

Countering Staff Stress—Why and How

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The topic of correctional staff wellness is attracting greater attention from agency leadership and staff around the country. In response to this interest, the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) has been working with a variety of providers and stakeholders to develop methods to support the health and wellness of correctional staff and their organizations.

Desert Waters Correctional Outreach (DWCO) is one of the providers NIC has been working with in this subject area. Founded in 2003, DWCO focuses on the occupational, personal, and family well-being of staff of all disciplines within the corrections profession. NIC has awarded competitively bid projects to DWCO to develop a white paper, deliver a webinar series, and provide training and coaching to agencies around the country. All of this work has centered around the issues of staff stress, secondary/vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, and ways to support correctional staff wellness.

This article presents the perspective of DWCO staff. Others working in the field may have different approaches. They all share the same objective—to support the health and wellness of corrections professionals. The appearance of this article does not constitute endorsement by NIC of DWCO's approach.

Jail managers are inundated with duties and responsibilities. The thought of adding one more substantive task area—addressing staff stress through a systematic, data-driven strategy—may sound daunting at first. The task will require systematic and group-level assessment of staff, trainings on the sources of stress and on resilience-promoting behaviors, and re-assessments over time. These steps translate into budget line items, time, and energy. A jail manager may think, “We already offer employee assistance services and have a Critical Incident Response Team. Plus, we have enough trouble as it is managing an overly full plate of tasks and responsibilities, and doing it with a limited budget.”

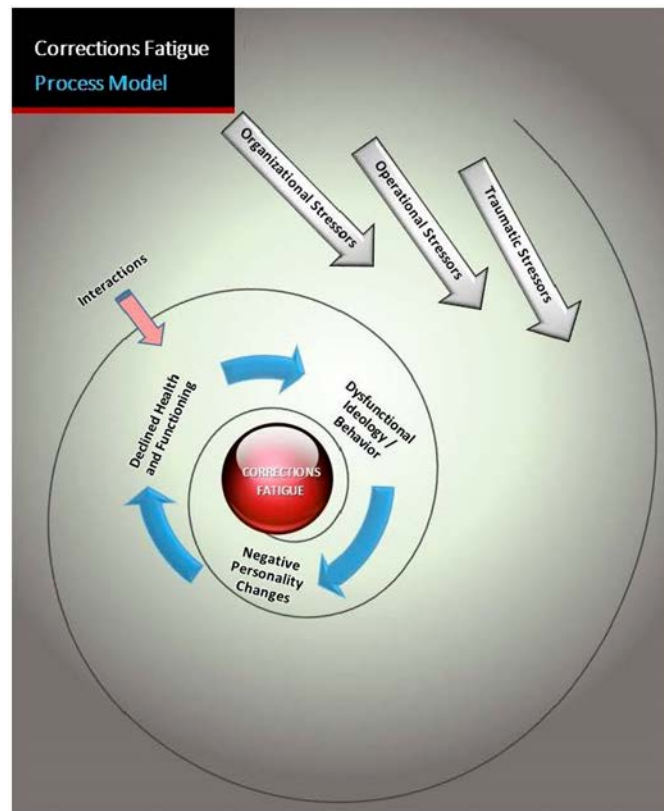
A growing body of research evidence, however, clearly indicates that not doing anything or doing little to address staff stress is very costly to corrections organizations, both in terms of staff health and functioning and in terms of financial costs. In fact, many of the management challenges jail managers face can be seen as veiled manifestations of employee stress. Well-documented consequences include pervasive and contagious negativity, declining job performance, hostile work environments, abrasive

behavior among staff and/or toward offenders, absenteeism, turnover, and unhealthy or volatile off-duty behaviors.

This article presents a summary of key issues and how they can be addressed through a data-driven, evidence-based strategy. Readers interested in this article’s content can find a more comprehensive discussion in the white paper DWCO developed for NIC, *Occupational Stressors in Corrections Organizations: Types, Effects and Solutions*.

The Nature of Corrections Staff Stress

Figure 1. Corrections Fatigue Model Process



Corrections and disciplines are a multitude of throughout the They include stressors, and *traumatic*

employees of all ranks repeatedly exposed to occupational stressors course of their careers. *organizational operational stressors, stressors.*

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- *Organizational stressors* have their source in the “people” aspects of the job, such as interpersonal and role conflicts, unsupportive or unreliable coworkers, and/or unsupportive leadership (that is, situations in which subordinates do not feel supported by their supervisors and administrators).
- *Operational stressors* refer to logistical issues common to correctional environments, such as high workloads, harsh physical conditions, and shiftwork.

