state of play and an understanding of the mission and policies their agency embraces for the future. The interview should seek to reveal an applicant's strengths and how those strengths may fit into the agency's "standards of excellence." Applicants displaying a preference for an environment more suited for rehabilitation than the traditional punitive approach are needed in order to change the current culture. Questions should provide the opportunity for the applicant to express who they are and what aspirations they hold. A deeper look at each candidate through proper interview techniques, with a focus on the inclusion rather than the exclusion of the applicant, will make for a better agency and healthier, more satisfied employee. The interview panel should include at least one seasoned staff member with the same job classification as the applicant.

“

Investing in this area is a must for every correctional facility to prevent early quitting or a failure to function in this environment.

*annual corrections
conference attendee*

“

Folks should be able/ready mentally to work in corrections.

anonymous survey respondent

Evidence

Corrections is not a job for everyone. Selecting the wrong candidates can be both expensive and potentially deadly and cause additional stress to current employees. Proper pre-hire screening is an essential part of correctional security protocols. The rush to close the staffing gap has led some agencies to shortcut the process, hiring staff as young as eighteen and even some who cannot speak the language and cannot communicate with other staff or those incarcerated. Staff who cannot communicate and those as young as 18 are viewed as additional responsibilities for existing staff, increasing everyone's stress levels. "When you're 18, you're roughly halfway through the entire stage of development. The prefrontal cortex doesn't have nearly the functional capacity at age 18 as it does at 25. This means that some people may have major struggles with impulsive decisions and planning behavior to reach a goal."

At What Age Is The Brain Fully Developed? - Mental Health Daily Impulsive decisions in corrections can have devastating consequences.



How to measure once the principle is in place

Track retention rates by months of service and age of staff member. Track number of self-terminations versus numbers relieved of duty by the agency. Conduct exit interviews of all staff leaving agency service. As on-boarding practices change track the rates of incidents of violence and uses of force per academy class over time.



Tools and practical applications

- Staffing for Success
- Suffolk County Sheriff's Department's Interviewing Structure

(details on next page)



Principle #7 Tools and practical applications

Staffing for Success: Establishing Core Competencies and Training Supports

The "Staffing for Success" guide outlines a framework for establishing core competencies and training supports for corrections and community supervision staff, emphasizing skills needed to reduce recidivism. Developed by the Iowa Department of Corrections, it includes a competency matrix for roles from frontline officers to executive leaders, integrating training on evidence-based practices, risk management, and organizational skills. The resource aims to enhance recruitment, performance, and career advancement by providing clear guidelines, training pathways, and coaching support. More details are available **here**.

(https://csgjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/CSGJC_Staffing-for-Success_508compliant.pdf).



Suffolk County Sheriff's Department's Interviewing Structure

Since adopting a structured interview process for custody staff, the Suffolk County Sheriff's Department includes a panel with representatives from the union, human resources, and training staff. A candidate must receive at least two approvals to progress to the next stage. This process was implemented following a visit to Norway, where representatives gained firsthand insight into its corrections system.

#8 Comprehensive Physical Fitness and Nutritional Support

Both physical and nutritional support are part of addressing the holistic well-being of all staff. Physical components should encourage regular exercise, adequate sleep, strength training, health screenings, and cardiovascular activities to improve fitness levels, reduce stress, and enhance energy and productivity. Nutritionally, staff should have access to healthy and balanced meal options, which are essential for maintaining optimal health, supporting the immune system, and reducing the risk of chronic diseases and fatigue. With these two components, the wellness program can foster a culture of well-being, encourage healthy habits, and empower correctional staff to lead healthier and more balanced lives. Agencies should consider a “health coach” and work with staff to develop voluntary programs with incentives to reach fitness, weight, and nutritional goals. Ideas promoting competition can also be incentivized such as an interagency staff Olympics, softball or basketball tournaments, boxing matches, 5K races, or other competitive activities promoting camaraderie and physical fitness and showcasing skills.

“

Correctional officers are the backbone of the agency. With the continuous challenge of retaining good staff, administrators must recognize that it is in their best interest to help officers' health and well-being.

Julie Pinero- Corrections One article

“

I'd love a program where there was a physical fitness or nutritional program. We get bagged salad and rotten fruit. We do have a weight room but no time to use it.

anonymous survey respondent

Evidence

Exercise and nutrition are essential to a well-functioning adult both physically and mentally. The inability to eat properly and exercise regularly can result in multiple negative physical manifestations. Higher levels of hypertension, obesity, diabetes, increased sick leave call outs, and FMLA utilizations rates, common in corrections, indicate an unhealthy work environment. In many correctional facilities the only non-prison food available to staff comes from vending machines. The current staffing crisis that has promulgated the use of mandatory overtime has decreased the opportunity for staff to exercise and also impacted their ability to gain access to nutritional food when they are working 16-hour shifts.



