



CORRECTIONS STRESS NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Executive Summary and Recommendations

In fulfillment of NIC cooperative agreement
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**KSL Research, Training,
& Consultation LLC.**

Executive Summary

Corrections Stress Needs Assessment

The field of corrections has long been recognized as a high stress profession. Previous research suggests that individuals who work in either institutional settings (i.e., prison, jail, juvenile detention) and/or community corrections (i.e., probation, parole, pretrial services) experience varying degrees of occupational, organizational, and traumatic stressors. If left unaddressed, corrections stress can lead to an assortment of personal and professional problems that could result in high staff turnover and vacancies, which in turn, jeopardize safety and effective programming. The National Institution of Corrections (NIC) invests in developing data-driven initiatives and solutions to assist jurisdictions in identifying and addressing the issues that contribute to corrections stress and create practices that help to maintain a healthy and productive work force. To guide development of initiatives and sustainable practices, KSL Research, Training, & Consultation LLC (KSL) conducted a needs assessment as part of a cooperative agreement with NIC. This assessment collected data from over 3,000 individuals across the United States who were employed in corrections. The assessment revealed several areas that NIC can potentially address through training and education programs.

Organizational stress:

One of the most notable findings from the survey results was that respondents perceived organizational issues contributing more to their stress than their work with the justice-involved population (i.e., defendants, detainees, probationers, inmates, parolees, etc.). The respondents identified the following organizational issues as increasing stress in the workforce:

- Steadily increasing workload
- Chronic understaffing
- Communication problems (or lack of communication) with subordinates and/or superiors
- Difficulty with colleagues
- Tight timelines for completing work
- Physical environment (i.e., old equipment, poor sight lines, hard to hear, drab surroundings)
- Forced overtime

There were differences based on position in the organization regarding perception of workload stress. For example, the percentage of line staff who reported “significant stress” related to tight timelines for completing work, chronic understaffing, and a steadily increasing workload was almost double that reported by executives for each respective category. Conversely, executives reported more stress dealing with difficult colleagues than was reported by line staff. Supervisor stress levels in the same categories were consistently between those of executives and line staff. These findings are important to note as they suggest that staff do not perceive stress equally, which could lead to a divide between the leadership and an overwhelmed frontline.

New initiatives and perception of change:

The “perception of change” in an organization regarding new initiatives and practices was an interesting area of investigation, particularly because the results also differed significantly based on position. For example, 59% of line staff believed there was “too much change” while only 25% viewed the amount of change as “just right.” In contrast, 39% of executives perceived there to be “too much change while 49% viewed the amount of change to be “just right.”

The percentage of line staff (26%) and supervisors (27%) who reported feeling “extremely stressed” due to “too much change” was double that reported by executives (13%). The percentage of line staff (29%) and supervisors (28%) who viewed new initiatives as “beneficial, but extremely stressful when added to an already demanding job” was also double that reported by executives (12%).

Given executives will be the group most responsible for the pace of change and for bringing new initiatives to the organization, if their perception of the effect of change is vastly different from other staff’s, the stress that supervisors and line staff experience may not improve. Interestingly, line staff and supervisors did not rate the stress of “learning new practices” as high as they did factors associated with “how the new initiatives were implemented.” Specifically, line staff and supervisors identified the following issues as contributing to new initiatives being stressful:

- Lack of communication about the “why”
- Not being asked for feedback
- Having feedback about the changes be ignored
- Implications that the old practice was wrong based on the new initiative
- Time spent learning new initiatives was not adequately reflected on performance evaluations

Any of the factors above could explain why staff sometimes resist change.

Beneficial training:

Regarding potential training that might be beneficial in reducing stress, respondents rated curriculum to improve communication (specifically for managers) as highest. In addition, they regarded mentoring programs or peer buddy systems as potentially beneficial. Lastly, education and training that targets corrections stress, understanding physiological reactions to stress, managing traumatic stress, and addressing changes in employees’ worldview were all rated as potentially beneficial in lowering stress and creating a healthier workforce.