Research has shown that organizational and operational stressors contribute to “burnout.” The term “burnout” is frequently used to describe a state of emotional exhaustion that workers experience, which may be accompanied by a reduced sense of job role effectiveness and/or an attitude of general indifference or emotional callousness.

- A third major type of stressor, which is not included in the construct of burnout, is the *traumatic stressor*. While traumatic exposure has not received much attention in the corrections profession compared to other high-stress occupations, both direct and indirect types of potentially traumatic exposure are not uncommonly experienced.

Traumatic exposure may occur “first hand,” such as when a staff member is assaulted by a justice-involved individual or directly observes an assault on another person, or when the staff member witnesses or responds to an inmate death or suicide attempt. Indirect or “second hand” exposure occurs when accounts of violence, injury, or death-related events are repeatedly conveyed through in-house communications or through paper or electronic media or other mediums. Both direct and indirect forms of exposure to trauma, when repeated over time on the job, can and do take a cumulative toll on health and functioning.

The newest version of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*—now in its fifth edition (DSM-5)ⁱ—has added indirect forms of traumatic exposure as a contributing factor for the development of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)—such as, *when indirect exposure is repeated or extreme and work-related*. Previously only direct exposure was considered causal.

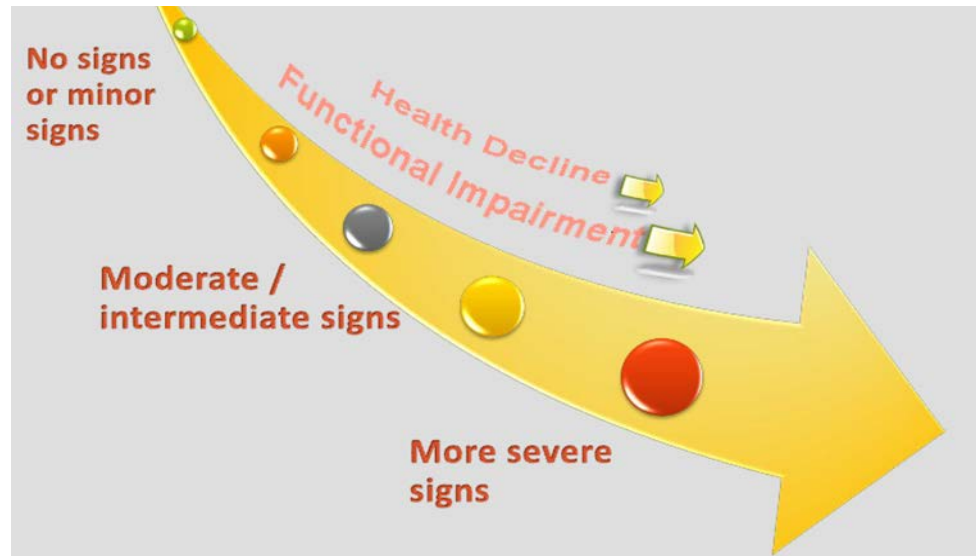
Corrections work truly is a high-stress and high-trauma occupation, akin to police work, firefighting, combat military activity, and similar vocations. Evidence suggests that this claim is particularly accurate for corrections staff with job roles involving the highest and most direct levels of exposure to critical events. Security/custody staff, for example, have been found to experience adverse consequences upon their health and functioning at generally higher rates than positions that involve less direct and front-line activity.ⁱⁱ

Manifestations of Correctional Staff Stress

To describe the combined effects of occupational stressors in corrections, Caterina Spinaris coined the term Corrections Fatigue in the year 2000. The definition of Corrections Fatigue has been refined over time based upon scientific research activities and process modeling. Corrections Fatigue is currently and technically defined as a collection of negative and inter-related consequences upon the health of functioning of corrections workforces, due to exposure to traumatic, operational, and organizational stressors and their interactions.

Figure 2. Corrections Fatigue Continuum

DWCO’s work, as well as other emerging research on the topic, has shown that the consequences or manifestations of Corrections Fatigue include negative personality changes, mental health disorder symptoms, and socially dysfunctional thinking/ideology.



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- *Negative personality changes* most often consist of a negatively skewed emotional disposition and outlook; declined empathy or compassion; a tendency toward social isolation; negative emotions, such as anger, shame, and guilt; and increased substance use.
- *Declined health and functioning* are often exemplified by symptoms of depression, anxiety, and/or PTSD and in extreme cases full disorder conditions; declined performance on the job, in relationships, in caregiving, in attending to personal responsibilities, and in ability to enjoy leisure time; increased suicide risk; reduced life satisfaction; and lowered physical health.
- Examples of *dysfunctional ideology and behavior* include dualistic thinking as exemplified by an “us against them” perspective (for example, staff vs. justice-involved individuals or line staff vs. administration), cynicism, workplace alienation, and indifference.