How to measure once the principle is in place

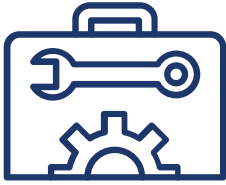
Propose a voluntary, incentive-based physical fitness program focused on education and personal improvement. Track participation, usage, and individual progress over time. Offer nutritious snacks and meals to staff, and monitor their selections to better understand engagement and preferences. Additionally, incorporate a voluntary wellness check-in during annual training sessions. This could include tracking blood pressure and completing an anonymous health questionnaire. Over time, analyze the aggregated data to evaluate the program's impact and guide future wellness efforts.



Tools and practical applications

- **Feed the Blue**
- **Blulight Barbell**

(details on next page)



Principle #8 ***Tools and practical applications***

Feed the Blue

Feed the Blue provides nutritious meal services and catering for law enforcement personnel, supporting their well-being with fresh meals and grab-and-go options. Operating in locations like NYPD Headquarters, its mission is to enrich officers' lives through quality culinary experiences aligned with law enforcement values. **Learn more here** (www.feedtheblue.com).



Blue Light Barbell

Bluelight Barbell is a fitness brand dedicated to enhancing the health and fitness of emergency services personnel. Founded by a police officer with over 20 years of service and a background in fitness, the organization offers strength and fitness programs tailored to the unique demands of emergency service roles. Their core values include integrity, professionalism, work ethic, and determination, ensuring that all programs adhere to established strength and conditioning principles. **Learn more here** (www.bluelightbarbell.com).



#9 Pre-Shift Briefing/Roll Call

The Norway Model is referred to often as one to aspire to. According to Norwegian correctional staff a key component of their system that adds greatly to their ability to complete their mission is the hour overlap they have between shifts. This transition period is considered essential, not only for passing on important security and safety intel, but in fostering an esprit de corps among staff, instilling confidence, and emphasizing a sense of mission and purpose. An hour overlap in the United States is highly unlikely, however a 15-20-minute pre-shift briefing (roll call) would provide staff with time to mentally prepare for their shift, be brought up to speed on any security or safety concerns, and bond with fellow staff. For staff heading home, they would benefit from having a chance to decompress, disclose anything that happened in their shift that they are struggling with, and connect as they build a sense of purpose and camaraderie. All of these are important pieces in mitigating some of the staff's daily stressors and ensuring they provide the incarcerated population with the necessary resources and support needed on each shift.

Evidence

In the highly regarded Norwegian Correctional System, the national agreement on working hours for correctional staff, established in 2010, builds on a 1993 working regulation document that mandated shift overlap for roll call. This overlap was designed to provide critical updates from the previous shift, support ethical reflection, mental decompression, and align staff with the institution's mission and purpose. Although it became standard practice, some wardens now propose its removal due to time and cost pressures, creating new challenges for maintaining staff preparedness and wellbeing.



How to measure once the principle is in place

Upon implementing or extending roll-call, evaluations might include tracking changes overtime among intel gathered, the number of offender incidents reported, the number of contraband intercepts, and overall morale.



Tools and practical applications

- **What Roll Call Should and Should Not Be**

(details on next page)



Principle #9 ***Tools and practical applications***

What Roll Call Should and Should Not Be

This guide explores the vital role of pre-shift briefings in sharing critical updates, building camaraderie, and reinforcing a shared mission among staff. Learn best practices for fostering morale and teamwork while avoiding common pitfalls, such as turning roll call into a disciplinary session. Whether you're looking to improve communication, enhance peer support, or boost preparedness, this insightful resource offers practical strategies for making roll call a powerful tool for success.

Learn more here (<https://onevoiceunited.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Roll-Call-Briefing-OVU-Wellness-Principles.pdf>).



#10 Retirement Planning

One of the most difficult transitions that staff face is going from active duty to retirement. Rules that are intrinsic to life within corrections no longer apply outside of correctional institutions. For instance, within corrections, a staff member's safety often relies on people responding to commands without question. In civilian life, behavior in this vein can often lead to social dysfunction and isolation. Contact should be made with potential retirees 24 months before they are eligible to retire to start discussing the retirement process and their options. The agency should provide the resources necessary to navigate this major change. With studies showing that correctional retirees have a 14% suicide ideation rate, support services should be readily available well into retirement.

