

# National Institute of Corrections Virtual Conference 2016 Transcript for Interview with Kevin Kempf

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**Announcer:** This is the podcast of the National Institute of Corrections Virtual Conference. Please join us November 9, 2016 for our third annual conference titled *Leading with Innovation*, where you will receive a full day of presentations, innovative chats, and networking all brought to you by NIC. Visit us at [www.nicic.gov/go/VC2016](http://www.nicic.gov/go/VC2016) to register.

And now... here's a sneak peek!

**National Institute of Corrections:** It's a great time to be in corrections. With so many changes taking place for the better, restrictive housing reform, justice reinvestment, etc., now is a great time to pull back the curtain to our industry and show the public what really happens behind our walls.

This presentation will provide examples of how an agency can do this and what the benefits are to the staff, the public, and inmates. Now, more than ever, the industry of corrections is in desperate need of reform and transparency. For years, our industry has been closed off and at times, secretive about what we do. This culture has hurt our industry and failed to recognize the amazing things that happen in corrections. This presentation will describe the benefits of pulling back the curtains and how Idaho has gone about making this happen.

So, this topic is terribly interesting. I think it will be a good idea if we simply begin with the discussion of your background, how you came to being in the position that you're in, and then how you came upon being part of this project or maybe I should say, a mission. It sounds more like a mission, a mission to tell the story of corrections to the public.

**Kevin Kempf:** Okay, sounds great. Well first off, I'm a career corrections person, so I started off 21 years ago as a correctional officer within our system. And over the past 20 years had the opportunities to

promote up both through our probation and parole track and our prisons track, kind of bounced back and forth on my way to being the Director today. And I'll tell you and it's not just something that's shared by me but it's shared by our entire leadership team here in Idaho. We just believe the theory of corrections is important. It's important to want to have a passion to change people's lives for the better. We believe it's in fact sustainable public safety when we can change the way people think and providing resources that they need out there.

And we collectively believe that before any organization can set forth with reform whether it be justice reinvestment or a top-to-bottom review of whatever it is you're doing within your system, the first thing you have to have in place is transparency. You've got to fight...you've got to actively fight against the general public to be suspicious about what it is you're doing. And as I've mentioned before, our industry in corrections for 100 years really has been kind of a little bit too much behind the scenes or in the corner of the room and not very open to pulling back the curtains.

**NIC:** Now, you are the director but how did you come about being so involved in the communications piece, because usually we think that a director is more concerned with operations, and maybe staffing, you know things like that, not so much outreach.

**Kempf:** Yeah, that's a great question. So, one of the first things that we did starting December of 2014 was we did a top-to-bottom assessment of just that, of operations. We started with our headquarters. We looked at every single position that worked in our headquarters and applied a definition to exactly what it is that that position did. And we frankly put a kind of a litmus test to each and every position. We said...and is this position as important or more important than a probation officer? Or as important or more important than a drug and alcohol counselor in one of our prisons? And if we felt like it was, we kept it in place. If we felt like it wasn't, we eliminated it, and then changed it to a drug and alcohol counselor or a probation officer and moved it to the front lines. And within our system, we effected 25 positions just in headquarters by using that assessment.

We also made some changes. We made some leadership changes across the state, and then we really followed the direction from Brad Livingston who was the Director of Texas. Trading a culture of leadership, we changed how we promote people. We frankly are micromanaging who we promote and I could go on and on and on about

a variety of things that we did really to affect the operations. But, at the same time, we really launched into this notion of we've got to be more transparent. We've got to be...again, we got to pull our curtains back and let people from the general public, to the media, to our lawmakers, to our prison advocacy groups, we've got to have them have access to our system. So, they know what it is we're doing and frankly, be able to provide input on how we can improve. So, all of those things we've been actively doing, and I can certainly go in to some of the specifics of what we're doing there.

**NIC:** Okay, so it sounds like your first step in coming around to thinking about outreach was to do an entire overhaul of your system, so you did some systems work internally. And was there a specific method that you used to do that? Or was it just that a handful of individuals that you selected, you know you just said, "Take a look at what we're doing and see if we can change things?"

