

Reducing Stress for Officers And Their Families

By Doris T. Wells

Author's Note: *Points of view expressed in this article do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.*

Correctional officers who experience job-related stress may find it necessary to use excessive amounts of sick leave. Stress may cause them to make costly errors or take early retirement. Job-related stress can also make recruiting, hiring and retaining officers difficult. Reducing correctional officer stress not only saves money; it also improves officers' health and makes correctional facilities better places to work.

Since 1994, the National Institute of Justice has been exploring the hows and whys of stress-related problems for law enforcement and correctional officers. NIJ's Corrections and Law Enforcement Family Support (CLEFS) program has funded research, published several documents and is currently analyzing results from a field test of model programs.

The CLEFS program aims to identify and understand the stressors officers face and find innovative ways to prevent and treat their negative effects. When Congress authorized the \$1.5 million program in 1994, the program initially focused only on law enforcement stress. But in the late 1990s, it expanded to include correctional officer stress.

Traditionally, employee assistance programs have been the most common resource for officer stress. These programs, however, generally focus only on the officer with little or no attention to family members, and they usually do not gather data on their effectiveness.

Currently, several other components are being added to stress-reduction programs: professional counseling, peer support, responses to critical incidents that include help for victims

and their families, academy and in-service training that teaches stress-reduction techniques, and services for family members.

Stress-reduction programs fall into three basic categories:

- In-house programs, which are operated by the correctional agency;
- Independent contracted services, which are provided by a private, outside agency; and
- Hybrid programs, which combine elements of both in-house and external structures.

There is no one set stress-reduction model that applies to all situations. Correctional administrators must choose the components from each program that best fit their needs and resources.

What Causes Stress For Correctional Officers?

Preliminary findings from an NIJ study indicate that most officers feel that their greatest source of stress is caused by organizational factors, not the dangers of the job, as most people would think. For example, 60 percent of officers surveyed reported that inconsistent discipline and enforcement of rules caused stress; 59 percent identified poor communication about rules, changing rules or inconsistent rules as stressors. Nearly half the officers interviewed reported problems of a lack of support from supervisors and poor supervisory skills.

Of the correctional officers' spouses surveyed, 50 percent reported stress from their spouse's place of employment. The top stressors were critical incidents their spouse experienced; poor communication of rules, changing rules, or inconsistent rules at their spouse's work; lack of recogni-

tion for their spouse at work; and concern about their spouse contracting diseases from inmates.

Benefits Of Stress Programs

Save money. Stress-reduction programs can reduce the need for overtime pay to cover for officers who are sick or quit because of job-related stress. Facility administrators lose money recruiting, hiring and training replacement personnel for officers who resign after serious incidents. However, officers who participate in stress programs typically return to work after an incident, and do so much sooner.

Improve performance. Stress-reduction programs enhance staff morale. Low pay for difficult work and a generally poor public image of the profession often contribute to officer stress. Administrators and supervisors who participate in stress programs learn that it is important to let employees know the department cares about their well-being. When a critical incident occurs, supervisors learn ways to communicate with officers and their families.

Increase safety. Stress-reduction programs can reduce stress-related distractions. Officers under stress may make mistakes. Sloppy paperwork produced as a result of stress may cause the release of the wrong inmate or the mistaken retention of others. Officers under stress may ignite personal attacks or riots by being impatient and overreacting to routine situations. Such disturbances endanger the lives of both staff and inmates.

Success Stories

Do stress programs save correctional facilities money and improve morale? A study conducted by the San Bernardino Sheriff's Department sug-

gests they can. The study examined the number of stress-related retirements of officers and deputies following critical incidents for a 10-year period before the department contracted for stress-reduction services. The retirements cost the county \$20 million in unfunded liability to the retirement fund. Six years after the stress program was implemented, no one had retired after a critical incident. The sheriff's department saved \$13 million by avoiding the unfunded costs to the retirement fund.

In his report on lessons learned from the CLEFS program, Robert Delprino notes that the program has achieved some success in identifying and reducing the negative effects of stress, but its biggest impact has been to increase awareness of the problem. It brought together administrators, officers, family members, union representatives, mental health professionals and researchers to discuss the issue and find ways to address it. Correctional officers and their families have expressed gratitude that such an important topic is finally being recognized.

The Costs of Stress-Reduction Programs

Budgets vary considerably. Most correctional departments have incomplete information on the cost of their stress programs because of difficulty estimating expenses. Separate budget line items for in-house programs generally do not exist; staff, office space and equipment may be shared with other department units; and in-kind contribution of space, supplies and personnel is often used.

It is equally difficult for consulting contractors to estimate costs because such services constitute only part of their practice, reimbursement varies with insurance plans and staff may provide pro bono services. Thus, stress program budgets could range from no cost with an all-volunteer program to expensive budgets with high costs for counseling and training, and part-time coordinator and secretary salaries.

Programs commonly share a number of costs related to personnel, including trainers and clinicians, rent

and utilities, vehicles for emergencies and off-site clients, equipment and supplies, telephone, fax and postage.

New programs will incur one-time startup costs for items such as office furniture, computers, photocopy machines and staff training. Many correctional facilities fund the entire stress program, but some programs receive supplemental funds from sources such as unions and the National Institute of Corrections.

Do stress programs really help participants? In *Addressing Correctional Officer Stress: Programs and Strategies*, Cathy Carlson, coordinator of the California Youth Authority's Officer Return-to-Work program in Chino, responds, "After inmates killed a civilian employee, 17 officers took disability leave. Seven never returned. Of the five who went for individual counseling, four returned. [The one who did not was the officer who found the body.] The officers who returned told me that the counseling helped them to come back."

NIJ will continue to study officer stress and the benefits of programs designed to address it. The results of NIJ's field-test of model programs at six sites are expected this fall.

For more information, visit the CLEFS Web site at www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij.clefs. Additionally, resources and publications about correctional officer stress can be downloaded from NIJ's Web site at www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij, including *Lessons Learned From Early Corrections and Law Enforcement Family Support (CLEFS) Programs* and *Work and Family Support Services For Correctional Officers and Their Family Members* by Robert P. Delprino, and *Addressing Correctional Officer Stress: Programs and Strategies* by Peter Finn.

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