Lerman, A. E. (2017). Officer Health and Wellness: Results from the California Correctional Officer Survey (<https://gspp.berkeley.edu/research-and-impact/publications/officer-health-and-wellness-results-from-the-california-correctional-office>)

“

My facility had four suicides in two years. Three were recent retirees.

*annual corrections
conference attendee*

“

The stress of not having a long-term plan can have disastrous results.

*annual corrections
conference attendee*

“

During his time in retirement, he bounced around from job to job, trying to find his place in the world. But he struggled to find a workplace that valued his leadership and experience in the prison as a supervisor. He only lived about 18 months after he retired.

*Bryanna Mellen, OVU Blue Ribbon
Commission Testifier*

Evidence

A California study found that the suicide ideation rate for correctional staff retirees was 14% (1 out of 7)! The transition to civilian life from the paramilitary authoritarian way corrections operates can be difficult. As with the Family Awareness and Outreach principle this is another gap we have found in many wellness programs.

Lerman, A. E. (2017). *Officer Health and Wellness: Results from the California Correctional Officer Survey.*



How to measure once the principle is in place

All retirees should be asked to participate in an exit interview. Part of the interview process should include questions on how the retiree would rate the agency's retirement preparation program such as:

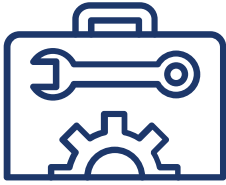
- What if any information do they feel was lacking?
- What might be helpful to include?
- What they would change?



Tools and practical applications

- **Enjoy a Healthy, Rewarding Retirement**

(details on next page)



Principle #10 ***Tools and practical applications***

Enjoy a Healthy, Rewarding Retirement

The *Enjoy a Healthy Rewarding Retirement* booklet, written in collaboration by Dr. Donald Steele, and Brian Dawe, is designed to help individuals transitioning into retirement from a correctional career navigate the adjustments in their psychological, social, physical, and financial life. It offers practical advice on how to organize and structure your new lifestyle, manage increased free time, and adapt to family routines and changes. With a focus on easing the shift from a highly structured and stressful work environment to a more relaxed, open atmosphere, this guide provides valuable insights to support a successful and fulfilling retirement.

Read the booklet here (<https://onevoiceunited.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Healthy-Rewarding-Retirement-OVU-Wellness-Principles.pdf>).



Principles Assessment

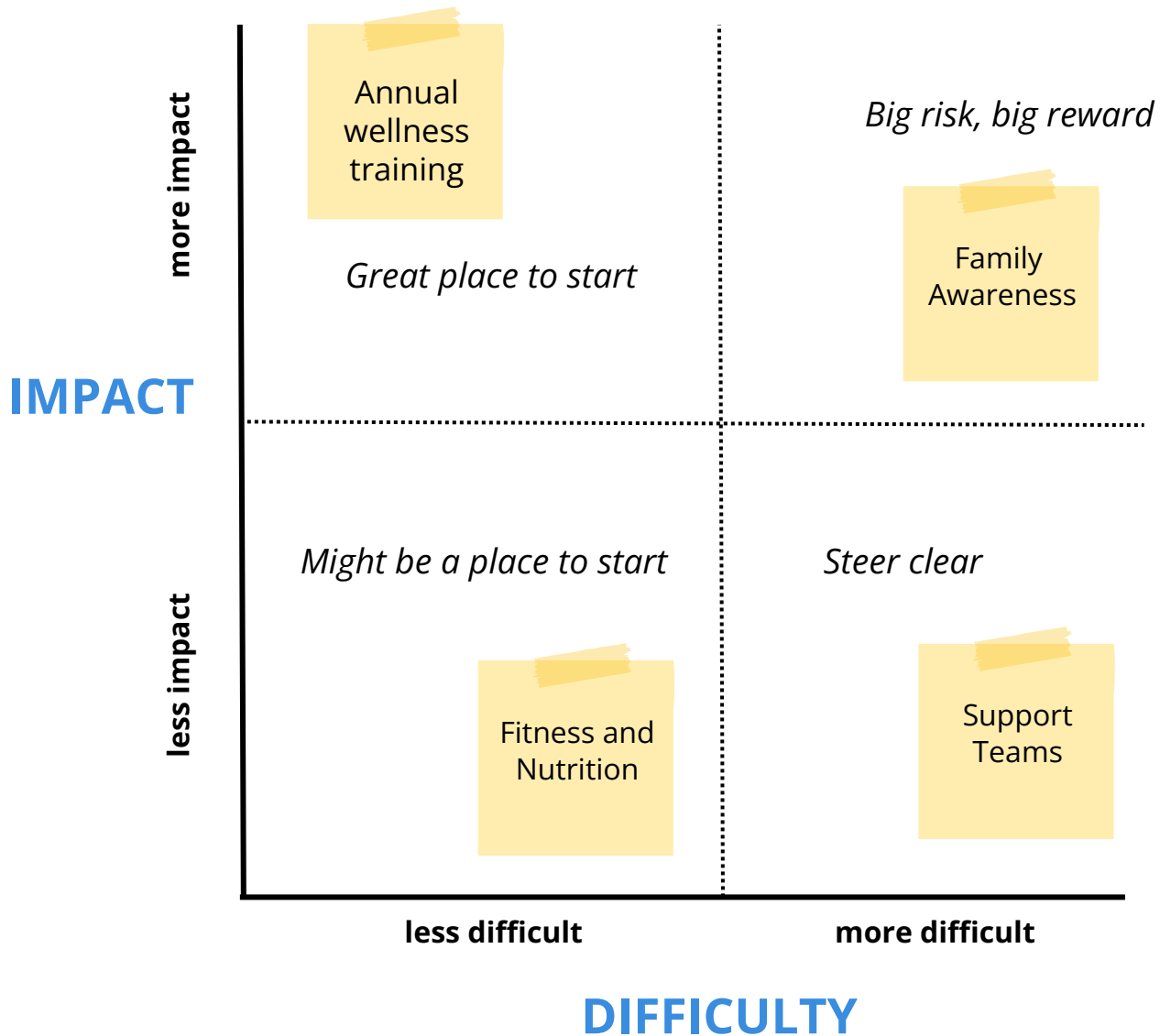
Use the following scale to determine current strengths and gaps in health and wellness efforts. For each Principle, rate the current status based on the scale provided and then complete the remaining columns to develop an action plan.

