

CORRECTIONAL PROFESSIONALS

Today's greatest public servants

BY GARY C. MOHR
106TH PRESIDENT OF ACA





As President of the American Correctional Association, the largest and oldest professional organization representing our profession, I have had unique opportunities to see the great challenges and significant triumphs of the professionals working in our jails, prisons and community corrections. In fact, I frequently refer to these professionals as the greatest public servants of our time. I understand that statement is controversial to many outside our work, as I often hear special offers for first responders that seldom include our professionals. As a former director of a correctional system and prison warden, I have seen tens of thousands of incident reports that describe truly heroic responses of our staff. I am not aware of any other group of worthy public servants that respond more frequently to incidents that could result in loss of life than our correctional staff.



The failure of the non-correctional public to recognize our value in providing safe, humane and rehabilitative environments, in both

our incarcerate settings as well as in our communities, has significant and negative consequences. First, our staff who work in our prisons and jails are often paid less than other public safety officers in their communities. This has resulted in the challenge of staffing our prisons and jails being the number one concern voiced by practitioners as I travel the country. The general public, who elect local, state and federal legislative members responsible for setting compensation and benefit rates, must recognize and understand the risk and value of our staff. Without this public respect, we cannot expect our staff to feel valued and be given the respect they deserve and compensated at a rate warranted by valued public servants. Second, unlike positions in police and fire departments, younger candidates entering the workforce are not typically seeking out career opportunities inside our incarcerate settings where staff are at risk daily and mandated to work overtime hours beyond their regular schedule because of existing staff shortages. Finally, given the size of many of our operations, and the 24-hour, seven days a week responsibility for supervision of those who do not want to be confined or under supervision, “things happen” and those incidents are ripe for media stories. These stories tend to influence the public opinion of our value without a heavy dose of the really good stories that exist to provide balance.

So, what can we do? I think there are several things that can make a difference to lift up our greatest public servants:

- When the media calls those who stand post in our prisons and jails “guards,” contact the media and correct them by saying our professional staff are correctional officers who perform many services beyond “guarding.” While in harm’s way, they remain dedicated to facility and our community safety.
- When we have an opportunity to speak at a community event in a church or for a civic organization, take the opportunity to tell the story of the brave men and women who not only ensure a safe and secure environment, but also positively engage those under our supervision to become positive and contributing members of our communities. Encourage others in your organization to speak out as well.
- At every opportunity strive to get our good stories about our staff and our good work in front of the public.
- When we have an opportunity to describe our profession, talk about a large holistic professional community. We have many parts of our professional community. These include safe and productive confinement, providing for the health



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and well-being of those confined, delivery of evidenced-based programming that changes lives, community supervision and coaching with the aim of making the transition into our communities a positive experience for all. Then, describe how all of these components provide a great opportunity for a professional career.

- When we have an opportunity to speak to those seeking a career, speak freely and proudly about the great life this profession has given us.
- As we consider priorities for us to achieve, never lose sight of how we can influence a positive culture for our staff and take the opportunity to talk with our new employees entering the workforce to address legitimate concerns they are facing before you read about those issues in an exit survey.
- Take every opportunity to grow as correctional professionals and support professional development for our employees including certification programs offered by ACA that grow competency and confidence.
- When we have an opportunity to speak to those responsible for passing budgets that support compensation and benefits comparable to other law enforcement agencies, take a correctional professional from your organization with you and give them an opportunity to tell their story of what they experience every day.
- Finally, when those sales staff in every business offer special deals for first responders that do not include our staff, contact them to ask why not our employees, today's greatest public servants?

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— Gary C. Mohr

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I have to admit, I did not always follow the above advice as a warden and a director, but I sure wish I did. Given the challenges most systems are facing today holding on to a competent, experienced and happy workforce, we must hold up our staff in front of the community at every opportunity and consider the wellness of our staff with every decision we make.



Gary C. Mohr is the President of the American Correctional Association.

