



# **NORTH CAROLINA PRISONS INNOVATION INSTITUTE**

Affecting change from the inside out

BY CHARLES MAUTZ

**I**n the late summer of 2020, while working in my former role as the Clinical Programs Manager for Behavioral Health Services in North Carolina Prisons, I distinctly recall listening into a statewide conference call and hearing about a new team being formed within the administration: the *Innovation Institute*. The announcement spoke of soon-to-be recruitment efforts and job postings to build this group, beginning with the Administrator. Throwing my name in the hat was an interesting thought, but admittedly something I only briefly attended to — I had a great job, one I genuinely enjoyed and one that I felt was having an impact.

Time passed and I decided to pick the brains of a few mentors. I listened and learned from some who had an idea of what this *Innovation Institute* was supposed to be about, what this opportunity could be for people looking to affect change in corrections. This institute, this hub of innovation and change — it really started to take root in my mind as something of which I wanted to be a part. After some consideration, I decided to apply for the Administrator role. I had supportive leadership and a supervisor who literally told me that if I got the job, “you’d be an idiot not to take it.” Maybe I could be the person to lead this new team and take advantage of a new opportunity. During my interview, I shared my vision with my future Director for how I wanted to be a corrections professional who pushes for change, strives for advancement and contributes to a premier prison system. I got the job.

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Ishee told me, “I’m handing you a ball of clay. Now go make something amazing out of it.” It isn’t every day we get to feel this empowered, this supported to step into a new space and shape it. He continued, “I want you to be bold, be strategists, be visionaries, and become an idea incubator that will push us to re-imagine North Carolina’s prison system.” I left that office knowing I had the chance to create a team that could truly have an impact. This article is not about my experience personally, though, but about the *Innovation Institute* and what it is becoming in North Carolina Prisons — what we have undertaken since beginning to build an innovation-focused team within a correctional system, why we have taken this particular path and how we are forging ahead. For some with similar intentions and resources, perhaps this will serve as an invitation to collaborate. For others looking to take the steps we are taking now, we hope this will provide insights from our perspective.

## **Innovation Institutes: A concept**

The term *Innovation Institute* and its numerous variations generally capture a purpose rather than a specific set of resources, areas of focus, or pre-defined procedures. That purpose is conceptually simple: find ways to improve and advance. The applications, on the other hand, are varied and more nuanced, as one strength of innovation is inherently its utility across a broad spectrum of industries, services, need areas, etc. The *something* that these groups seek to improve is not their defining feature; rather, innovation itself is the intent. Thus, it is only fitting that one can easily find dedicated groups of innovators across the United States focusing on a wealth of subject matter.

Here in North Carolina, innovation-based groups exist as part of multiple universities both public and private, including Duke University’s Institute for Health Innovation (2020); the Campbell Law Innovation Institute (2022); and North Carolina State University’s Office of Research and Innovation (2020) and their William and Ida Friday Institute for Educational Innovation (2022). Similar university-affiliated or academia-based groups exist across the United States, like the University of Pittsburgh’s Innovation Institute (2022), Carnegie Mellon University’s Integrated Innovation Institute (2022), and the University of Tennessee — Oak Ridge Innovation Institute (2022).

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The list goes on: the Cambridge Innovation Institute in Massachusetts (2022), Innovation, Research & Training in North Carolina (2022), and the Prison Research and Innovation Initiative and Network within the Urban Institute (2020). Each of these groups, and others, are hubs for developing and operationalizing innovative thoughts, concepts and action. Each, in its own way, serves as a resource focused on the concept of innovation within its given realm of subject matter. Each promotes advancement and growth. A thorough review of these and other similar groups would be an exhausting endeavor. Suffice it to say this concept is prevalent throughout the United States.

### Innovation in prisons: Applying the concept to correctional systems

While innovation institutes exist in varied locations and with varied purposes, this concept is still permeating through the field of corrections. Commonly, Departments of Correction utilize internal groups for research and planning, administrative analysis or perhaps scientific study. However, the intention of creating an innovation institute *within* a corrections agency combines these concepts and focuses them toward the common goals of our profession. We would argue consolidating these efforts into a centralized team can lead to better addressing both the current practices and the future of corrections from *within* the agencies responsible for it.

