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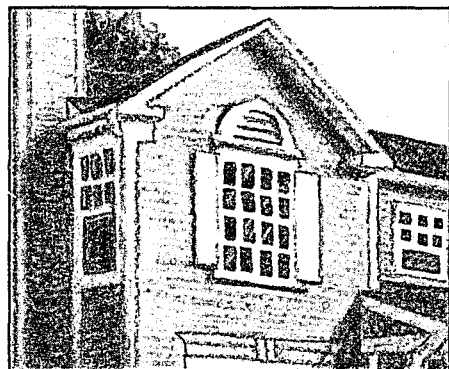
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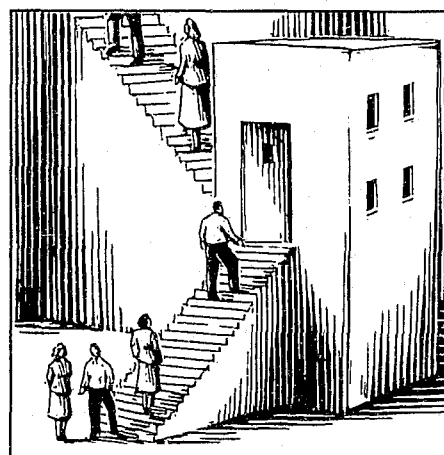
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News at Eleven

Correctional accountability and the media

Charles Turnbo

There is a great deal of talk today about "accountability" in corrections, due to the significant responsibility corrections carries in dealing with criminals and protecting the public, and the enormous fiscal resources required to sustain correctional operations.

Without question, corrections needs the public's confidence and support to be successful in its mission; indeed, a well-informed public is an asset to any public administrator or agency. But in the face of societal pressures to "reform" criminals and use tax funds wisely, corrections professionals are—very properly—being held accountable for their stewardship of public resources.

Put simply, for the public to accurately and effectively hold corrections officials accountable, it must be better informed on correctional issues. Beyond a doubt, the most powerful force in our society for conveying information of this type is the mass media—a term that covers both news- and entertainment-oriented media organizations. Yet in many cases, serious correctional issues are not being examined by the media in a full and responsible manner.

The public is justifiably concerned about the business of "correcting" criminals. They are concerned whether prisons are effective; whether they are too comfortable or too harsh; whether the death penalty is appropriate; whether inmate health care should be better than that available to the millions of Americans who have no health insurance; whether and when inmate furloughs are appropriate; whether drug offenders should receive treatment and what treatment is

effective; and whether the correctional system should spend more effort devising effective alternatives to prisons (such as halfway houses, parole, probation, home confinement, and electronic monitoring). They are concerned about prisons' response to high-profile prisoners such as Michael Milken, David "Son of Sam" Berkowitz, Manuel Noriega, Jeffrey Dahmer, John Gotti, Charles Manson, and Leona Helmsley. And the public is also concerned about the cost of corrections, particularly of imprisonment.

In addition, the public has become increasingly aware of the rapid growth of prison, parole, and probation populations. Across the Nation, high levels of prison crowding are the norm. The Federal prison system is operating at 45 percent over its rated capacity; many States are similarly crowded. States such as California, Illinois, New York, and Florida are spending billions of taxpayers' dollars on new prisons, while the Federal Bureau of Prisons is currently embarked on the largest expansion program in its history.

Most correctional systems, as they expand, also face serious issues in the areas of recruitment and training of staff members. Thousands of professionals must be hired even while the national economy forces agencies to implement stringent cost-containment and -reduction measures, while competing against private industry for high-quality personnel.

Although the general public is usually unaware of them, corrections also faces many inmate management issues, all of which are compounded by crowding. To reduce idleness, effective work programs must be found and job opportunities expanded. Literacy training and education program capacity must be increased, as must vocational training. Drug treatment is even more in demand; in the Bureau of Prisons, more than 30 percent

of the inmates have histories of moderate or serious substance abuse.

Clearly, the public needs to know more about these and other issues facing corrections if it is to make accurate judgments about how its taxes are spent. The public deserves intelligent discourse about what is happening in corrections today, and the media is one of the best means of providing information in this important policy debate.

Sensationalism drives out accuracy

Unfortunately, all too often, crises and scandals are the only prison stories that make the news—sensationalism, not accuracy, often drives reporting on correctional matters. Well-managed prisons are not news.

Changes in the world of journalism have only increased the tendency to sensationalize. News organizations competing over ratings increasingly structure the news along entertainment lines.

"Infotainment" television programs that mix news and entertainment formats are on the increase—electronic versions of the supermarket tabloids.

Of course, corrections officials must admit they haven't done enough over the years to inform the public about their profession. Indeed, corrections has a problem largely of its own making—a history of hiding behind its walls and fences and only reluctantly releasing information to the public.

