

National Institute of Corrections Virtual Conference 2016 Transcript for Interview with Leonard Romo

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 to register.

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

National Institute of Corrections: With high levels of stress, fatigue and poor work-life balance negatively affecting correctional staff all over the country, agencies everywhere are feeling the effects. Health Coaching in Corrections offers a wellness-centered approach to improving staff performance and longevity. Participants will learn about the growing field of health coaching and its potential benefits to the corrections profession. Participants will learn how improved staff wellness can have positive impacts on productivity, morale and turnover.

Let's start with your telling us just a little bit about yourself and what you do and how you got into this area of corrections.

Leonard Romo: Great, okay. Well, I am a certified integrative nutrition health coach and experienced corrections trainer. As a health coach, I teach clean eating and healthy lifestyle practices with the busy person in mind. I found myself in the field of health coaching just through personal experience of dealing with, at a young age of just being unwell and having some health conditions that were, the common things that we're seeing pop up quite often nowadays: was pre-diabetic and had high cholesterol and at the age of 25, I had skyrocketing high blood pressure. Scary high blood pressure.

So, and this was the very beginning of my career. And being new to corrections, I'm not sure what that meant for my career and therefore my

ability to take care of my family, I was scared. So I started to make some changes in my life and of course, what most people do is you start working out, right? The first thing you do is you go to fitness. I started working out, I started taking care of myself a little bit better, thinking about how I could become healthier. And not long after, well after a while, I found nutrition. I found the power of nutrition, I should say. It wasn't until, really, that I changed my eating habits that I started to turn my health around.

So long story short, I, in addition to the exercise, frequent exercise, I started educating myself on nutrition. I found myself working in a gym as a fitness instructor just as a hobby, because I'm still in corrections, right? And before you know it, I'm giving advice and support to the members of the gym on their nutrition and, really, lifestyle habits. So when I started looking deeper into the lifestyle component of it, I found this field of health coaching.

And so health coaching is about yes, teaching people how to eat clean but it's also about helping them find, implement healthy lifestyle practices into their current lives.

NIC: Okay. So let's back up just a little bit. So you found out that you were pre-diabetic when you were a child or when you were in the early part of your adult...?

Romo: I was 25.

NIC: At around 25. Okay. And so you go to a gym and you become a fitness instructor...

Romo: Right, that's the shortened version of it but yes. Ultimately, that's what happened. I started working out at a gym and they asked me to come help them with some of their classes and yeah, I became a fitness instructor.

NIC: Okay and so that means you also have certification, as well, in fitness?

Romo: Yes. At the time, no, but now I do, yes.

NIC: All right. And so this advice that you give to people is, in terms of what you do for corrections, is it closely aligned with the type of advice that you give to people who are not in the corrections field? Or is this

more specialized?

Romo: It's more specialized in understanding that working in the field, obviously, there aren't a lot of professions like ours. It's unique in many ways. And so if I'm coaching someone who works in corrections, it's going to be a little bit different approach than if I was coaching someone working a regular, a nine to five, if you will.

NIC: What are some of the things that you're finding that people in corrections specifically are struggling with?

Romo: There's a lot of things. And it's hard to boil it down and I try to do that with my summary and I always go back to this and I refer to it as this work-life balance. Working in corrections, we work a lot. We work different shifts. We rotate days off. We put in extra hours and that doesn't leave a whole lot of time for our home life. And so this is why I've even, when I'm coaching people outside of corrections, I'm looking to connect with people who are busy in that respect, as someone who works in correction is, because it's about finding balance.

So I think, to answer your question, it's this work-life balance, this is what they struggle with most. And when you don't take time for your home life, that ultimately results in not taking time in things like self-care. Really, that's what we're talking about.

NIC: And what sorts of home-life issues are you finding among correctional workers?

Romo: Well, time away from the family is a big one. Time away from family, so relationships suffer. We see social life suffer. The home environment begins to change, really for those two things in addition to other things, just not being present. I think those are the biggest.

NIC: I recently was talking with another colleague, actually, about an issue related to this, and she had also mentioned that the social aspect was also something that was strongly affected in corrections. She's also a researcher. How exactly are you seeing that manifest in terms of affecting the social relations of correctional workers?

Romo: Well, I think it's best to say, or easiest, is just to call it becoming anti-social. Whatever time they do have at home to themselves, that's spent away from the agency is oftentimes spent alone. And then even, to take it a step further, I'm seeing some corrections staff who are

literally spending it alone. They're not spending time at home with their family and having that quality time with family, the family's going out and doing things while the corrections officer, that relative, is home choosing to not go out. Maybe that's to catch up on sleep, maybe, because oftentimes that's a big struggle, getting adequate sleep. Maybe it's to just decompress, maybe not wanting to be around a whole lot of people and wanting to take time for themselves. And some of that's understandable.