Critical incident/peer support programs:

Survey results indicate that critical incident/peer support programs are offered more frequently in institutional settings (65%) than in community corrections (44%). However, most respondents (82%) who reported having critical incident/peer support programs at their agencies also indicated they never personally used the services. These statistics were consistent for both institutions and community corrections. Seventy-eight percent (78%) of survey

participants agreed that training specifically for managers on how to support staff during critical incidents would be beneficial. It was interesting to find significant differences in perception of program use based on position: 13% of line staff, 29% of supervisors, and 55% of executives thought the critical incident/peer support services were well used at their organization.

Respondents who believed the program was not well used were asked why they held that perception. The most frequently cited reasons were the following:

- People don't trust the confidentiality.
- People don't think it will be useful.
- People are afraid that others will perceive them as weak.
- People don't know how to access the team.
- People don't trust team members.
- People fear repercussions.

Perceptions of safety, value, and employee recognition:

The survey data revealed significant differences between executives and line staff regarding perceptions of safety, value, and employee recognition. Sixty-five (65%) of executives "strongly agreed" that their organization takes the physical safety of employees seriously, while 44% of supervisors and only 27% of line staff concurred. Even more divided, 64% of executives "agreed" that their organization takes the emotional wellbeing of employees seriously, while 54% of line staff completely "disagreed" with the sentiment. Sadly, more than half of line staff (57%) believe their employer values the wellbeing of inmates/probationers more than the wellbeing of the employees.

Overall, line staff consider the work they do as "important," but they do not feel valued nor do they perceive employee appreciation/recognition efforts to be well thought out or easily accessible to all employees. In contrast, most executive respondents feel valued by their employer, think employee recognition efforts are easily accessible to all employees, and believe their agencies are sincerely trying to recognize and value all employees.

Recommendations

Organizational stress

It may be beneficial for agencies to re-evaluate the actual duties of line staff, who are reporting moderate (22%) and significant (39%) stress associated with a steadily increasing workload. “Doing more with less” and “adding more to the plate but never taking anything off” are common complaints from staff in many organizations throughout the United States.

The corrections profession has been using evidence-based practices (EBP) to improve success rates for almost two decades. Many organizations have invested heavily in training staff and creating policies that measure best practices to ensure they are performed effectively and incorporated in daily work functions. Quality assurance has been an integral part of program efficacy when using best practices and subsequently increased the focus (and scrutiny) on employee performance. The increased duties of line staff and continual rise in expectations may have contributed to a sizeable workload that is more stressful than anticipated. Therefore, a thorough evaluation and re-prioritization of job functions could prove beneficial in reducing unnecessary tasks while increasing morale and productivity.

The survey data from community corrections (more so than institutions) further exemplified the effect of an increased work load related to changing practices associated with EBP. The majority (59%) of survey respondents believe the changes were beneficial but noted they were added to an already demanding job, which significantly contributed to their stress. While implementing EBP in community corrections, employees conduct risk assessments, collaborate with clients to create problem-oriented case plans addressing criminogenic needs, match them with appropriate services, model pro-social behavior, and use enhanced communication and motivational techniques to promote cognitive restructuring and behavioral change. It is, therefore, highly recommended that in addition to re-evaluating workload and the effect it may have on employee stress, agencies may also want to assess the effect that unaddressed stress, in turn, may be having on the quality of the employees’ ability to implement quality EBP effectively.

New initiatives and perception of change

The way in which organizations implement new initiatives or changing practices could significantly influence the perception of change by line staff. Lack of communication from upper management about the reasons for the change was in the top three scoring items for negatively affecting stress at work. Therefore, taking the time to explain the reasons behind new initiatives could lower stress and potentially improve staff morale, motivation, and productivity. Because such a sizable percentage of employees (54%) indicated there is “too much change” overall, the importance of open communication from managers about “why” practices are changing cannot be overstated.

