

### NIJ UPDATE

# Transforming correctional culture and climate

## *Innovations from the field*

By Nancy La Vigne

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*Borrowing from innovations abroad, U.S. correctional facilities are piloting more humane living environments that are grounded in principles of restorative justice to support rehabilitation and enhance safety for all who work and reside in them.*

**P**eople are sentenced to prison to be removed from society, where ideally, they are rehabilitated so that they lead productive and law-abiding lives upon their release. Unfortunately, prison environments are not always conducive to this goal. Some facilities have substandard and unsafe living conditions, where threats of violence are commonplace. And some have correctional cultures that establish an “us against them” relationship between correctional officers and the people in their custody and care.

The command-and-control culture of more traditionally operated correctional facilities can breed a mindset among officers that if they authentically engage with people who are incarcerated, they will become vulnerable to manipulation. Moreover, the operations of many correctional



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settings remove all agency from incarcerated individuals, making them ill-prepared to adopt healthy habits and make decisions upon their release. In addition, many traditional correctional environments have no means of constructively responding to those who violate rules and harm others in a restorative manner, rather than issuing infractions or using restrictive housing.

These types of environments are harmful for all who live and work in them. Correctional officers may experience high rates of stress that

can affect their physical and mental health and can also adversely affect their behaviors and relationships in both their professional and personal lives. Incarcerated people may live in fear and experience both vicarious and direct trauma that could compromise their mental and physical health and their ability to benefit from prison programs, education, and treatment opportunities.

These environments not only increase the likelihood of trauma but also hinder the ability of people who are incarcerated to develop prosocial

ways of thinking, living, and interacting with others. These factors likely influence the high recidivism rate in the United States, along with the alarmingly high rates of correctional officer attrition in jails and prisons.

Despite this dire picture, examples from other countries demonstrate that correctional facilities can establish safer, more humane, and more restorative environments. Correctional agencies in the United States are beginning to pilot these models, and early indications suggest that these transformative settings offer promising alternatives to traditional prison and jail environments and operations.

### **Looking outside the United States for inspiration**

In recent years, some U.S. correctional systems have looked toward Western European and Scandinavian countries for models that can transform the culture in prisons, making for more rehabilitative environments and promoting greater safety for all.

Countries like Denmark, Germany, Norway, and Sweden view prison as an opportunity to promote rehabilitation and a successful return to the community. The goal is not to inflict further punishment but rather to create a supportive environment that mirrors life outside prison as much as possible. This is accomplished through intensive rehabilitative services, a well-trained correctional workforce, and more humane prison conditions.

In Norway, for example, corrections officers are trained to play an active role in the rehabilitation of people in their custody and care,

engaging them in health-focused programming, providing intensive mentorship, and modeling positive socialization. Officers employ incentives and motivational interviewing, a counselling method designed to coach individuals to acknowledge and draw from their strengths and reconsider ways of thinking that lead to negative and harmful behaviors.

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According to Synøve Andersen, a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Oslo and a principal investigator on the Scandinavian Prison project evaluation, the increased global attention on Scandinavian correctional policies can, in part, be attributed to the country's reported recidivism rates of 20-30% — considerably lower than those in the United States — and media attention on Norway's Bastøy and Halden prisons.

Following the example of their Scandinavian counterparts, corrections leaders in at least a dozen U.S.

states have implemented programs that incorporate aspects of Norway's and Sweden's correctional policies. While it is too early to assess the impacts of these new programs, these pilots illustrate new strategies to establish improved cultures and climates within American prisons and jails, holding promise for yielding better outcomes for those who work and are confined in them.

The following discussions detail two programs based on the Scandinavian model. One, Little Scandinavia, aims to impact staff safety and wellness and is currently used at a state correctional institution. The other, Amend, focuses on training and assistance for U.S. corrections officials.

### **Little Scandinavia: Incorporating Scandinavian concepts into a state correctional facility**

At Pennsylvania's Chester State Correctional Institution, corrections officials have partnered with researchers from Drexel University and the University of Oslo to incorporate concepts from Scandinavian prisons and evaluate their impact on the wellness of staff and incarcerated individuals, prison culture, and recidivism.

The "Little Scandinavia" unit looks unlike any other in the medium-security prison, boasting single cells, custom furniture, a communal kitchen, and an outdoor green space. Corrections officers on the Little Scandinavia project have traveled to Norway to work alongside peer mentors in their facilities. They have also received training in conflict resolution, suicide prevention, and other relevant skills.

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In 2020, six men moved into Little Scandinavia as part of the pilot program. Although the program was delayed due to COVID-19, more participants were moved into Little Scandinavia throughout 2022, and the unit reached full capacity in November 2022.

New residents of Little Scandinavia are chosen through a lottery system, which ensures that anyone housed in SCI Chester is eligible.

“This is not an honor block. This is not a specialized housing unit. This is a general population housing unit that employs a very different model of corrections,” said Jordan Hyatt, a criminology and justice studies professor at Drexel University and a principal investigator on the Scandinavian Prison project evaluation.