**Kempf:** Yeah, the latter. We had a select group of individuals around our table that obviously we chose to be there, smart people from around our system, and in some cases, at various levels. And as I mentioned before, one of the things that we did is we had every single chief of a division here in the headquarters, their task was to submit to me every single staff person that they have here in the headquarters with a description of what it is that they do. And once we received all of those things which we did on pretty short order, once we received all of those positions, their definitions of what they do, then we started down that process with that group that I had around the table.

But, in addition to that, we brought to Boise every single one of our wardens, every single one of our district managers who oversee probation and parole, every single one of our community reentry center managers from across the state, and we met with them individually. And we asked some pretty simple questions of them, you know, what do you need? Like what are some of the things you are lacking today? And through that, we learned a lot. We learned where the water was rising in our organization.

And so, when we had all of those things together that we felt like we were lacking or that we needed, and at the same time we went through that assessment process in headquarters, it allowed us...frankly, it allowed us to determine those 25 positions that I've mentioned earlier. We had a very natural way to say, "Well, clearly, the bulk of these positions need to go to probation and parole." That is where the water is

rising out there and so that's what we turned the majority of those positions into where Probation and Parole Officers, Drug and Alcohol Counselors, Program Managers, and then just distributed those positions to where they were needed in the field.

We utilized, of course, we have our own, of course, human resources within the department but our state of Idaho also has a separate entity called The Division of Human Resources. And so, we had them be a sitting member of this entire assessment so they could see it through their own eyes what we were doing, why we were doing it, and then certainly add input to what we should or shouldn't do.

**NIC:** Now, it takes a brave person to do what you've just described, and I would imagine that you received a lot of backlash. You don't even have to say it. I already know the answer to that is yes. With that, did you have a strategy in terms of...does your internal communications or how you spoke with staff about that?

**Kempf:** Yeah, so speaking of strategy, the very first thing that I did when I was appointed as director was create a 90-day plan and I broke it into 30-day segments, and it was very clear and descriptive. And I communicated that in a couple of different ways to every single one of our leadership team members across the state and every one of our staff members across the state, everyone in the agency. Now, we're a small agency. We only have a little over 2,000 staff and about 24,000 probationers, parolees, and inmates, but everyone in the agency knew exactly what that 90-day plan looked like. And just as an example, like for the first 30 days, I was very clear. I'm gonna travel the state, I'm gonna get to every single worksite, and I talked about exactly what I was gonna do in those 30 days.

For that second 30-day period, I was gonna spend my time doing two things with key members of our legislature, of course, our Governor's office, our Board of Correction, and then start the process of doing this top to bottom review of our operations. Even though I came within the system, none of us around the table really were comfortable of just the status quo. We really had an opportunity to say, "Let's just take a fresh look or a fresh approach." But within those first 60 days for instance, it's in the plan. I reminded myself, "Do not make any changes. Do not make any changes." I was not gonna make any changes within those first 60 days.

That last 30-day period, that's the period where I talked about that if

there were changes to be made and that they were going to be made, then that was gonna be in that time period where we were gonna make them. And I just talked about how we were gonna communicate that to our staff who knew me, and I know a lot of staff of course coming up the agency. It was not a surprise to many people that we were gonna shake some things up. I'm very comfortable, very comfortable with change, very comfortable with trying to recognize what's working and if it's not working, not wasting any time in eliminating it.

And we continue to do that through significant things, things that were like sacred cows in Idaho, our therapeutic communities, for instance. Our judges love them. Our judiciary loved them. We had them in several places in our institutions across the state, but our research and our data were showing us time and time again that they weren't working. That recidivism was actually going up to an offender that was going through a therapeutic community as opposed to an inmate with the same risk level that wasn't going through a therapeutic community. That inmate was being more successful.

And so, we didn't ask anyone's permission or frankly didn't spend much time even communicating why we were doing it. We just eliminated all of those therapeutic communities in our entire system, and then told the judges and judiciary why we did it because we knew if we would have asked for a public debate about it, it would have become a public debate. And it was the right thing for us to do. We understood it and so we did it, and we replaced it with something that's research-based and working, so those types of thing.

And it wasn't just me, it's not just me. I've got a team. I got a deputy director named Henry Atencio for instance, who's an absolute rock star, who I've been close with for a long time. And I used to work for him when he was a district manager in Probation and Parole. I was one of his section supervisors for him. I've been pretty blessed to surround myself with some people that are brave, that are change agents and so we went in to this thing with arms locked together.