Rating Scale	
1	The agency has not yet specifically focused on this area. No significant actions have been implemented in this area.
2	Initial actions toward improvement have been taken for this item. The agency has taken some preliminary steps but has not advanced much at this time.
3	The agency has a nearly comprehensive approach to this area. The agency has several mechanisms, practices, or systems built into routine or standard procedures but there is still room for improvement.
4	Comprehensive practices are in place at this agency for this area that is well utilized and sustainable and the overall culture reflects a commitment to this wellness principle.

Principle	Current Rating <i>(using scale above)</i>	Prioritization 1=low / 10=high <i>(see next page to help address this)</i>	Possible next steps	Who needs to take the lead to implement next steps?	Resources and commitments needed to successfully implement <i>(ie. partners, funding, etc.)</i>	Target completion date
#1						
#2						
#3						
#4						
#5						
#6						
#7						
#8						
#9						
#10						

Setting Priorities

Use the table below to plot each activity you are considering undertaking to assess the potential efforts and result of moving forward with any number of the 10 principles. The post-its below are presented as examples of how you might use this assessment and planning tool.



Appendix

METHODOLOGY

One Voice United's process for developing these principles was multifaceted. The methods we employed and the manner in which we gathered the information included:

- Surveys and Listening Sessions
- Blue Ribbon Commission on Wellness
- International Outreach
- National Wellness Advisory Council
- Annual Corrections Conference

SURVEYS AND LISTENING SESSIONS

OVU sought to hear directly from the men and women working on the frontlines. No one knows better both the problems they face and the potential solutions than those with lived experience. We conducted surveys and listening sessions with staff across the nation from union and non-union states. We convened two 18-month Leadership Cohorts with staff to dig deep into the challenges facing corrections and to enlist them as the true consultants in this field. We met with members of the Corrections Leadership Association to establish a presence at their convenings and to share the concerns of the men and women in their charge.

This correctional "think tank" resulted in a treasure trove of ideas. It helped us identify specific times during an employee's work life cycle where targeted training and programming would be most beneficial.

BLUE RIBBON COMMISSION

We convened a diverse group of Chief Executive Officers, union leaders, and reformers from across the political spectrum for the first ever Blue-Ribbon Commission on Correctional Wellness. The event was held in Washington, DC where these leaders heard firsthand testimony from staff and clinical experts of the devastating psychological and physical challenges corrections jobs pose for staff and their families. What was immediately evident to the event organizers, panelists, and audience was the intrinsic link between staff and those incarcerated as it relates to how the conditions of confinement drastically affect each human who spends significant time inside correctional institutions. As one panelist put it, "It doesn't matter if you're a CO or a prisoner, when it rains, we all get wet."^[3]

This event served as a public awareness campaign, an educational opportunity, and a chance for some of the men and women most adversely impacted by this crisis to have a platform to speak. It also resulted in the production and release of a powerful video by One Voice United that both humanized and shed light on this crisis, "The Secret Is Out"^[4] along with the Blue Ribbon Commission report, which has made waves in the community. Former Deputy Assistant Attorney General Amy L. Solomon of the Office of Justice Programs said, "I was taken aback by the recent Blue Ribbon Commission Report by One Voice, which highlighted the stunningly high rates of PTSD and suicide, and the stunningly low life expectancy of corrections officers – which is reportedly even lower than the life expectancy of law enforcement officers. This is a truly sobering state of affairs, one that you know all too well, but should really be of concern to all of us. It certainly is a major concern for us at OJP."