At the end of 2020, Bureau of Justice Statistics reports indicated roughly five and a half million people were under the supervision of an adult correctional system in the United States, a much higher per-100,000 population rate than any other reporting nation in the world (Antenangelo & Durose, 2021; The Sentencing Project, 2021). Approximately 70% of these individuals were under community-based supervision, the remainder held in jail or prison. Of those released from incarceration in 2008, the majority were re-arrested within three years (Antenangelo & Durose, 2021; Kluckow & Zeng, 2022). These data are simply staggering, especially considering the exponential growth of justice-involved individuals in the last half-century and what this forecasts for the near future of our nation (The Sentencing Project, 2021).

In the era of modern technology, it has become general knowledge for any reasonably informed citizen of our nation that prison reform, and more broadly criminal justice reform, is a societal need that we simply cannot ignore. While the leaders of North Carolina Prisons are neither the first nor the only ones to recognize this need, the establishment of a prisons innovation institute is an investment in our ability to reform from the inside out. Improving the way we provide services to incarcerated individuals, how we approach safety and security, how we measure success — these are examples of areas over which we *inside* the agencies can affect change. Likely, many would agree we already strive for advancement in these and other domains of our work, but we can do more.

A prisons-based innovation institute can provide several specific areas of benefit to a corrections agency above and beyond their current efforts. That is to say, while corrections professionals work daily to improve their impact on offenders, their colleagues, and their communities, an innovation-focused group can provide a variety of additional advantages:

- A full-time, dedicated staff. Leaders often acknowledge the simple reality that their organization’s greatest asset is its *people*. Prisons are no different. However, in an era of short-staffing, recruitment and retention challenges and continually changing working conditions it is an uphill battle to keep posts filled and keep programs in operation. Thus,



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those same *people* in whom we place such value are the same ones we cannot afford to take off post. So when are they expected to develop the concept they have been considering? Study the sources of challenges faced by their facility? Do anything beyond their full-time job? With an innovation institute, corrections agencies can dedicate full-time staff to identifying, researching, understanding and generating responses to issues while supporting proactive future plans.

- A centralized resource for internal and external stakeholders. An innovation institute can provide a central hub with whom staff can partner to tackle the issues they see but lack the time or resources to address alone. Such a group can incorporate staff knowledge and resources, organize and utilize their input, and share information more cohesively. Beyond internal staff and leaders, a prisons innovation institute can engage with external partners, be they researchers, additional state agencies or individual practitioners. With an innovation institute, corrections agencies can funnel internal and external advancement-focused energy for review and incorporation.
- A research- and advising-focused unit. Operational challenges, opportunities for growth, and new resources or programs — these concepts can be studied, developed and organized cohesively. Outputs can be focused toward advising leaders, providing evidence for or against potential decisions, considerations to be made given current or future circumstances or targeted recommendations. With an innovation institute, corrections agencies can establish processes to dynamically study topics of interest and benefit from evidence-informed decision-making.
- Support for evidence-based planning. Leadership, staff experiences, professional judgment — these all weigh into the choices prison staff make when trying to safely and efficiently fulfill their duties. These perspectives are critical but objective research and study provides an obvious benefit — while not always popular or matching expectations, what we find through organized study or engagement with diverse perspectives provides additional data with which we can make the best decision available. With

an innovation institute, corrections agencies can bolster their ability to thoroughly review available options, priorities and resources with an eye on following evidence alongside experience.

## North Carolina Prisons Innovation Institute: An introduction

The North Carolina Prisons Innovation Institute is intended to provide the benefits described above. The Institute exists as a group of dedicated staff within the Performance and Standards Section of Prisons Administration — no Institute staff are assigned to any other duty station. Yet, the Institute encompasses a focus on engaging internal and external stakeholders alike. Opportunities are built specifically to obtain staff involvement and feedback, perspectives on project-specific concerns and expert assistance in scientific study. Finally, the Institute remains focused on conducting sound, relevant research and review of relevant information so to provide beneficial recommendations and considerations to North Carolina Prisons policy-makers and team of leaders.

The Institute currently comprises four full-time staff, each position intended to fill a specific role from which the overall footprint of innovation can grow. One role maintains primary oversight of the current Division of Prisons Strategic Plan (2020), tracking progress toward stated goals, planning for future goals with Prisons leaders and staff and facilitating cross-discipline reporting and communication. A second role is dedicated heavily to frontline staff engagement. The Institute is implementing a staff-focused process improvement program in 2022 — known as *Frontline Innovation* — that will operationalize staff identification of unit- and facility-specific concerns, cultivate staff input into addressing them and integrate staff into system-wide innovation. A third role provides research expertise to the Institute, both through reviewing and making use of available literature or other resources and through developing and implementing research projects within North Carolina



Prisons. While projects vary in scope, topic and breadth, this role strengthens our ability to provide objectivity and relevant considerations. The team is led by the fourth role, an Administrator serving to direct Institute activities. However, collaborative teamwork is foundational to the Institute’s innovative capabilities. All voices are heard and we work together.

