

CORRECTIONAL WORKFORCE ENGAGEMENT TIPS & BEST PRACTICES

1 Acknowledge the Current Reality

The danger of overcrowding and staff shortages, and the strain these conditions put on the remaining workforce, must be acknowledged. Short-term band aids such as mandatory overtime and lowering hiring standards are making things dramatically worse. Requiring staff to work double or triple shifts, deploying non-security personnel to perform officers' jobs, and reducing programming and visitation all contribute to a downward spiral that is depleting the workforce and ultimately undermines an agency's ability to carry out its mission.

- *Leadership naming the current crisis, committing to reducing mandatory overtime, seeking out creative alternatives for addressing the staffing shortage, and investing in improved working conditions are all essential for building buy-in among the workforce needed to carry out a new vision of corrections.*

2 Safety and Security First

With rising levels of violence inside many facilities, reforms can make it harder to keep staff and those who are incarcerated safe. Staff will likely always put the safety and security of the institution first (as they should) and not want to compromise. Reform efforts geared toward rehabilitation is not their most urgent need and the benefit for them is collateral. It is not just the physical danger of violence but also the emotional toll that must be addressed. The expectation that officers should prioritize reforms over security not only puts their lives, and the safety of an entire facility at risk, it also increases the staff stress levels as a result of role conflict. It is vital that staff be physically and mentally safe if they are expected to maintain safe, dignified and humane conditions for those in their care.

- *Introduce complements (pre-shift, overlap, increased training) and provide other tools that they design with you to address today's safety and security concerns to show they are not sacrificial workers but rather their safety and health matters.*



3 Engage Them as Experts

Staff, and the union leaders and associations that represent them, possess significant knowledge about the problems, possibilities, challenges and threats that this multi-billion dollar industry is contending with. If administrators and policymakers are going to be successful in making changes that are effective and sustainable, they would be wise to partner with this constituency. Not just because they can stop them (or slow them down) but because many of them understand the problems and the solutions better than anyone. Informing staff, and their unions, of a new policy can be a far cry from actually engaging them in the design process. Even when there might be tensions over the CBA, there should always be room to partner on addressing the larger challenges facing the sector.

- *Invite them to the table early on, before the plan is being hatched, so their knowledge and experience can inform the contemplation phase through to implementation.*

4 Promote Staff Health and Wellness

Working in a hyper-tense, negative and often volatile environment takes a toll on one's mental health and can impair their cognitive ability. For correctional staff, the low staffing ratios, the para-military command structure, the constant threat of violence, the lack of agency and autonomy as well as the removal of key tools for maintaining order have led to sky rocketing levels of stress. This growing epidemic is driving people out of the profession after just a few years, creating more tension inside facilities and hindering the possibility of creating a more successful environment for everyone inside. This stress is felt by those living in the facilities who in turn contribute to it as well. A workforce that is forced to suppress their own trauma is unlikely to have the physical and mental capacity that would be expected of staff who are charged with supervising and caring for some of our nation's most vulnerable populations. De-stigmatization of occupationally induced stress requires administrative buy-in and a new precedent must be set that ensures staff are not retaliated against when reaching out for help. If we expect correctional facilities to transform into places that foster healing and rehabilitation, it must start from the top.

- *Agencies should promote the use of Employee Assistance Programs, educate staff's family members on the signs of stress, depression, and PTSD, and incorporate mental health awareness into all staff training curriculums.*



5 Recognize and Lift Up the Profession

Staff can make a difference in the lives of those housed in prisons and jails but the tendency to shield this work environment from the public eye means that the day-to-day burdens, as well as the heroic actions, are usually unknown to most. This has resulted in a false and negative narrative about correctional staff painted by sensationalists outside of the profession. Highlighting heroic acts, showcasing all the good work staff do behind the wall, upgrading uniforms and break rooms, incentivizing volunteer activities in the community, and offering more generally elevating the profession is a key component to retaining a strong and purpose-driven workforce, as well as attracting a new generation to come to work in this profession.

- *Commit to honoring the bravery of those in this profession and reward their hard work so that they can feel pride and reprieve.*