**NIC:** I'm really glad that you told that story about how you had to listen to what the data told you, and I think that's probably the hardest part about following evidence-based practice is that sometimes you don't get the answer you want. And instead, you have to move on to another program that is actually meeting the needs of your population.

**Kempf:** Yeah, you know Donna and this fits right into the transparency

discussion. One of the things that we did is we contacted The Council of State Government and asked them if they would give us resources. That they would dispatch resources to our state to do a top to bottom review of every one of our treatment programs in our entire system. And they did that. And Idaho was the very first state to have what they call a "Justice Program Assessment." And they spent several months in our state doing that very thing. So when they were finished, they were able to show us through their own data, through their own research that things like the therapeutic community, for instance, were not working to the degree that they should be.

They also showed that nine out of the 12 programs that we had in our system were not research-based. And then helped us with an action plan to improve, and we put that into place. So, we no longer have 12 programs, we have five programs total. And they're universal and every one of our facilities, every one of them are research-based, but those are the...and they're working. This is really, really good stuff but those are the type of things you can get to. If you're willing to just pull back the curtains and let others come in and take a very objective look and review of what it is you're doing, and just be okay with the fact that what you're doing today is not working. And put more energy into how you're gonna fix it, and less energy and be embarrassed about something that's in your responsibility that's broke.

**NIC:** That's very good advice. So, now let me ask you, during this 90-day period, during this change, did you ever have any public media? So let's say, you know, your local television station or national news program. Was there ever any of that type of attention that was given to what you were doing?

**Kempf:** Yeah, you bet. There's a few different...nothing national, I mean there's since been national thing, The Council of State Government for instance, they put out several national publications on what it is we're doing. The Corrections Today Magazine, for instance, one of the featured articles today in The Corrections Today Magazine is our transparency reforms here in Idaho. So, a few of those things have taken place. But at the time of that 90-day period, what did come out because it was right around the legislative session when this was happening, so when I was downtown publicly speaking to how we were reorganizing the agency and moving resources where they needed to go, a couple of our...three or four of our local newspapers across Idaho certainly picked up on that and did stories on how we were overhauling things, changing things, those types of things.

**NIC:** How did your PR people, your internal...I guess your internal, external communicators deal with that issue?

**Kempf:** Quite well. One of the things...and it's just a complement to our Governor's office and our Board of Correction, and our legislator, they have given us green lights to where...We have just a lot of freedom to allow the media into what it is we're doing, invite them to everything we do. I'm not sure if you're on Facebook or Twitter or like LinkedIn or anything, Donna, but we utilize social media here in a major way both on my own personal site where every single lawmaker in Idaho that's on Facebook is friends with me on there. Multiple times every single day, multiple times a day, they're getting hit with things that look like...you know, IDOC is great. Our staff are amazing. IDOC is great, our staff are amazing.

We're just spotlighting our staff across the state on a constant basis, putting all of our articles and things like that, of course, on social media. It's a great time. There was a time not too long ago that if you wanted to share something amazing about Corrections, the media controlled if they put that out or not. And as you know, that doesn't sell a lot of newspapers. What does sell newspapers are things that look like scandal within a prison or terrible failures within a prison.

And today with social media, the way it is and Facebook and all those types of things, you don't need to seek anyone's permission to put those things out. The media doesn't dictate what goes out any more. You do, as a leader. So, we take full advantage of that. We've even have taken it to another step, Donna, to where we have done...we just finished our fourth live streaming on Facebook where I get on there and do like an hour long segment of live streaming. With the bulk of our audience being friends and families of our inmates and probationers and parolees, and I take their questions and answers on there so they're hearing it from the horse's mouth about what's going on, what are we doing, all of those types of things.

The last one that we did...oh, I'm sorry, two live streaming events that we did, I went to one of our community custody prisons, our minimum custody prisons and sat down in a housing unit with I don't know however many inmates that I had around there, and did one of those live Q&As; with inmates. And it's just another way, in our opinion of being just transparent and getting the message out there, communicating with friends and family. It's just such a great, great way to communicate

these days. As you probably know, all of our staff, the vast majority of our staff are on Facebook, so it makes it so easy to like spotlight them and have their moms and dads, and their spouses commenting and how proud they are. It's just really, really cool.