The Innovation Institute is in its infancy stages in North Carolina, with an eye on growth. However, our processes and opportunities for engagement have begun to solidify. We have begun various projects and stepped into various roles within Prisons Administration, finding ways to provide immediate benefit, consider short and longer-term futures, and create processes through which innovation can itself take root. In the past 18 months, the Innovation Institute has found ways to engage. Institute staff have:

- Utilized web-based software to create an *Electronic Suggestion Box* which staff can use to identify concerns and propose solutions directly and digitally, whether anonymously or identifiably.
- Developed the framework and protocols for the new *Frontline Innovation* arm of the Institute, including processes not only for staff engagement and input, but for information sharing across 50+ facilities. This initiative is loosely based on the *Back to Basics* concept commonly known across correctional professionals.
- Participated in crafting and implementing *All-In 2022!* — North Carolina Prisons’ intensive, 10-point-plan targeting improvements to staff safety, support, working conditions, compensation, overall wellness and more.
- Assumed responsibility for maintaining central monitoring of the Division of Prisons Strategic Plan (2020), as well as begun a thorough mid-cycle review and revision process involving both leadership and frontline staff perspectives.
- Enhanced select internal reporting mechanisms to utilize digital technology and modern, flexible, user-friendly software for greater ease of access, data retention and transparency.
- Collaborated with information technology professionals to develop a unilateral mass-messaging system for Prisons staff through which staff can voluntarily receive alerts, reminders and various helpful information directly to their cell phone. Recognizing that nearly

9,000 North Carolina Prisons staff do not have email access, this tool puts leadership-to-staff communication directly into the hands of those on the frontlines.

- Developed processes for and conducted targeted reviews of specific security enhancements, whether currently in operation or under consideration for the future, considering specific outcome measures and indicators relevant to the enhancements in question.
- Conducted, in tandem with internal subject matter professionals and at times external researchers, rigorous program evaluations regarding Restrictive Housing diversionary treatment programs (Remch et al., 2021) and peer observation of suicide watches.
- Published literature regarding program development and evaluation experience within North Carolina Prisons, including Institute staff and others (Mautz, Junker, Catlett & Ishee, 2021).
- Convened multidisciplinary workgroups to study the use of data analytics to inform decisions ranging from program availability to population management.
- Identified and developed partnership opportunities with corrections professionals across the country, welcoming support, perspective and collaboration both with today’s leaders and the next generation.

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As the ball of clay really begins to take shape, we continue to keep our eyes not only on next month, but on next year, the next three years, and the next five. Part of that intention begins with solidifying processes and establishing our role — defining what the Institute is, what it is not, how our partners and colleagues engage with it, how it approaches projects and tasks, and what others can

expect from it. Also important is focus on the big picture, seeing the opportunity to truly make a difference in the criminal justice space. As we look to the future, the Institute will continue focusing on long-term goals including:

- Ensuring the availability of evidence and relevant considerations to Prisons leaders not only to respond to current needs but to anticipate those of the future.
- Fostering true idea incubation that involves multidisciplinary, multi-perspective and open-minded study.
- Advancing the use of technology to improve communication, resource access, educational opportunities, social support, transparency and safety.
- Providing comprehensive and rigorous evaluations of internal programs and practices to provide direct feedback for ongoing quality improvement.
- Supporting opportunities for those impacted by incarceration, including those incarcerated as well as staff, to have a safe experience and to avail themselves of education and skills training, positive health and wellness programs and a chance to be successful.
- Developing processes to proactively anticipate future needs and generate advanced recommendations to meet them.

## Taking part in the future of corrections: Becoming agents for change

Understanding an innovation institute in corrections is only one arm of any agency and prisons are only one branch of the criminal justice system; it remains true our approach to innovation in this field has the potential to ripple throughout society. That is, while this Institute focuses on that which we can plausibly affect, we see our impact as growing in time as we improve processes, build on resources and cultivate relationships with others across the globe. As we continue to step into this space, the *Innovation Institute* in North Carolina Prisons remains eager to build partnerships and to collaborate with those spanning the corrections and criminal justice arenas. We are here to affect change, together.

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