

Challenges with Facility Administrations



Surprisingly, the biggest source of stress for correctional officers (COs) today isn't the incarcerated individuals they work with – it's the administrations they work for. National studies have shown that approximately 60% of staff stress comes from policies, procedures and the administrators themselves. Here are some of the reasons why.

LACK OF ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF CHALLENGES



Too often, administrations don't see the real, everyday dangers and mental health strain that come along with being a CO. Before policies and procedures can be put in place to help relieve that strain, administrators need to acknowledge that it exists. Changing that mindset is crucial to any meaningful reform.

DISTRUST OF ADMINISTRATION



Even after administrators acknowledge a problem exists, they rarely ask for COs' input on new or improved policies and procedures. Sometimes, staff don't find out about a change until the day it's implemented! Often, COs are asked to implement policies that have direct impacts on staff or the incarcerated population – but without having been part of the conversation, they don't have an understanding of why the change is being made. Administrators can't do what's best for the facility without on-the-ground information and insights from COs. That means sometimes they accidentally put staff in danger, leading to a distrust of the administration among COs.

INADEQUATE EQUIPMENT



Officers rely on their equipment to keep them safe and help them do their jobs to the best of their ability. But they have no control over the equipment they're provided or the condition it's in. All too commonly, that means COs are left to work with radios that don't work, dangerous vehicles, outdated fire extinguishers, and not enough protective equipment like handcuffs, OC spray, gloves, face guards and protective vests. In addition to being a source of stress for officers, it leaves them feeling as though administrators have a disregard for their safety.

LACK OF JOB RECOGNITION



Law enforcement officers and first responders are often covered in the news for the good work they do on the job – unfortunately, COs rarely make the front page when they save someone's life or avert another crisis. That's why recognition from facility administrators is so important. Too often, administrators are slow to recognize and appreciate COs, making it difficult for COs to have a sense of pride in a job well done. Simple recognition from administrations would go a long way in improving COs' job satisfaction, self-esteem and overall mental health.



CHALLENGE SPOTLIGHT: UNDERSTAFFING

Staffing impacts virtually every aspect of how a correctional facility operates. Understaffing is one of the biggest threats to a CO's safety and security – and therefore one of the biggest sources of stress.

When a facility first opens, government officials determine how many COs are needed to safely staff it, based on a variety of factors including security classification, incarcerated population and physical layout. While there are minimum staffing levels in addition to the recommended operational staffing levels, too often administrators feel pressure to get by with as few staff as possible.

- + In private prisons, managers are under pressure to maximize revenue by minimizing the number of staff needed to run the facility, and their bonuses, salaries, and pensions are based on how well they maximize profit – meaning more incarcerated individuals and fewer staff.
- + In public prisons, staff are often being asked to take on more programming and education without additional resources or manpower, which can result in safety risks when staff are spread too thin.

Additionally, reported staffing ratios can be misleading. They're calculated based on the number of staff against the number of incarcerated individuals – but individual COs only work 40 hours per week, and incarcerated individuals are there all 168 hours of the week. These staffing ratios are only accurate if every CO worked 24/7 and never went home. Better ratios can be determined by "post audits," where every post is evaluated on every shift to determine the true staffing requirements.

This understaffing means often a CO can be in charge of overseeing as many as 70 or even 100 incarcerated individuals at a time, especially in yards and cafeterias of larger jails and prisons. This stressful situation contributes to employee burn-out and negatively impacts the incarcerated population, too; COs don't have the opportunity to focus on rehabilitation when they are so focused on having to maintain order.

Facility administrators should commit to bringing staffing back to safe levels, and not decrease the number of staff as prison populations fall.