While most correctional agencies now have policies that allow inmates to grant interviews, prison officials do have a legitimate right to regulate in-person interviews in some cases. An inmate's status as a juvenile or as a psychiatric

patient can create a need to restrict media access. Without some limits, satisfying media appetites regarding highly notorious inmates could occupy an entire staff of public information officers full time. But for the most part, inmate interviews are an area in which correctional agencies can accommodate the media.

In many cases, there is good cause for a conservative approach to release of information about correctional operations. Corrections officials are required to comply with the Privacy Act and other laws that protect much personal information about staff and inmates. Institution security or the conduct of an investigation often dictates caution in releasing operational details.

During disturbances—particularly those involving hostages—safety and security become paramount; information must be carefully controlled to ensure that hostage-takers do not gain some advantage from media accounts of the ongoing incident. In hostage situations, inaccurate news reports can create dangerous confusion; during the Atlanta penitentiary takeover by Cuban detainees in 1987, false reports of an FBI assault nearly caused the detainees to begin killing hostages.

Even when the prison gates are thrown open, examples of disappointingly skewed perceptions are numerous. A few years ago, Home Box Office was given access to the U.S. Penitentiary in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania—to film any inmate, any program, any staff member, in any part of the prison, any time of the



Director J. Michael Quinlan (fourth from right) and Attorney General Edwin Meese (second from right) meet the press during the 1987 disturbances at USP Atlanta and FDC Oakdale.

day or night. For 3 weeks, the camera crew roamed the institution. The resulting film could have shown education and drug treatment programs, bustling industrial and training programs, or the wide range of counseling and other services available.

Unfortunately, the version ultimately aired simply reinforced public prejudices. Choices made in the editing room shifted the program's emphasis from a factual presentation of a major penitentiary that runs (on the whole) smoothly, to a far more melodramatic view that caricatured staff and focused on a few of the more "interesting" inmates—usually those who committed spectacular or gruesome crimes. As a result, the public missed an ideal opportunity to learn a great deal about the real world of prisons and the often difficult choices officials face in managing a high-security population.

Similarly, the Bureau recently permitted an award-winning, nationally known author to spend 2 years observing operations at the U.S. Penitentiary, Leavenworth, Kansas. The resulting book presented a narrow view of life inside a high-security penitentiary. It portrayed a facility governed not by policy and procedure, but by the law of the jungle. Yet

in the entire 2 years the author was in the institution, not a single murder or serious disturbance occurred. Surely the public deserved to see that side of one of its most famous prisons.

To much of the public, movies by Cagney, Eastwood, Selleck, and Stallone represent their knowledge about prison inmates. Just as with the Home Box Office presentation, these movies are generally not factual; they are more

concerned with market appeal than the presentation of real issues. These productions shape public opinion, but because of their distorted content, they do so in a damaging manner.

Corrections officials are simply asking for a balanced portrayal of their profession, so the public can make intelligent decisions. They need media coverage that conveys the entire picture, showing prisons that aren't poorly managed, where drug use is not rampant and sexual assaults are relatively rare, where staff are well trained and professional, and where programs and self-development opportunities are available—and used by inmates.

Helping the media do better

Corrections can do a better job to help the media and the public to understand its mission, its problems, and its accomplishments. Establishing direct communication links between the corrections agency and the media, each fulfilling the other's needs, allows correctional professionals to enhance their credibility and communicate newsworthy issues to the public. There are concrete steps administrators can take to achieve this goal.

First, well-managed correctional facilities have nothing to fear from outside review. If an agency's policy is sound and is being applied in an informed, common-sense manner, accountability simply cannot be a problem.

To ensure this is the case, the agency and each institution must have a management structure based on complete, comprehensive policies in accord with accepted professional standards. They must have solid training programs that ensure staff know what is expected of them. They must have sound supervision practices and day-to-day management oversight in place. And they need a system of internal reviews or a perpetual internal auditing process, based on those policies, that ensures staff are following the policies in effect.

An agency or an institution with such an infrastructure in place may welcome outside scrutiny. One of the most prominent methods of outside review in corrections is the American Correctional Association's voluntary Standards and Accreditation Program (ACA standards themselves also support openness with the media). Standards compliance helps correctional managers demonstrate the professional status of their operations. Institutions that are accredited should make a special effort to inform the public and the media that they are operating at this high level of excellence.

Correctional agencies can have their greatest influence on both public and media perceptions at the local level. One



TV crews congregate near FCI Talladega, Alabama, during the 1991 disturbance.

of the most important accountability strategies is an "open door" policy. This acknowledges the public's "right to know" and demonstrates that the institution has nothing to hide.