But it can manifest into being what we would often call "anti-social."

NIC: And do you find that correctional workers feel that they can talk about their job to their spouse and to their friends in the same way that other people do or do they feel like it has to be a secret?

Romo: Yeah, I don't think so. I don't think they're comfortable talking about it. I've heard, "Well, I don't want to bring my problems home." I've heard, "They don't understand." I did have a client that was a corrections officer and her husband also worked in corrections and so that helped. But at the same time there was still this element of "yeah, we don't want to bring work home with us, so talking things out and discussing work matters at home is something we're not interested in."

NIC: Yes. This is, echoes a lot of what you find in military and I guess you would say, law enforcement, other parts of law enforcement. That's so terribly interesting. So what sorts of things do you provide to correctional workers when they come to you or do you create programs outreaching to them?

Romo: Well, in terms of programs to reach corrections staff as a group, that's something that's still a work in progress and I have yet to develop but I am working on. And I hope that this helps, helps us see in this field, in this industry, see that there's a need for it. But in working with individual clients who have corrections backgrounds or come from the world of corrections, I give them a safe place, a safe place to talk about what they're dealing with. And then we go through a self-discovery: what's holding them back, what's keeping them from...remember, this is founded on wellness, so what's keeping them from taking care of themselves and being the best person that they can be, both inside the agency but also outside the agency.

So there's this self-discovery that takes place and then it's followed by collaboration where we look to develop together, we co-create healthy

strategies and practices to improve their overall wellness. And there's a lot of trust that has to be involved and it's a process of understanding that each person is an individual and they're going to have different things going on in their lives, different, what we call as health coaches in our world, we would call "limiting factors." What's preventing them from being able to take care of themselves and like I said, be the best version of themselves?

NIC: Now, the program that you do, is this only available at...

Romo: Hualapai.

NIC: Hualapai, is it...?

Romo: Yeah, it's Hualapai. So there's not a formal program offered up there. This is something that I do through my own personal business.

NIC: If there was someone who wanted your services at your facility, how would they, how would they connect with you to get that treatment, to get that assistance that they're looking for?

Romo: Well, if it was someone at my facility, they would simply reach out to me in person or by phone or website. If it's others around the country who are seeking this type of help, they would simply go to my website, RXNWellness.com. That's the best way to connect with me.

NIC: Okay. During your presentation for the virtual conference, the NIC virtual conference, what can we expect to learn? I know just from hearing you talk about working with your correctional officers in other capacities, I know it's going to be chock-full of information.

Romo: Yeah, so my presentation will be talking about, first and foremost, what health coaching is. This is, it's still a new but growing field. We've all heard of life coaches and there is some element of that in there but it's a little bit different. So we'll be talking about what health coaching is, why it's needed, so what problems bring about the need for health coaching? What makes it unique and innovative, right, to the industry, because that's consistent with the theme of the virtual conference, the innovative piece to it. And then I hope to start to at least begin the conversation of what it might look like in the field.

NIC: Okay. And so would you recommend your presentation for only people who maybe work on the front line with offenders or is this

something that everyone could benefit from, everyone from librarians to executive staff or administrators in a jurisdiction?

Romo: Yes, everyone. Donna, everyone. I think it's going to be especially important that we get leadership in on these conversations. We need to see leadership take a role in understanding the importance of having staff who are well. So yeah, everyone.

NIC: And really here's, I'm glad you mentioned that, something else, that when your staff no longer have to take sick leave as frequently because they're not feeling well or because they just need a mental health day or a physical health day, right, you can save money that way.

Romo: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. This health coaching piece, what I'm not going to talk about is I'm not going to talk about how to make a better quote-unquote "corrections officer" or "corrections staff member." But I would like to talk about how to make a better individual. And I think when we have people who come to work and they feel better, they have better outlooks on life, their home life is improved, they're dealing with stress better, etc., etc., I think we do, we start to see things improve like attendance and morale and performance. And that's why I mentioned staff performance and some of these other things in the summary, because I think the end result is improving those things.

NIC: That's wonderful. Thank you so much, Leonard, I really look forward to your presentation.

Romo: Thank you, Donna.

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 policy or position of the National Institute of Corrections.

We hope you enjoyed this broadcast.

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