



Creating positive and sustainable change

Denise M. Robinson

ACA 108th President

Thank you all very much. It is an honor and it is humbling to stand before you as the 108th President of the American Correctional Association; and the first ACA President from the field of community corrections.

Community corrections are an essential component of the corrections continuum and for the continuity of care for the people and communities we all serve. I am honored to be able to elevate the visibility of community corrections.

I am thrilled so many family members and friends are here with my colleagues from across the years. You all mean so much to me!

I do not want to give the “last but not least” treatment to the two most important people in my life — Milton, my husband, and Christopher, our son. Milton, you are my life partner and my best friend — thank you so much for all of your support over all of these years. Christopher — you have been a blessing since the moment you were born. I couldn’t have pictured all of the joy that has come from being your mother. Thank you both — you are my world.

I never thought I’d choose to be in the corrections field.

I am the daughter of a police officer and an educator. My parents raised me with the knowledge that I

am a child of God whose purpose is to be of service to others.

My Mother and Father passed away some time ago, but they are always with me. Each and every day, I strive to reflect the very best of both of them.

My original career goal was to become a marine biologist like Jacques Cousteau and to save our oceans. That did not work out, but I never stopped believing that I could make a positive difference in the world.

When I was in high school, the first and only time my father discharged his weapon in the line of duty resulted in the death of a teenage boy. My father was quickly exonerated, and we were so grateful he was not injured.

After this incident, my parents began getting letters that threatened my life. They said things like, “You took our child, now we are going to take yours.” They included details showing I was being watched. My parents kept all of this from me. I noticed the additional police around, but it never occurred to me I was in danger. I assumed the protection was for my father.

When I was a freshman at The Ohio State University, my parents unexpectedly showed up one day. They finally told me about the threatening letters because the last

letter they received said, “I saw your daughter walking across the oval in a red plaid skirt,” and they knew I was still in danger. They talked to me about the steps they wanted me to take to stay safe.

It was terribly frightening, but I am not a person who shows weakness. To the outside world, I became even more driven to succeed and show I could not be intimidated. I took my commitment to be of service to the next level and I continue to serve to this day.

Inside, however, I had changed. I built a thick shell around my heart. I really wanted the people who were threatening me to be caught and to be punished for the fear and pain they had caused me and my family.

My hardened heart did not want anything to do with people who broke the law. At that time, I would not have pursued a career in corrections for any amount of prestige or money.

So — what happened? How did I get here?

First, I had to do an internship at a juvenile institution.

After graduation, I got a job in a specialized program at Alvis for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities who were also in the criminal justice system.

I was promoted from that position and reluctantly came over to the corrections side of the organization. There, the last parts of the shell around my heart fell away as I saw the offenders we served needed treatment and rehabilitation services to change their lives and be able to successfully return to their families and communities. Punishment alone isn't enough.

At Alvis, I found my calling and a way to make a positive difference in the world. I have never looked back.

As Nelson Mandela said, "What counts in life is not the mere fact that we have lived. It is what difference we have made to the lives of others that will determine the significance of the life we lead."

I first became involved in ACA when Dr. Reginald Wilkinson, then the Director of the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, decided that all community corrections providers in Ohio had to be ACA accredited.

I set out to learn the what, when, where, why, who and how of accreditation. I came to see ACA accreditation is absolutely essential for accountability to our funders, the community, our staff and the individuals we serve.

I put my commitment to work and became more and more involved in ACA itself, starting with committee work and becoming an auditor and later serving on and Chairing the Commission on Accreditation for Corrections.

As I look ahead to the presidency, I am carrying forward the principles of my campaign platform: Enhancing continuity of care.

I see ACA working to promote and support continuity of care in three ways:

1. Within correctional programs and services,

especially in working with special populations;

2. Across the different elements of the corrections continuum; and
3. For ACA itself and its members.

First, within corrections programs, let's take what we've learned providing comprehensive healthcare for adults and apply it to juveniles. Kids do not come to us with the chronic diseases our adult clients have — but without interventions, they will develop them.

We can create structures to support preventative medicine, behavioral health care and health and wellness education that will give juveniles the tools to change their behaviors and avoid the health-related consequences we see in adults in the corrections system. This will also improve the health of our communities as a whole.

In adult correctional programs, I'm very interested in studying the science of geriatrics. There are model programs in our country that do an outstanding job of serving aging offenders. Let's explore these and how they can be duplicated.

I believe we need a system to foster the expansion of model programs. I'd love to see ACA create a Correctional Treatment Resource so we can learn more from each other. We do not need a dry and dusty database and I am not talking about best practices, which are not future-focused enough. We need a living, breathing resource of what different correctional systems are doing and what they see on the horizon.

Second, we need to provide better continuity of care and reduce the duplication of services for individuals as they transition from one correctional setting to another, for

example, from prison to community corrections. We need to focus on doing a better job of capturing what is provided in one setting and carrying it over to the next, so individuals are not repeating assessments and treatment services. Repetition and duplication is frustrating for staff and for those we serve. It's also a waste of scarce resources.

Third, ACA needs to focus on continuity of care for itself and for our individual members. I suggest a two-pronged approach of succession planning and continuing our staff wellness programs.

ACA needs a comprehensive succession plan. Yes, ACA will have a new Executive Director, but that's not a succession plan — that's one job. It's completely inadequate to address the retirement wave that has already begun. 75 million Baby Boomers are projected to retire by 2030.

We need to prepare and invest in the next generation to get them ready to take over and do great work. ACA has the opportunity to model a succession plan for our members who are also facing significant losses in experienced leadership.

Another component to augmenting ACA's Continuity of Care is to continue and enhance our Staff Wellness initiatives. The pandemic was very hard on our corrections staff. We lost some excellent employees to COVID-19; lost others to retirement; and still more simply left the profession.

We need to show how deeply we appreciate the staff we have right now. It is essential they have the supports they need to take care of themselves — in a holistic way. ACA needs to do everything we can to improve morale in a meaningful way and help support overall staff wellness.

There is no better association in the world to take on these challenges. Look around and see the incredible wealth of knowledge here. But we won't be here forever. We have to act now and leverage and expand on what we collectively know to create positive and sustainable change.

Before closing, I am going to thank some very special people — some of you have helped me to learn and grow in my career, others have opened my eyes to new possibilities, and still others have supported and fed me spiritually. Thank you to:

- My only sibling, Jennie, my aunt Terry, and my sister of the heart, Marsha;
- My dear cousins and closest friends — thank you making the trip to Orlando to celebrate with me;
- The ACA Executive Committee as a whole and Tony Parker in particular;
- The ACA Past Presidents — thank you for your guidance and for allowing me to benefit from your experience;

- The Ohio Community Corrections Association and the International Corrections and Justice Association - the community corrections associations I had the pleasure of leading in the past; and all of my partners in community corrections, especially Neil Tilow and Jim Lawrence;
- The president and past leaders of the National Association of Blacks in Criminal Justice;
- Keith Stevens, my Alvis Board Chair and the Alvis staff;
- Jim and Betty Gondles, Jeff Washington, and all of the ACA staff — your support is so appreciated; and
- Thank you to all of the corrections professionals and the wonderful mentors I've had along the way — you have taught me corrections and inspired me to greater service for the individuals, families and communities we collectively serve.

To all of the ACA members: Please know I am deeply grateful for the trust that you've placed in me to help lead ACA. I am looking forward to working with you to enhance our profession; to empower the professionals within it; and to improve continuity of care for all of the constituencies we serve.



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