Following the Scandinavian model, the unit benefits from a low ratio of staff to incarcerated men, with an average of one officer per every 64 men versus the typical ratio for SCI Chester of one officer to every 128 men.



### **Restoring Promise creates prison housing units grounded in human dignity for young adults between 18 to 25 years old.**

Little Scandinavia embodies an effort to create a more humane prison environment, including a dramatic shift in how staff and the incarcerated population interact. The program is intended to allow everyone living and working in the unit to focus on successful reintegration into society.

Hyatt credits local and state corrections leaders for their strong support of Little Scandinavia, noting that it was of critical importance in starting the project. When it comes to challenging long-held beliefs of what corrections should look like, Hyatt says it is the correctional officers involved in Little Scandinavia who have demonstrated that such programs hold potential.

“The staff at the front lines of this project really are the ones who are the most responsible for carrying forward the cultural change. They are the best ambassadors for this project,” he said.

#### **Amend Program offers international exchange and officer training**

Amend is a program of the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) that supports international exchange, officer training, and technical assistance designed to help U.S.

departments of correction learn about and adopt practices from the Norwegian Correctional Service. Amend supports programs in California, Oregon, Washington, Minnesota, and North Dakota.

Because U.S. and Norwegian cultures differ, Amend does not directly apply Norwegian correctional policy or practice to its programs. Instead, it draws inspiration for potential reforms from Norway’s approach.

For example, North Dakota correctional officials and staff members traveled to Norway in 2015. Following the trip, North Dakota enacted policy changes that reduced the use of solitary confinement by nearly 75% between 2016 and 2020.

The initial feedback on these efforts to reduce solitary confinement has been positive, according to North Dakota officials. Both incarcerated individuals and correctional staff report that the reforms are responsible for increased trust and reduced antagonism between the two groups.

Corrections staff have also reported enhanced job satisfaction, reduced stress, and increased safety. Meanwhile, corrections leaders say violent infractions have remained stable or even improved following the change to the solitary confinement policy.

**Table 1: Reform Efforts at a Glance**

Program	Location	Population	Program Inception
<b>Restoring Promise*</b>	Multiple	Varied	2017
<b>Little Scandinavia</b>	SCI Chester Chester, PA	General population	March 2020
<b>Amend</b>	Stafford Creek Corrections Center Aberdeen, WA	Men incarcerated in restrictive housing unit	October 2020
<b>Kewanee Life Skills Re-Entry Center</b>	Kewanee, IL	Men who are between 1–4 years away from release and pose a medium to high risk of recidivating post-release	February 2017
<b>Women Overcoming Recidivism Through Hard Work (WORTH) I</b>	York Correctional Institution Niantic, CT	Young women ages 18–25	June 2018
<b>Change Maker’s Village</b>	Arkansas Valley Correctional Facility Ordway, CO	Young men ages 18–25	December 2021
<b>UNITY Village</b>	North Dakota State Penitentiary Bismarck, ND	Young men ages 18–25	February 2022

\* Multi-site; details below

### Restoring promise: A promising model based on the “Normalization Principle”

Perhaps the most well-established institutional reform effort is the Restoring Promise initiative, a project led by the Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) and the MILPA Collective (MILPA), is a national initiative that works to transform the living and working conditions for people in jails and prisons, especially young adults.

Restoring Promise creates prison housing units grounded in human dignity for young adults between 18 to 25 years old. Following the “normalization principle,” Restoring

Promise partners with departments of corrections to create environments in which young adults are guided by specially trained staff and mentors (older incarcerated people serving long or life sentences) to hold each other accountable for following a daily routine inside a facility. The program mirrors life on the outside as closely as possible and includes connecting with family and community regularly for support, resolving conflict without violence, and using restorative practices instead of punishment when community agreements (prison rules) are broken.

Restoring Promise sites support corrections professionals and

mentors working as teams to create a supportive community environment. Everyone on the unit develops workshops and educational opportunities that help the young adults navigate prison successfully and prepare them for returning to their communities. Mentors and staff equip the young adults with practical, social, and emotional skills to earn a living and lead law-abiding, productive lives both behind bars and after release.

Restoring Promise supports young adult housing units in prisons in Connecticut, South Carolina, Colorado, North Dakota, South Carolina, and Idaho (currently in the planning stages), and a county jail in



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Massachusetts (see Table 2: Restoring Promise Pilot Sites). Across all locations, young adults have been charged with or convicted of various crimes, including serious offenses such as armed robbery and homicide. Staff and mentors are trained in restorative justice, young adult development, family engagement, and international and national best practices.

The Vera and MILPA staff spearheading these pilots are careful to note that Restoring Promise is a philosophy not a model. This allows the incarcerated people and correctional staff in each facility to co-create the specific ways in which the environment will be transformed, allowing for differences in correctional environments and engendering buy-in from those who reside and work in each unit.

A three-year randomized controlled trial funded by the National Institute of Justice, led by Vera in

partnership with the MILPA Collective and in collaboration with the South Carolina Department of Corrections, found that residents who participated in Restoring Promise were 73% less likely to be convicted of a violent infraction after one year. Participating in the program was also associated with an 83% decrease in the odds of placement in restrictive housing, and there was no significant increase in misconduct. Additionally, correctional officers assigned to the housing unit implementing Restoring Promise — the Community Opportunity Restoration Enhancement (CORE) — at Turbeville Correctional Institution reported lower stress and greater quality of work life. Specifically:

- 88% felt less stress working in the unit.
- 89% reported an improved quality of life.
- 91% felt that they had grown professionally.