**NIC:** It sounds great. So your staff generally are in favor of this new cultural shift that you're taking them through?

**Kempf:** Yes, just as you would expect, our millennials and Gen X-ers are all over it. They love it. They eat it up. Our baby boomers and beyond, at first, were very, very skeptical. Even our own leadership team, if I had them in here right now, it's probably 10 or 12 of us, almost...the vast majority of them would probably say they didn't want us to go down this route with social media. It's a little risky to them. Today, they would tell you like, "We would never go back." It is such a great way to communicate with our staff and it's such a great way for us to spotlight the amazing things our staff are doing.

Just so you know, that again we're applying data to that. Starting last year, for the first time in...and we've never done it in our history, we now have an Employee Satisfaction Survey. That's 100% anonymous and we put that out every six months. We ask questions like, "Do you feel like our agency is doing enough to spotlight staff or to show value or gratefulness to our staff?" and those types of things. And we can see that data and show how many of our staff out there that are expressing that yes, they strongly agree that this is improved, and those types of things. We know we're on to something and many of them in their comments section talk about our social media blitz and how that's been effective.

**NIC:** That's great. So, let me also ask you this before we get into your presentation, so when you talk about...if we go back to the description here, when we talk about Corrections generally, so it's not just Idaho. Do you have a vision for what types of representation we will see in even the broader communications like in the news, in Hollywood, what would be your vision for the way the Corrections communicates and is understood by the public in the future?

**Kempf:** Great question. So, first and foremost and I'll tell you I feel this to the bone. Our staff and when I say, "our staff," I don't just mean just Idaho staff, I mean every single correctional professional in the United States and beyond, they absolutely deserve to wake up in the morning and read something positive about what it is they do. They deserve to

see themselves on social media and see things that are being shared out there of a positive nature. They deserve that. These jobs are so difficult and they're such a grind physically, they're a grind emotionally. And we know that if you are not...as an organization, if you are not actively, actively pursuing all venues that you have in your options to show the public how amazing your staff are, you're gonna lose. Your story is gonna get told by someone else, and that story almost every time is going to be negative because it sells.

So first and foremost, this is staff-driven. Our staff deserve to wake up in the morning after working a very difficult day or night, and read something positive about themselves. And read something you know, whatever that might be. So first and foremost, that, and then again, just collectively, we believe that pulling back the curtains on our industry is a good thing. We know that when we do that, whoever is looking back there whether it be the media, universities, lawmakers, it doesn't matter. We know they're gonna find first and foremost that our staff by and large, working super hard. They zing out of bed in the mornings because they're passionate about what it is they do.

They're gonna find that our inmates, probationers and parolees by and large are working really hard at overcoming addiction, overcoming change in their behaviors, things like that. Now, are there knuckleheads out there? Of course, there are. But for the most part, most offenders are working hard at changing their behavior. And that third thing, Donna, that we know that people are gonna see, we know they're gonna see things that are broke. We know they're gonna see things that need improved, that need resources applied to them, and that's where our leaders across the state, across the country come into play. We have to be open-minded, open to change, open to improving. We just think that there's a lot of positive things that come about when you're just open to criticism and open to sharing what your amazing staffs are doing.

**NIC:** That's wonderful. So, this conversation alone is probably enough but...

**Kempf:** Yeah, I keep on...yeah, I could get a little winded sometimes.

**NIC:** Oh no, that's completely fine, but what can we expect from you in your presentation during the virtual conference?

**Kempf:** First off, I hope...I would hope the listeners and the participants would see a lot of passion. First and foremost, a lot of passion for our

industry, like I really, really believe that anyone that's associated with the industry of Corrections and changing people's behavior is just amazing. They're amazing people. And then transition that right into the need, the absolute need for transparency in what it is we're doing for all the reasons that I just talked about, and then how to go about doing that. Like very specific things that we have done here in Idaho that have proven to be very successful for us. I can give you some examples of that but that's what the participants are going to hear from this conference.

**NIC:** All right. Well, we look forward to hearing it.

**Kempf:** Okay, awesome.

**NIC:** I want to thank you so much for agreeing to do this interview today.

**Announcer:** This has been a broadcast of the National Institute of Corrections. The views presented are those of the speakers and do not necessarily represent the policies or position of the National Institute of Corrections.

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