

Personal Safety inside Prison

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My comments on personal safety when Associated Press Bob Christie reported the sexual assault or rape of an Arizona teacher has fallen on many deaf ears as their assessment of the dire need to change the way we conduct our security assessments and personal safety issues has become a topic of discussion amongst correctional employees and administration.

There appears to be a large misunderstanding to determine what is safe and what is unsafe in a potentially high risk and violent environment. Violence inside a prison can take place anywhere. It can happen inside the housing units, the recreation yard, work areas, the infirmary or as demonstrated by the Arizona rape incident, the classrooms. No work should have a risk associated with it as “usual” or “accepted” to go with the

job.

We are constantly reminded that our prisoners can and do have history of violent behaviors and must never forgo or forget they may turn violent on a moment's notice due to well-planned, spontaneous actions or provoked situations. Critical incidents can turn into lethal situations in seconds and security is necessary to deter such ideas or occurrences daily.

The issue of personal safety can be covered by using basic security habits or procedures to remain safe to some degree. We can escort employees, watch over them by using virtual electronic technologies, lock them in designated areas or control access to areas by using a controlled movement procedures that identifies authorized personnel only in those areas.

Regardless and no matter what security element we use, we must always have a basic awareness or vigilance about ourselves and others to establish the very basic point of being safe. This is achieved by effectively training you for the job assigned and giving you the tools required to carry out such an assignment.

Managing risks is a complex and fluid on-going challenge that must be done constantly in order to detect changes in the environment or population. Inspectors or officers should be aware of the variables that may change over time and require adjustments in procedures to attain the level of security to reduce the risks. This is a constant problem inside prisons.

The visible proof is most populations have become specialized and most staffing has been drastically reduced due to budget constraints or vacancies in the staffing patterns. There should be no discontinuities or weaknesses in such assessments as they provide a window of opportunity for the perpetrator or criminal to attack or plan such an act as taking a hostage, escape or even to commit another crime while incarcerated and striking at another person to kill while already serving time for a crime.

Specialized populations such as protective custody prisoners, sex offenders, gang leaders and highly disruptive groups require intense security assessments at all times to adjust the risk factors placed within the environment or facility. Remember that institutional adjustments must be made to allow a safe and secure milieu. Personal safety is not an individual dimensional challenge but rather it is a multi-dimensional challenge that requires the use of many tools rather than just a basic shift or relocation of human resources or other logistic networks designed for safety purposes.

Basic multi-dimensional strategies to ensure better safety practices should be designed to give you the confidence you feel safe and allows you to make adjustments in your presence to continue to feel safe throughout the day.

Personal safety requires you to:

- Be aware of your surroundings and find areas that are not blind spots or not within the view of surveillance cameras. Always know the location of the nearest correctional officer and carry a radio in good working order so you can communicate immediately.
- When possible travel during designated movement times so you are not alone. Walking in pairs or telling others where you are going is a good practice as well as letting them know when you plan to return or move from the assigned area so they are expecting your arrival elsewhere.
- Follow sound security procedures. Don't go into an area unless you are cleared to go into the place especially when there is an emergency and you are called to respond.
- Never take materials on your person that may be used as weapons. Pens, sharpened object or even blunt objects can be used against you. Secure them if you can and not make them visible.
- Don't stop during movement that takes you away from the main corridor or path designed for movement. These areas are normally within the camera's vision and can observe your movement to and from your designation safely under a watchful eye.
- Watch your behavior or attitude so it can't be misconstrued as being flirty or biased. Focus on your job and do not go beyond questions relevant to getting the assignments done.
- Look for subtle attempts to personalize your relationship and set forth a pattern of conversations that lead to manipulation and released personal information that may harm you or others.
- Maintain a personal safety zone and make it clear you do not want any closer contact which you clearly expressed to the inmate population with consistency. Report violations of disobedience and stay away from retaliatory attitudes that provoke conflict or misunderstandings.
- Take care of each other and express your movements with each other so your whereabouts is a constant awareness by others you work with and reduce any personal one on one contact with the prisoners.

Personal Safety requires the Administration to:

- Appropriately train and equip you for the job assignment given even if temporary or substituted
- Ensure the environment is controlled by limiting authorized movements only during certain times
- Ensure accessibility or availability of responding staff is within voice or sighted distance at all times
- Ensure accessibility to communication devices to call for assistance is unobstructed and available at all times
- Ensure visibility of the assigned location is not blocked or impeded by obstacles or blind spots
- Ensure a welfare [security] check is in place to check on employees wellness in periodic irregular fashion
- Ensure the population is in compliance with designed classification risk levels and other security threats
- Ensure ingress and egress is controlled at all times by security personnel on each shift
- Ensure the physical plant and locking devices are working as designed and tested periodically
- Ensure security audits or assessment are made to capture environmental changes over time
- Ensure population assessments are conducted on a regular basis [at least annually] to detect problematic issues or adjustments in mission changes.
- Ensure roster balancing and post assignments are reviewed every six months
- Ensure monthly walk thru inspections are conducted /documented by unit Chief of Security
- Ensure a monthly report is forwarded to Warden for notifications of problems reported and found

Corrections.com author, Carl ToersBijns, (retired), has worked in corrections for over 25 yrs He held positions of a Correctional Officer I, II, III [Captain] Chief of Security Mental Health Treatment Center – Program Director – Associate Warden - Deputy Warden of Administration & Operations. Carl's prison philosophy is all about the safety of the public, staff and inmates, "I believe my strongest quality is that I create strategies that are practical, functional and cost effective."

[Other articles by ToersBijns: \[http://www.corrections.com/news/result?keyword=&from=12%2F21%2F2009&to=08%2F21%2F2041&name\[id\]=1221\]](http://www.corrections.com/news/result?keyword=&from=12%2F21%2F2009&to=08%2F21%2F2041&name[id]=1221)