INTERNATIONAL OUTREACH

As part of this initiative, we were simultaneously engaging staff and union leaders from Norway, New Zealand, and Australia to see if we shared the same challenges and where it might be possible to seek best practices to help mitigate this crisis. We took a group of approximately 20 frontline staff from a variety of job classifications (correctional officers, probation and parole officers, institution nurses, culinary staff, and others) to Norway to learn firsthand from the employees in that country's correctional institutions and attend a regional meeting of the European Correctional Unions in Oslo. During this conference, which welcomed correctional staff from ten nations, we were surprised to find that many of the concerns we have in the United States are shared by correctional staff worldwide. We hope to continue our working relationships with these organizations and together seek solutions to many of the universal challenges we face and are considering cohosting an international conference.

NATIONAL WELLNESS ADVISORY COUNCIL

We enlisted clinicians, correctional experts, and active duty and retired staff to develop a set of wellness principles based on research and learnings from the field. This group, the One Voice United National Wellness Advisory Council for Corrections (NWAC), met in person in Chicago in May 2024 and played a key role in fine-tuning these principles to ensure that they address the needs as identified by those most impacted. The members of NWAC consist of:

One Voice United

- Andy Potter, Founder and Executive Director (CO RET)
- Brian Dawe, National Director (CO RET)
- Simon Greer, Senior Advisor
- Brent Kowitz, Program Assistant (CO RET)
- Corey Post, Program Director
- Jeremy Tripp, Policy Director
- Jenelle Wooldridge, Communications Director

Academia and Clinicians

- Nneka Jones-Tapia, Ph.D. – Managing Director Justice Initiatives, Chicago Beyond, Illinois
- Phil Gibson, Ph.D. – Staff Psychologist, State of Washington Department of Corrections, Washington
- Lisa Jaegers, Ph.D. – Associate Professor Occupational Science, St. Louis University, Missouri
- Karen Lischinsky, Ph.D. – Adjunct Professor Sociology, Restorative Justice, Boston College, Massachusetts
- Brendan Ozawa-de Silva, Ph.D. – Associate Teaching Professor, Center for Contemplative Science and Compassion-Based Ethics, Emory University, Georgia
- Lisa Puglisi, MD. – Associate Professor of Medicine, Yale University, Connecticut
- Caterina Spinaris, Ph.D. – Founding Director Desert Waters Correctional Outreach, Colorado

Sector Advisors

- Stevyn Fogg – Executive Director, Corrections Leadership Association, Washington, DC
- Monroe Hudson – Senior Research Associate, Institute for Intergovernmental Research, Tallahassee, Florida.
- Stephen Walker, Director of Correctional Health for California Correctional Peace Officers Association (CO RET)

Active-Duty Staff

- William Farrell – Correctional Officer, EAP Coordinator, Massachusetts
- Elena Martinez – Correctional Officer, Union President Association of Oregon Correctional Employees, Oregon
- Wayne Spence – Senior Parole Officer, President Public Employees Federation, New York

ANNUAL CORRECTIONS CONFERENCE

One Voice United holds an annual conference in conjunction with our National Medal of Honor Awards program. For the past three years we have dedicated large blocks of time at those conferences to address the wellness crisis. Indeed, a substantial amount of the knowledge we have gained on this issue has come from the correctional staff attending these events. We rely on their firsthand experiences to inform us of the challenges they face, to workshop a plan, and devise the strategies and tactics necessary to address them. Those are the strategies we employed to develop the Wellness Principles.

CITATIONS

[1] *"I Am Not Okay" One Voice United, Spring 2021* (<https://onevoiceunited.org/blog/i-am-not-okay-wellness-white-paper/>)

[2] *National Institute of Justice "Correctional Officer Safety and Wellness Literature Synthesis" July 2017 Frank Valentino Ferdik Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice, University of West Florida, Pensacola Hayden P. Smith Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice, University of South Carolina, Columbia NCJ 250484*

[3] *Blue Ribbon Commission testimony* (<https://onevoiceunited.org/blog/blue-ribbon-commission-report/>)

[4] *"The Secret Is Out" video* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YI-UiWt0n70>)