

Pulling Back the CURTAIN

Transparency Marks the First Step in Corrections Reform

By Kevin H. Kempf

In 2012, one month before the execution of convicted murderer Richard Albert Leavitt, the Associated Press and 16 other news organizations sued the Idaho Department of Correction (IDOC). They argued they had a right to view Leavitt's execution from start to finish. Specifically, they wanted IDOC to pull back the curtain between the execution chamber and the witness gallery so they could observe all that would take place. In typical corrections fashion, IDOC was opposed to letting the media witness these proceedings. The department fought the lawsuit and lost. Interestingly enough, the reporters who witnessed it emphasized how impressed they were by the IDOC team's professionalism. They described the event as "silent, sterile and respectful." Looking back, IDOC wonders why it ever went to court.

Fighting for Reform

The corrections profession has been on the defensive since 1841, when Dorothea Dix exposed the horrendous conditions in American prisons, and for good reason. Dix was right. Conditions were inhumane, immoral and outrageous. In recent years, however, corrections has made great progress. Organizations like the American Correctional Association, Association of State Correctional Administrators and the Council of State Governments have provided excellent leadership in correctional reform. Correctional administrators know evidence-based practices work. They have personally witnessed offenders change and understand that sustainable public safety means treating people with dignity and providing them with education, a skill and structured reentry.

It's a great time to be in corrections. The industry is in the midst of unprecedented reform as the justice reinvestment movement — an approach driven by data to improve public safety — takes root across the country, changing lives, increasing attention toward victim restitution, increasing public safety, and cutting the cost of prisons. Despite these positive changes, corrections professionals sometimes remain cautious and even secretive. They still go along with the so-called conventional wisdom that says, "Nothing good comes from corrections." And because they are silent, the citizens they serve perceive outlier incidents, like those involving corrupt "guards" and murderous escapees, as the norm for the field. Every sensational news story reinforces deeply held beliefs about the corrections industry. If corrections isn't telling its stories, then it shouldn't be surprised when others will, and when they do, those stories could be exaggerated, sensational and inaccurate.

This is more than a point of pride. Negative stereotypes undermine public support for agencies' missions and hamper correctional efforts to recruit and retain high-caliber professionals. They are asked to be brave, dedicated and sacrifice so much, yet so many do little to help them stand tall and be proud of the many ways in which they are truly making a difference.

Behind the Curtain

It's time to break the cycle. The corrections industry needs to speak up and tell its own stories. This starts with being transparent to the public. IDOC adopted the motto, "Don't talk about it; be about it." Here are three ways the department is promoting transparency.

1. IDOC invited all 105 members of the Idaho legislature to pay unannounced visits to any correctional facility, or probation and parole office, any time, 24/7,

holidays included. The lawmaker can simply walk up to the entrance, show a legislative ID and an IDOC staff member will take them anywhere they want to go. IDOC urged staff to be honest with lawmakers, to speak their minds and explain what they think the department is doing right, what might be wrong, and where they think IDOC could improve.

2. IDOC consents to all news media requests for interviews. When possible, the director meets reporters at one of the department's correctional facilities, and they meet them alone: no public information officer, no entourage, no script. The director will take reporters anywhere they want to go and let them see whatever they want to see. They can talk with inmates. They can talk with staff. There are no limits and no conditions.

3. IDOC has significantly ramped up its social media presence. Facebook and Twitter allow the department to communicate directly with inmates' families, its staff, their families and lawmakers, and for these people to communicate directly with IDOC. Lawmakers get bombarded with emails, letters and reports every day. It's difficult for them to stay on top of all that information. However, it's easy for them to go to IDOC's Facebook page and check out a two-minute video about some aspect of the department's operations.

Idaho may have a "part-time" legislature, but its lawmakers are often anything but part time. They take their positions seriously, and they have been showing up at IDOC facilities and offices, even at odd hours, year-round. Giving them full access allows them to see for themselves how things are going and not to rely on the word of the director or an inmate. What are they seeing? They are seeing exactly what IDOC thought they'd see: amazing people doing amazing things.

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First, a person can't be around the department's staff and not be impressed by their professionalism. They treat offenders with respect and expect respect in return. They enforce institutional rules firmly and fairly. They model prosocial behavior. Nothing crushes the "Shawshank Redemption" stereotype of the heartless prison worker like a face-to-face conversation with an IDOC staff member.

Second, lawmakers are witnessing inmates, probationers and parolees who are working hard to turn their lives around. Does the department have offenders who seem to be doing life sentences on an installment plan? Yes, of course. But when you get into IDOC's prisons, it is obvious that it has many more inmates who are truly committed to beating an addiction, overcoming criminal thinking or working through a mental health issue.

Third, lawmakers are seeing there are many areas where the department needs to improve. IDOC knows it is far from perfect, and it recognizes that it often takes fresh eyes to spot old problems. It welcomes the criticism. None of this would happen without a Board of Correction and Governor's Office that supports and encourages this openness.

Looking Ahead

It will take years, perhaps generations, before the facts about corrections drown out the fiction, and there will surely be setbacks along the way. Many who serve as correctional administrators began their careers in the field. They found the courage to break up fights between inmates and knock on high-risk parolees' doors. Now, they need to find a new kind of courage — the courage to pull back the curtain and reveal that it's not only bad things coming from corrections, but good things, too.

It's not just smart. It's the right thing to do. For those people who think reform in prisons means coddling inmates or going soft on crime, consider this: IDOC staffers don't treat inmates with respect and kindness because the *inmates* are proper ladies and gentleman. They do it because they are.



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