Pervasiveness of Correctional Staff Stress

Research has repeatedly shown that occupational stress is an inescapable reality of corrections work, and it has consequences akin to an occupational hazard. It comes with the territory, and especially so when the organization has not implemented a systematic and ongoing program of workforce health

assessment and training to promote resilience promoting behaviors. Everyone is affected to some degree by Corrections Fatigue, with front-line officers appearing to be the most severely impacted.

Studies have demonstrated the following:

- Based upon large-sample data, it is estimated that 27% of corrections professionals meet criteria for PTSD, and 26% demonstrate moderate to severe depression symptom severity.ⁱⁱⁱ
- It has been estimated that 20% of corrections staff—one in five—demonstrate a high level of Corrections Fatigue.^{iv}
- Individuals scoring high in Corrections Fatigue account for 36% of all reported sick days among corrections staff.^v
- Arguably, the most extreme manifestation of unaddressed stress is staff suicide. Researchers in New Jersey found in 2009 that, when controlling for gender and age, correctional officers (COs) had more than twice the suicide rate of police officers.^{vi} In another study, COs were found to have a 39% higher suicide risk than the rest of the working age population.^{vii}

These figures, together with other corrections research, consistently indicate that corrections workers' health and functioning is seriously affected by occupational stressors, with significant negative outcomes for the workforce and for the organization as a whole.

Aims of Interventions

The aims of corrections staff wellness interventions overall are: (1) to educate staff on the genesis of stress-related health consequences and on healthy adaptations to work-related challenges, and (2) to increase resilience-promoting behaviors to counter the effects and consequences of stress.

Intervention programs also provide an opportunity to recognize and address issues within the agency's workplace culture. In the pursuit of organizational culture improvement, staff's unhealthy habitual ways of responding—both as a group and also individually—are reshaped to reduce Corrections Fatigue and promote resilience against its manifestations. This is accomplished through targeted skill-building and repetition.

Addressing Corrections Fatigue is more of an ongoing effort and strategy than it is a one-shot intervention. To use a couple of analogies, one does not become a sharpshooter by firing a gun once in a while. Nor does a body-builder achieve and maintain his/her physique by working out once or twice a week. Corrections staff should receive ongoing instruction and periodic training to learn and maintain the self-management, interpersonal, and resilience-promoting skills and behaviors that underpin a healthy and optimally functioning workforce and workplace culture. Staff members need continual reminders of effective strategies, and they need structured opportunities for practice. Ongoing role

modeling from higher-level staff also is essential. Corrections organizations need to be genuinely invested in this pursuit for improvement to take root and grow.

It cannot be emphasized enough that enduring change of ingrained negative or dysfunctional patterns requires systematic, ongoing, and culture-wide effort. Dysfunctional behaviors have become self-sustaining and self-reinforcing patterns in many correctional agency environments over the decades. New recruits are vulnerable to “contamination” through unhealthy indoctrination as they assimilate into the affected workplace culture. Interventions involve gradually “deprogramming” and “reprogramming” staff’s thinking, beliefs, and behaviors in response to challenging corrections workplace experiences, situations, and circumstances. Through an agency’s efforts, current and future staff can learn to adapt successfully to occupational stressors. Culture improvement is a slow and laborious—but deeply critical—process. It is a marathon, not a sprint.

The ultimate purpose of workplace culture intervention is to breathe new life into staff and into the corrections profession by bringing enduring and sustainable solutions to endemic corrections workplace problems.

Useful questions for jail managers to consider include:

- How big will our problem become if systematic steps are not taken to counter the negative effects of ongoing occupational stressors?
- What is it costing our agency in the long term to ignore Corrections Fatigue, depression, or PTSD?
- What is the actual price of turnover, sick leave days, overtime, and/or substandard job performance caused by low morale?
- What is the potential financial impact to our agency from lawsuits resulting from staff misconduct traceable to corrections work malaise?
- What would the impact be on our workforce if an employee committed suicide?

What Does a Workplace Culture Intervention Look Like, Specifically?

Countering the trajectory of Corrections Fatigue’s development is a difficult yet crucial undertaking. Effective interventions require a customized, comprehensive, and data-driven approach that addresses the needs of each agency while considering its specific issues and characteristics. One size does not fit all. A systematic, six-stage approach that takes into account the unique nature of Corrections Fatigue and corrections workplace environments is described in the *Occupational Stressors* white paper available from NIC.

