Justice and the Pandemic Covid-19 inside Corrections

Andy Potter, One Voice United
Shawshank Narrative

• Movies like Shawshank Redemption and the Green Mile have set the stage for how corrections is viewed

• Without an alternative narrative, society will believe what they see on TV and in movies

• Good guy vs. villains

• Corrections officer almost always seen as the villain
“I founded One Voice United in 2016 because our profession is being transformed and I want to make sure correctional officers are at the table. If you aren't deciding what's on the menu, you're getting served up.”

- Andy Potter, Founder, One Voice United
2016 searched reform landscape:

- Bi partisan, philanthropy, policy makers, scholars, celebrities: Yes!
- Officers and staff voice: No!
Traveled country talking to everyone to find out why not our voice and is there room . . .
Blind spots Uncovered

- Lives of those working in corrections and those who are incarcerated are inextricably linked
- Issues and conditions of confinement
  - Food quality
  - Overcrowding and understaffing
  - Mental health and wellness
  - Safety
- Truth is – the system was not designed for success for anyone
Corrections officers suffer from **Depression, PTSD and commit suicide at rates much higher** than law enforcement staff in other agencies and those in the military.

**Depression** at a level significantly higher than the national average.

- **Corrections officers (7%)** vs. **National average (25%)**

**PTSD** at a level significantly higher than the national average.

- **Corrections officers (4%)** vs. **National average (4%)**

**Suicide** at a rate 39% higher than the working age national population.

- **Corrections officers (7%)** vs. **National average (5%)**

**Shorter life expectancy** than the national average.

- **Corrections officers (59 years)** vs. **National average (75 years)**

---

**Sources:**

- For corrections officer depression rates, see box note j, at the end of the report. For national depression rates, see National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), “Major Depression,” https://perma.cc/GZV8-ZP38.
- For corrections officer PTSD rates, see box note j. For national PTSD rates, see NIMH, “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD),” https://perma.cc/23GX-6YBW.
- For suicide rates, see Steven Stack and Olga Tsoudis, “Suicide Risk Among Corrections Officers: A Logistical Regression Analysis” Archives of Suicide Research 3, no. 3 (1997), 183-86, 184.
- For life expectancy statistics, see box note m.
2020 – “The Perfect Storm”

- Health and wellness crisis of those working and living behind the walls
- Looming budget crisis and possible further defunding of essential programs
- Growing tension over anti-law enforcement movements
- Covid-19 continues to ravage through prisons
- Corrections voices are still excluded or ignored in reform efforts
"Hero's in a swamp full of Villians" by Josh Puckett (Covid-19 Prisoner’s Blog for The Adolescent Redemption Project)

The truth is a little brighter than what the statistics may show you.

Let me tell you about 2 officers who battled the incompetence from the front lines. Officer A, fought tirelessly against all these poor choices, she was the boots on the ground that no one would listen to. With her partner, officer B, they were on the front line from the beginning. They objected when the Deputy of Housing repurposed the College unit into the COVID-19 unit. They both expressed concern when potentially sick inmates were being housed in the unit when healthy inmates were still upstairs. The chaos was so extreme in the beginning that Officer B’s original partner took his retirement early at the start of the pandemic seeing how bad it would get in the prison. Yet, officer B stuck it out, rumors were told that he was living in a motel so he wouldn’t risk infecting his family were he to contract the virus.

When men panicked in the early stages as the potentially sick men were being moved into the downstairs areas of the unit both Officer A and B kept cool heads which made the inmates calm. Without them present it could have easily escalated into something bad but most inmates trusted that they were fighting to do things right.

Many officers would have looked at old man Nate, as a murderer not deserving of help, other officers would have overlooked him because he is black, some would have walked past Nates cell and not done anything because Nate was NOT asking for help. Not Officers A and B they have spent the last 3 months working overtime, working to exhaustion, fighting with an administration that dehumanizes inmates and was trying to pack inmates into the quarantine unit like cattle. They even pushed many of the nursing staff to do right by US.

As inmates we often are made acutely aware that we are viewed as societies throw aways. Our daily lives are wrought with dehumanization and few care if we live or die as long as we do it quietly. So, in the midst of a chaotic facility where everyone is trying to figure out what to do, how to do it and how deal with all these sick bodies these 2 officers saw the humanity in each and every person they interacted with.

That is exemplary. Too often as inmates we only share our complaints, many inmates feel victimized by the system but this time, this story is about 2 Hero’s who saved lives and demonstrated compassion to hundreds that their own bosses saw as less than human because of their past mistakes. People like this is what makes America great and I’m proud to call attention to their excellent work.
Survey of more than 1200 correctional officers found:

- Only 7% of respondents said their facility was “very” equipped to handle this emergency or a crisis of this magnitude before it hit.

- TOP 3 CONCERNS that officers expressed about risks they are facing inside facilities:
  - Lack of proactive testing
  - Poor communication contributing to stress and uncertainty
  - Lack of protective gear such as gloves and masks

- 62% of respondents said they still DO NOT have all the tools needed to do their job in this time of crisis related to the coronavirus pandemic.

- 67% of respondents said neither they, their union or line staff had been invited to help with building any protocols or new operating procedures since COVID-19 hit

- More than half of respondents said problems/hazards inside their facility related to this pandemic remain unaddressed.
One Voice United’s Covid-19 Rapid Response Highlights

• Out of these survey findings we created a national protection resolution with 15 key policies and procedures sent to the National Governors Association

• We also posted the resolution and cover letter on social media and have received over 2000 signatories from individual corrections officers and staff across the country

• Sent a letter to the CDC as another attempt to ensure better protections for those in prisons

• Press release, podcasts and op-eds to raise more awareness

Some Key Recommendations:

• Limit number of people entering/exiting facilities

• Decontamination stations for all facility entries/exits

• Accurate, consistent and frequent communication to inform everyone of policy changes and to help lower anxieties around the unknown and rumors

• Policies that covers sick leave, hazardous duty pay and accommodations for staff if/when the virus rebounds and starts to spread again at even more alarming levels

• National Protocols to deal with future pandemics that are informed by frontline staff
Reflections and Looking Ahead

• Pandemic revealed longstanding issues that went mostly unheard
• Crisis is not over - Healthcare experts suggest a possible 3rd wave
• The situation inside facilities isn’t any better today than it was
• Those working and living inside facilities should not be forgotten
• The experience, perspective and wisdom of those on the front lines are a vital component to managing and mitigating the current crisis
• When reporting on stories about the pandemic inside prisons – remember that there are untold stories and by including the voices of corrections officers and other front line staff you can help disrupt the false narrative
During this national state of emergency surrounding COVID-19, corrections officers and other staff across the country are being asked to report for duty amid rapidly changing and unprecedented circumstances.

Few groups have a more important story to tell than that of the often overlooked men and women who do one of America's toughest jobs: Corrections Officers. Please watch this video: