



ACCSS Associated Chaplains in California State Service

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This is the second of what we hope will be a series of monthly newsletters to our ACCSS members. The idea is to offer support and some helpful suggestions for chaplains and NASLs to continue to thrive and excel in our ministry to those our Creator has blessed us to serve.

I recently completed a doctoral dissertation in criminology. In my research I studied both chaplains and correctional officers (CO). I was interested in finding ways to help correctional staff deal with the daily stress of working in prisons. What I found surprised me, particularly in regard to COs. For this reason, I offer these observations in the hope that we can find ways to minister to the COs and the non-custody staff in our institutions who need our care and compassion as much as the prisoners.

Research confirms what we all know to be true – working in correctional institutions is stressful and can result in a high degree of burnout. Correctional staff work directly with prisoners in crisis situations and are thus unavoidably exposed to trauma and suffering. As a result, we are all susceptible to experience vicarious or secondary traumatization ourselves.

The statistics for CO's well-being are alarming: Over 50% of officers studied report symptoms of emotional exhaustion. Thirty-seven percent of COs experience job stress and burnout at twice the rate of workers in the general working population. COs, like their law enforcement colleagues, are among the highest at-risk groups for suicide, as well as exhibiting higher-than-average percentages of sleep disturbances, anger and symptoms of PTSD.

Daily working conditions can be unpredictable, combining boring routine with ever-present danger. COs are tasked with providing both safety, security and control for their institutions, often having to confront inmates who challenge their authority and act out in socially inappropriate, often violent, ways. COs share with prisoners a constant fear of violence. At the same time correctional officers are expected to "correct" as their title implies, teaching inmates better coping and behavioral skills and to comply with prison rules. This creates an inherently

stressful conflict between the goals of custody and the goals of treatment. COs thus can feel caught in the middle between the needs of inmates and administrators.

It is sometimes difficult not to bring work home with them. COs must supervise potentially violent and uncooperative people and must use communication skills and behavior control strategies that, while useful in the prison environment, may be quite damaging to family functioning at home. As chaplains, we need to be very sensitive to this and do what we can to support our colleagues in their demanding profession.

Each of us, in our own particular way, has been called by the Divine to serve the men and women in our correctional system, both the staff and the inmates. We do this best by caring for our own physical, emotional and spiritual well-being first. It's like when you're on an airplane and in the safety briefing, they tell you in an emergency to put on your own oxygen mask before you try to help others. If we are not attentive to our own health and balance, we cannot really be effective ministers to others. We need to be faithful to our own spiritual practices, observing our disciplines of prayer and meditation. It is very important too that we *pray* for the men and women that the Creator has entrusted to our care.

We need to cultivate patience and humor. If we don't have thick skins, we won't last long in these environments. That means we can't always expect to be thanked or appreciated for what we do. We also need to remember that our co-workers need affirmation. They too are rarely thanked or appreciated for what they do. If we only speak to inmates or act impatiently when security issues trump our plans, we send the wrong message to our CO colleagues. Taking a few moments to talk with our co-workers, expressing interest in their lives and their activities goes a long way to building up trust and collegiality.

We also need to be very professional in all that we do. COs must be at work on time and cannot leave early or disappear for chunks of time during the day. We need to be attentive to our own schedules and be diligent in being on time to work and to putting in an honest 8-hour day. COs have a uniform and a dress code; we need to be mindful too of how we dress professionally. We represent the belief in the power of the human person to change, to grow, to forgive and be forgiven. It is essential that we be consistent in our ethical behavior – especially in our professional roles as Correctional Chaplains/Spiritual Advisors.

There are two very good resources for employee wellness that I would direct you to – one is the CDCR's own Office of Employee Wellness: www.cdcr.ca.gov/Wellness/. Another great resource is Desert Waters Correctional Outreach: www.desertwaters.com. May you continue to be blessed in your service.

Submitted by George Williams, Catholic Chaplain, San Quentin State Prison