DWCO recommends a six-stage approach to improving corrections workplace health and functioning:

1. Inform (i.e., educate on the nature of Corrections Fatigue)
2. Assess (i.e., measure the extent that Corrections Fatigue permeates the workplace culture using validated workplace health assessment tools)
3. Evaluate (i.e., compare identified problem areas to the content of existing programs, structures, and resources for promoting staff health and functioning)
4. Plan (i.e., prepare for implementation of new or modified programs, structures, and resources)
5. Implement (i.e., roll out planned changes or improvements)
6. Re-Assess (i.e., periodically and systemically re-assess workplace health and functioning using validated assessment tools)

1) Inform

Administrators first need to increase their knowledge, depth of understanding, and ability to recognize Corrections Fatigue, its nature, and its components. Corrections staff of all disciplines will be in a better position to reduce the grip of Corrections Fatigue if they are made aware of its nature and are able to recognize its signs, manifestations, and sources. Meeting and overcoming the occupation-specific challenges of corrections work will, by necessity, require an accurate and specific understanding of the converging forces impinging on staff's health and functioning, how these manifest, and how they can be alleviated.

2) Assess

Once a better understanding of the nature of Corrections Fatigue is obtained, the next logical step is to quantitatively assess the extent to which manifestations of Corrections Fatigue pervade an organizational culture. A variety of assessment tools can be used for this purpose.

DWCO has developed assessment tools specifically for use with corrections professionals:

- The Corrections Fatigue Status Assessment™, ^{viii} which measures the extent of Corrections Fatigue in an organization along nine dimensions.
- The Corrections Staff Resilience Inventory™, ^{ix} which measures the extent of use of four resilience-promoting classes of behaviors.

- The Depression Danger Scale™, x which assesses factors associated with suicide risk on the group level.

Additionally, DWCO offers a free online calculator for estimating the costs to the agency of just one outcome of high levels of Corrections Fatigue: use of sick leave. The calculator is available on the DWCO website.

3) Evaluate

Decision-makers can compare identified problem areas to the content and focus of the agency's existing programs, structures, and resources that are dedicated to maintaining staff health and functioning. The relative fit of programming to problems should be evaluated. Upon doing so, it may become clear, for instance, that a particular resource is lacking or that an existing resource requires modification to better address one or more problem areas identified through assessment.

4) Plan

Once problem areas and their extent are identified, planning becomes the next logical step. If the Evaluation stage makes clear that one or more new resources need to be implemented, or that an existing resource could be modified to make it more effective, then decision-makers can prepare to take those steps. Planning might include the pursuit of funding, setting a realistic timeline for planned implementation or roll-out, and/or deciding if policy modifications will be required to support any changes to be made.

5) Implement

The implementation phase involves solutions and resources—such as the actual roll-out of trainings, interventions, changes, or other improvement efforts. The priority should be targeting Corrections Fatigue in specific ways that follow from quantitative assessment results.

To assist in meeting this need, DWCO has developed specialized training for the corrections field. Its program, From Corrections Fatigue to Fulfillment™, helps agencies initiate a program of sustainable change and deterrence of Corrections Fatigue. A Critical Incident First Aid™ e-learning module is also available. Other training resources are available via the NIC website and Information Center.

Other resources agencies can offer to exposed individuals include:

- Employee Assistance Programs, which may offer mental health support services for staff members and/or their families;
- Peer support groups that provide assistance following exposure to critical incidents or during other times of need experienced by staff;

- Chaplain services for religious/spiritual support;
- Field Training Officers, who may offer mentoring or on-the-job training to new employees; and
- Self-help resources such as books or handouts on resilience, nutrition, relaxation techniques, physical exercise, emotional self-regulation, skillful conflict resolution, skillful communication, or other relevant content.

6) *Re-Assess*

The final stage involves re-assessing manifestations of Corrections Fatigue and the presence of resilience-promoting behaviors quantitatively, and comparing current organization-level assessment scores to previously established baseline scores or to national baseline scores. Re-assessment in this way provides the critical function of accurately monitoring progress and obtaining data-driven guidance in regard to the potential need for adjustments or modifications to implemented improvement effort strategies.

Conclusion

The number of stressors corrections workers face is formidable, and their effects are dire for individuals and groups immersed in unhealthy corrections workplace cultures.