**Results of this comparison indicate that those who applied to be housed in Restoring Promise units but were ultimately not placed there experience similar outcomes to those who do not apply.**

The evaluation also compared outcomes for the control group from the randomized controlled trial and a matched group from general population. Results of this comparison indicate that those who applied to be housed in Restoring Promise units but were ultimately not placed there experience similar outcomes to those who do not apply. This indicates that the differences in outcomes observed in the randomized controlled trial are due to the Restoring Promise housing units and not to characteristics of who chose to apply. This finding offers strong evidence to support a new, scalable, and replicable model for improving safety in correctional settings.

Review the final report describing the evaluation as submitted to NIJ.



**Table 2: Restoring Promise Pilot Sites**

Institution and Restoring Promise Unit	State	Established	Description
<b>Cheshire Correctional Institution   T.R.U.E. Unit</b>	Connecticut	2017	Connecticut's T.R.U.E. unit, housed within the Cheshire Correctional Institution, is the longest- running Restoring Promise site. T.R.U.E. stands for truthfulness, respectfulness, understanding, and elevating. Cheshire is a maximum-security facility for men, which expanded to a second housing unit in 2021. There are 25 mentors working with 100 young adults. During the day, there are 12–15 staff.
<b>York Correctional Institution   Women Overcoming Recidivism Through Hard Work (WORTH)</b>	Connecticut	2018	Connecticut also houses the only Restoring Promise site at a women's prison. W.O.R.T.H., which stands for women overcoming recidivism through hard work, is housed at York Correctional Institution. York is a maximum-security facility for women. There are eight mentors working with 30 young adults. During the day, there are 8 staff.
<b>Turbeville Correctional Institution   CORE Village</b>	South Carolina	2018	The C.O.R.E. Village stands for community opportunity restoration enhancement (CORE) housing unit. CORE is housed at South Carolina's Turbeville Correctional Institute, a medium-security facility for men. CORE is designed for young adults sentenced under a state law that allows judges to give either a sentence of less than three years or specialized parole supervision. There are 15 mentors working with 50 young men. During the day, there are 2–3 staff.
<b>Lee Correctional Institution   Cadre of HOPE</b>	South Carolina	2019	Cadre of H.O.P.E. (helping other people evolve) is housed at Lee Correctional Institute, a maximum-security prison for men. The average sentence for young adults is 18 years, and 85 percent of young men at Lee are Black — higher than the national average for similar offenses. There are 15 mentors working with 56 young men. During the day, there are 2–3 staff.
<b>Arkansas Valley Correctional Facility   Change Maker's Village</b>	Colorado	2021	The Change Maker's Village is housed at Colorado's Arkansas Valley Correctional Facility, a medium-security facility for men. There are 11 mentors supporting 60 young adults. During the day, there are 9 staff.
<b>North Dakota State Penitentiary   UNITY Village</b>	North Dakota		U.N.I.T.Y. (using natural integrity for teaching youth) Village is located at North Dakota State Penitentiary, a maximum security for men. There are 15 mentors supporting 45 young adults. During the day, there are 6 staff.
<b>Middlesex Sheriff's Office   P.A.C.T. Community</b>	Massachusetts	2018	The Middlesex House of Correction and Jail is the only jail in the Restoring Promise initiative. P.A.C.T. stands for people achieving change together. Being a jail, there is a speedy rotation of both young adults and mentors on the unit, but usually there are 6 mentors working with 35 young adults. During the day, there are 4 staff.

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### Complementary initiatives support transforming correctional culture and climate

Correctional agencies in the United States are making important strides to establish safer, more humane, and more restorative environments. Beyond the programs described above, other initiatives exist to help identify and share evidence-based practices and experiences in an effort to meet that goal.

In recognition that these new ways of thinking about prison environments require the buy in and support of correctional leaders, programs that connect corrections professionals, like the Prison Fellowship's Warden Exchange program can provide a helpful foundation for spreading knowledge about emerging transformational programs. This program convenes wardens, deputy wardens, associate wardens, top corrections specialists and subject matter experts in a nine-month leadership training program that examines and applies best practices for creating safer and more rehabilitative prisons.

Additionally, the Urban Institute's Prison Research and Innovation

Initiative, an effort to build evidence and spur innovation to make prisons more humane, safe, and rehabilitative environments, could also complement these pilots. The Initiative employs research that actively and inclusively engages all people closest to the issue — both those in confinement and staff of all levels and roles — to identify the problems and develop solutions that are research-informed and most likely to produce the desired impacts.

While these programs are just two examples of initiatives that aim to transform correctional culture and climate, the continued piloting of more humane living environments works to support the rehabilitation and success of incarcerated individuals as well as the safety of those working in correctional environments. The programs described here are an important step in advancing restorative justice and enhancing public safety.



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