A strategy that proactively prepares staff for changing practices is highly recommended prior to rolling out new initiatives. Executives in charge of initiating changing practices may see the immediate value in a new initiative and assume that the benefits will be self-evident to staff after they receive training. However, if sufficient time and attention are not provided to the line

staff explaining “why” another change is being added to an already demanding job and if little recognition is expressed that even the best new practice(s) often come at an immediate cost of staff’s time and energy, the resentment from line staff about the change could override their ability to see any potential value in it. In addition, if sufficient thought is not given to the effect the change will have on staff, it may contribute to the perception that staff do not feel valued by their employer (or that their employer values inmates/probationers more than line staff) as indicated in the survey results. Conversely, seeking input from line staff before changes are implemented could increase staff buy-in, provide a valuable exchange of information that improves cost/benefit analysis, and actively demonstrates to staff that their opinions, knowledge and experience are respected by the organization.

Training and education

Communication problems, especially between rank, are by no means unique to the corrections profession. Many organizations and businesses struggle with providing or maintaining an open, transparent, democratic exchange of information. Training that provides strategies to improve communication is obviously important, but it is also recommended that curriculum explore beliefs, concerns and obstacles that prevent lasting change in this area. Training that develops skills in empathy and understanding, compassion in the workplace, appreciative inquiry, and having crucial conversations could all be extremely beneficial.

Survey participants perceive mentoring and peer buddy programs as valuable resources. These programs are especially useful for new hires during the onboarding process, and for supervisors and executives when promoting to new positions. Mentoring and peer buddy programs provide professional socialization and personal support to employees that can facilitate learning, ease the transition into unfamiliar assignments, and increase the likelihood for success. Understanding the value of these programs is typically not the problem for many organizations. Allocating sufficient time and resources to maintaining the program and keeping a healthy, motivated pool of veteran employees with the time, interest and energy to serve as the mentor or peer buddy tend to be the bigger obstacles. Therefore, developing training to help organizations build the infrastructure for a sustainable mentor and peer buddy program could be extremely beneficial.

Programs designed to alleviate officer stress can save money, improve staff performance, and enhance healthy coping. Survey respondents perceived trainings that target corrections stress, understanding physiological reactions to stress, managing traumatic stress, and addressing changes in employees’ worldview (i.e., vicarious trauma) as desirable and beneficial at reducing workplace stress. Educating employees regarding possible job effects would allow for anticipatory coping and normalization of stress reactions. Even more importantly, it may also increase the likelihood that officers will identify early warning signs, seek support to mitigate long-term negative effects, and improve their resilience. It is highly recommended that any training curriculum developed to manage stress and trauma exposure incorporate a balanced approach that normalizes reactions without minimizing or catastrophizing the effects.

There is a growing body of research that suggests one's beliefs and mindset about stress are more predictive of health outcomes than the actual stress itself. Curriculum that only describes the negative consequences of corrections work could potentially lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy (employees stressing out about their stress). Curriculum that also includes the upside to stress can encourage staff to trust their bodies under challenging conditions and help them use the sharpened focus, increased energy, and improved performance that are also aspects of the human stress response. A balanced approach can validate corrections stress without suggesting staff will be forever damaged by their work.

It is also recommended that future training curriculum capitalize on survey results that found that most correctional employees (92%) believe the work they do is important. Drawing on the natural meaning that comes from helping people and protecting the community could be a powerful antidote to the negative effects of corrections stress. Job satisfaction is higher when people perceive their career with a sense of purpose rather than as a job that pays the bills. Focusing on the value of corrections work (without minimizing the costs) could help balance the burden with the privilege and honor staff feel about serving their community. Finding meaning in a career and being deeply affected by it are not mutually exclusive. An approach to managing stress and trauma that acknowledges both the costs and rewards of the work may be most beneficial to staff wellness over time.

Training employees about corrections stress and trauma exposure at the onset of their careers can be beneficial on multiple levels. Staff who are mentally prepared for the various types of job stress are able to create a "psychological body armor" that can buffer them from long-term negative effects. The value of providing this training during onboarding is to offer anticipatory guidance, normalize stress reactions, enhance protective coping strategies (fostering resistance and resilience), and provide resource information (critical incident/peer support programs, EAP, etc.) before an incident occurs.