Because the major stressors and interacting manifestations of Corrections Fatigue represent a continual and relentless threat, so too must strategies to deter, reduce, or prevent Corrections Fatigue be ongoing. Systematic and quantitative assessment of improvement effort outcomes over time is necessary to inform the need for adjustments or changes and to gauge progress in a data-driven and evidence-based manner, and using population-specific and validated assessment tools—that is, tools developed specifically for corrections professionals.

Apart from what systematic assessments reveal in terms of numbers and measurements, an increasingly healthy and functional workforce will also reveal itself through:

- Professional, positive, and supportive forms of interaction among staff members;
- A valuing and acting out of respect and respectful communications among corrections staff of various disciplines and ranks, and between staff and justice-involved individuals;
- Reliable, consistent, and principled decision-making and follow through; and
- Disciplined and exemplary role modeling by leadership.

The goal is to breathe new life into staff and into corrections workplace cultures by bringing enduring and sustainable, data-driven solutions to corrections workplace problems.

Given tight budgets, administrators may hesitate to invest in staff well-being in a focused, systematic, and long-term fashion. Yet the actual price tag of avoiding such an investment is becoming increasingly well-established on a concrete and quantitative basis. It is exemplified by the empirical evidence of staff suicide rates, absenteeism rates, and at times professional misconduct. Surely it is worthwhile to invest wisely in a safer, more positive future for our agencies and for our staff.

Resources from NIC

Denhof, M. D., Spinaris, C. G., and Morton, G. R. (2014). Occupational Stressors in Corrections Organizations: Types, Effects and Solutions. U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Corrections. <http://nicic.gov/library/028299>

National Institute of Corrections Academy. Regional Training Initiative. Central Region. (2010). Hitting the Wall: Dealing with Stress in Corrections [Lesson Plan and Participant's Manual]. <http://nicic.gov/Library/024726>

Spinaris, C. G., Denhof, M. D., and Morton, G. (2014). *The Corrections Profession: Maintaining Safety and Sanity* (Parts 1 and 2). [Recorded webcasts with supplemental resources.]

Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Corrections.

Part 1 - <http://nicic.gov/library/027907>

Part 2 - <http://nicic.gov/Library/027908>

Resources from NIC

[NIC Library Package—Corrections Fatigue](#)

NIC webpage, [Health and Wellness for Corrections Professionals](#)

NIC library resources webpage, [Documents Related to Stress Management](#)

Desert Waters Correctional Outreach website, <http://desertwaters.com>

Includes Corrections Fatigue Costs Estimator and other free resources.

Document available

at: http://community.nicic.gov/blogs/national_jail_exchange/archive/2015/02/23/countering-staff-stress-why-and-how.aspx

The National Jail Exchange is an ongoing electronic journal focusing on providing information to jails practitioners. This blog is funded by a contract from the National Institute of Corrections, U.S. Department of Justice. Points of view or opinions stated in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

To write an article or to learn more about the National Jail Exchange, visit the homepage for this journal at: <http://NICIC.gov/NationalJailExchange>.

ⁱ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.). (Alexandria, VA: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2014).

ⁱⁱ Caterina G. Spinaris, Michael D. Denhof, and Julie A. Kellaway, *Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in United States Corrections Professionals: Prevalence and Impact on Health and Functioning*. (Florence, Colorado: Desert Waters Correctional Outreach, 2012). [Download](#).

ⁱⁱⁱ Michael D. Denhof and Caterina G. Spinaris, *Depression, PTSD, and Comorbidity in United States Corrections Professionals: Impact on Health and Functioning*. (Florence, Colorado: Desert Waters Correctional Outreach, 2013). [Download](#).

^{iv} Michael D. Denhof and Caterina G. Spinaris, *The Corrections Fatigue Status Assessment (CFSA-v5)*. (Florence, Colorado: Desert Waters Correctional Outreach, 2014). [Download](#).

^v *ibid*.

^{vi} New Jersey Police Suicide Task Force, *Report*. (Trenton, New Jersey: State of New Jersey, Office of the Attorney General, 2009.) [Download](#).

^{vii} Steven J. Stack and Olga Tsoudis, "Suicide risk among correctional officers: A logistic regression analysis." *Archives of Suicide Research* 3:3 (1997): 183-186.

^{viii} Michael D. Denhof and Caterina G. Spinaris, 2014, *op. cit*.

^{ix} Michael D. Denhof and Caterina G. Spinaris, *The Corrections Staff Resilience Inventory (CSRI)*. (Florence, Colorado: Desert Waters Correctional Outreach, 2014). [Download](#).

^x Michael D. Denhof, *The Depression Danger Scale (DDS)*. (Florence, Colorado: Desert Waters Correctional Outreach, 2014). [Download](#).