Studies show that, over time, people tend to perceive things the way the media portray them—i.e., the media plays a significant role in establishing the audience's sense of reality. An "open door" policy lets the public see what prisons are really like. It can build citizen awareness of issues that will enhance the credibility of correctional administrators and their programs. In a society such as ours, with a pervasive mass media system, closed institutions and secret information sources are automatically viewed with suspicion and are challenged.

An open door policy can take a number of forms:

- Correctional managers should encourage facility tours by the media; letting reporters see an orderly, professional operation on a day-to-day basis can go a long way toward neutralizing the misinformation that can reach a reporter's desk. In addition, allowing reporters to see first-hand the daily operations of an institution provides them with a personal

understanding of the challenges corrections professionals face.

- Institutions should hold "open houses" to permit the public to come in for guided tours, letting them see how their tax dollars are being put to use. Regular tours should be provided for college students—future community leaders.

- Administrators can increase access by the public by aggressive recruitment of volunteers to work in correctional programs. This not only has the benefit of allowing ordinary citizens to see prison as it is, but provides the institution with valuable program resources.

- Institutions can improve public knowledge of their operations by establishing community relations boards, which are usually composed of prominent (and widely representative) local citizens who meet periodically to be educated on correctional operations and give community feedback to correctional officials. Regular institutional tours by board members are an excellent means of dispelling public misinformation in a community.

- Institution strategic plans should include an agenda for addressing public-awareness issues.

- Staff training should orient all employees to the agency's philosophy of being proactive in dealing with the media.

- Correctional managers must take other steps to make facilities a part of the community. Where feasible, these can in-

clude encouraging staff and inmate participation in community affairs and providing inmate labor in the local community for public works projects.

These activities bind the institution and the community more closely together, and help erase the "negative mystique" that often surrounds prisons, even in the prison's local community.

Learning to work with the news cycle

Far too often, the first contact an institution has with representatives of the media is when there is a crisis. During an emergency, media representatives are primarily concerned about security and tactical issues, and are quick to jump to conclusions of "news management" and "disinformation" if the correctional agency is perceived as restraining the free flow of information. Under these circumstances, there is little opportunity for the media to gain background information about the institution, and it is not uncommon for the resulting story to focus on the negative.

However, when institution staff take the initiative to reach out to the media and educate them about the institution, offering tours and interviews with key administrators, a far different situation exists when a crisis arises. A solid basis has been established for two-way credibility; the reporter knows that problems are not the order of the day and staff have a reason to believe the information they provide will be used in the proper context. The end result is more likely to inform the public in an accurate way.

To reach this stage takes effort. But experience shows that institution staff can proactively build a solid relationship with local media by taking steps such as:

- Identifying key reporters and news organizations in the area and maintaining a list of their phone numbers, addresses, and the deadlines for their organization.
- Providing each reporter and news organization on the list with the name of the institution's public information officer and the institution's phone number.
- Making introductory telephone calls to new reporters, with followup letters that include an information package about the agency and the institution, then inviting those individuals (and their editors or producers) to tour the institution.
- Contacting major television stations, radio stations, and newspapers to arrange visits to their offices by prison staff to meet with key reporters, editors, or producers—eliminating the "faceless voice" syndrome—and each month calling as many of these key staff as possible to maintain that personal contact.
- Making special efforts to visit and provide items of interest to local newspapers; in particular, the warden and public information officer should make a point of regularly spending time with the editor of the local newspaper to discuss issues of importance to the community, and inviting him or her to the institution. In some Bureau of Prisons institutions, the editor also has been invited to become a member of the community relations board.

Finally, corrections officials should not hesitate to release information of interest to reporters in every instance where there is no actual harm to the security or operations of the institution. Information should only be withheld when necessary to preserve security or in accordance with policy or the law.

These relatively simple steps can initiate and maintain a vital, proactive contact

between corrections and the media. If done well, the public will have more realistic expectations of what can be accomplished with committed offenders.

Conclusion

In the coming decade, the American public will be called upon to make critical decisions about criminal justice matters, many of which will have a major impact on the correctional system. It will be better for all of us if policymakers and the public have more—and more accurate—information about the real world of corrections.

The media play a vital role in educating the public; corrections staff, in turn, must do a better job of working with the media to help them convey what prisons are like, and what they can and cannot do. In doing this, corrections workers must use as many avenues as possible to foster community relationships that will enhance accountability to the public. It falls to corrections to take this initiative—improving its own ability to work with the media and the public, opening the prison gates, in a figurative sense, to the rest of the world. ■

Charles Turnbo is Regional Director for the South Central Region of the Federal Bureau of Prisons. He is a former Federal warden, and, among his many other assignments in the Bureau, served as Executive Assistant to the Director, a position with significant public information duties. This article is adapted from a presentation made to the American Correctional Association, San Antonio, Texas, in August 1992, where Mr. Turnbo was a presenter on a panel entitled "Accountability and the Correctional Professional: Changing Demands."