It is also recommended that training for new hires on corrections stress also be open to their spouses or family members. This allows the family to learn about the type of stress and trauma exposure the employee may experience, which may increase their compassion and ability to be supportive. The spouse or family will also learn about various coping strategies and resources and may be able to encourage the use of them if they observe signs of the employees' distress at home. Lastly, acknowledging corrections stress to new employees and their families demonstrates that the organization appreciates the challenges of the work and is committed to minimizing the effect and safeguarding the welfare of their employees.

Critical incident/peer support programs

Critical incident/peer support programs can be a tremendous resource for employees after traumatic events or when they are dealing with chronic or extreme stress. But even the best program is of little value if employees won't use it. Survey results indicate 82% of employees who work at agencies with active critical incident/peer support programs have never used the services. There are many social stigmas and beliefs people have about needing help or accepting support. Therefore, it is recommended that programs exercise great care in the

messaging they use when discussing critical incidents and peer support. Statements that promote strength and resilience while minimizing implications of “weakness” are often most useful. The following example illustrates such messaging:

“As correctional employees, we all share a unique understanding of the challenges of our work and the [effect] it can have on our personal and professional lives. The peer support program was created from a belief that in our shared experiences lie the strength, wisdom, and resilience of our workforce! We don’t deny that difficult moments are part of corrections work; rather, we hope to capitalize on the value of coming together during those challenging times to appreciate the rewards and sacrifices our employees experience in their service to the community.”

In addition to empowering language associated with critical incident/peer support programs, education and training about the resource itself is extremely important. Many survey participants indicated the reason they did not use their critical incident/peer support programs was because they did not know how to access services, and/or they did not think the services would be useful. It is ironic that many agencies invest time and money into developing programs but overlook the importance of educating the staff about how to use the resource and explain why it is valuable. Staff training also provides an opportunity to combat some of the myths and concerns people may have that could be barriers to using the program (i.e., confidentiality, distrust, career repercussions, perceptions of weakness, etc.). Ideally, the best time to train staff on the critical incident/peer support program is at the new hire/onboarding stage as it highlights the importance of self-care at the onset of their career and demonstrates an organizational culture that expects self-care and values employee wellbeing.

Newly promoted supervisors could benefit from training that outlines critical incident/peer support protocol and discusses how and when to appropriately request services. A contributing factor for the low use of critical incident/peer support services could stem from an inability on the part of managers to recognize the need for services for their staff. As such, it would be useful to provide supervisors with strategies on how to identify stress reactions and how to talk with their staff about critical incidents in a manner that decreases the likelihood of minimizing the event and/or re-traumatizing the employee. The need for such training was clearly identified in the survey data.

Lastly, it is recommended that the offer of critical incident/peer support services (never requiring participation) be incorporated into policies and standard practices following critical incidents and events associated with unusually high stress. For many people, it is far easier to turn down support when they don’t need it, than to ask for it when they do. Procedural interventions may not only catch employees who otherwise would not request services on their own, but also reach personnel who might not recognize their own need for support.

Perceptions of safety, value, and employee recognition

Officers working in community corrections reported having more pronounced safety concerns than officers working in institutional settings. While both groups state that they at least agree that their organization takes their physical safety seriously, those working in community corrections expressed concerns about having adequate safety equipment and

training. Some jurisdictions allow probation officers to carry firearms and/or other defensive weapons, while some jurisdictions prohibit the officers from carrying defensive weapons of any kind. To address the lack of consistency among community corrections agencies, it is recommended that the field develop standards for safety practices in community corrections.

Employee recognition efforts are important to the morale of the officers; however when organizations do not invest adequate time, planning, and officer input in recognition efforts, they can have the effect of lowering morale. For employees to take part in employee recognition activities, organizations must offer them at a time when employees can participate. If some employees are excluded from the efforts because of their work schedule (as was shared by some of the officers working in institutions), then they may feel that they are less valued than other employees. It is recommended that employee groups be asked what they would like for employee recognition activities, and that those activities be accessible to all employees.