

# CORRECTIONAL OASIS

A PUBLICATION OF

DESERT WATERS CORRECTIONAL OUTREACH

A NON-PROFIT FOR THE WELL-BEING OF CORRECTIONAL STAFF AND THEIR FAMILIES

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## Seduction's Slippery Slope

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*A prior version of this article first appeared in the Correctional Oasis, Volume 1, Issue 11.*

One of the greatest sources of demoralization for corrections staff of all disciplines is "losing" one of their own to offenders. What I am referring to is the crossing of professional boundaries by staff in ways that violate policy and/or break the law. Why and how do these violations happen? And what can be done to help render staff immune to them?

A common boundary violation in corrections is staff befriending offenders. This "overfamiliarity" may lead to sexual/romantic involvement of staff with offenders, allowing offenders to commit violations without administering consequences, bringing contraband into facilities (tobacco and other drugs, cell phones, weapons, etc.), or acting as messengers between offenders and people on the outside.

Psychologists warn about the "slippery slope," the gradual erosion of professional boundaries between psychotherapists and their clients. This term refers to ethical or criminal violations which may be small initially, but which might eventually progress to major infractions.

How might the process of sliding down the slippery slope play out in corrections work settings?

Corrections staff do not start out their careers intending to cross professional lines with offenders. The beginnings of professional boundary violation may seem harmless to the staff committing them. "I just said, 'Thank you' when he complimented me about my hair, and smiled. There's nothing wrong with that." Or, "Oh, I'll go ahead and give him an extra piece of chicken. It's just food. He's been so helpful to me in the kitchen." Or, "I'll mail her letter to her kids, like she's begging me to. Nobody has to know about it." Or, "I'll bring him this piece of religious literature he asked for. He seems so sincere in his new faith." Baby steps down the slippery slope are usually taken without stopping to consider various potential implications and consequences, and without consulting with peers and supervisors. Even worse, sometimes these first steps downhill are taken defiantly in spite of dire warnings by coworkers.

Offenders, stripped of certain freedoms and privileges due to their status, may seek to devise ways to gain leverage in the "system," to get some power. (Seeking control over one's circumstances is not an unusual desire. We all do this regularly. The issue hinges on means, motives and context—how and why we engage in such behaviors. Is our behavior pro-social or does it violate rules, break the law, exploit others and cause them harm? What limitations or restrictions are we under that we need to abide by?) An obvious way for offenders to gain some power is to tap into staff's authority and have staff do for them what they cannot do for themselves. To achieve that goal, offenders look for chinks in staff's armor, ways to make "special" connections with staff, to meet staff wants. (When offenders lure staff to violate rules, they need to be able to answer the staff's unspoken question, "What's in it for me?") These chinks may include feelings of insecurity, loneliness, anxiety about finances, greed, entitlement, lust, or a sense of lack of appreciation by coworkers. (Continued on page 2)

## DWCO Services



**Seduction's Slippery Slope (Continued from page 1)**

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How do offenders manage to use the staff's vulnerabilities against them to gain some much-sought power and leverage?

In the case of sexual/romantic seduction, for example, an offender might initially offer a personal compliment to a staff member. On its own, the comment appears harmless. Unless one is vigilant, the flattering statement does not raise red flags. The offender, on the other hand, is observing the staff member's reaction to the comment. If s/he responds to the ego stroke with even a hint of positive emotion—such as blushing, a smile, or a giggle—the offender knows s/he “scored”, s/he “got to” that staff member.

By that I mean that the offender's carefully guided “missile” has managed to burrow beneath the staff member's professional armor and struck him or her on a personal level, satisfying a personal longing to be considered attractive and desirable.

That is the level where our needs for worth, love and acceptance reside. At that place in our soul people are not classified as offenders vs. staff, but rather as people who satisfy our needs vs. people who don't. And the persons who gratify us are granted preferential treatment. We are motivated to try to get along with them and not to alienate them, because, after all, they are “feeding” us emotionally.

When staff members allow themselves to receive ego strokes from offenders, they have stepped onto the slippery slope. They have been hooked. They have opened the door to being seduced. Staff in such a predicament may end up becoming lenient and friendly with these offenders, favoring them over the rest of the offender population in their facility or on their case load.

As the pattern of seduction advances, professionalism unravels accordingly. Staff members will begin to feel emotionally closer to the offenders in question—more understood, valued or admired by them—than to coworkers or loved ones at home. They might develop romantic and sexual feelings for them, derive pleasure and excitement from interacting with them, and actively seek to be in their presence and make physical contact with them.

Unless staff ask for help at this critical time, they run the risk of becoming correctional statistics. They may, for example, become romantically and sexually involved with offenders, bring in contraband for them, or even try to help them escape.

Alternately, offenders may overhear conversations among staff about financial struggles, or they may “read” staff members by, for example, making comments about money and observing the staff's response. If a staff member shows signs of anxiety or other emotions when money is mentioned, offenders may have identified a potential victim. Carefully placed comments plant seeds in the staff member's mind about possible “safe” avenues for extra income—“for just one time.” Or offenders might stir up staff's sense of entitlement. “You work so hard and you make so little money. This is a way for you to get a little extra cash.”

In other cases staff members may give into seemingly insignificant offender demands either to get them off their backs, or to gain the offenders' cooperation or even protection in violent settings. When the door gets opened a crack, however, the offenders make sure that it stays propped open. Getting offenders extra packets of even salt can progress to providing them with toothpaste, which later advances to cigarettes, and eventually can culminate to bringing them drugs. Offenders have time to gradually wear down staff's professional boundaries and resolve.

Offenders might also target staff members who seem to be lone wolves rejected by the rest of the pack of staff. The offender game may again involve flattery—“You're the best. You're the only one who's fair/smart/understanding. We appreciate you.” The goal is to offer lonely and disgruntled staff members the semblance of friendship and acceptance. Vulnerable staff could soon be on a steady diet of ego gratification by offenders, and may end up feeling obligated to do them favors in return.

The key to keeping staff away from the slippery slope has several components.

1. Supervisory staff must ensure that all correctional employees are repeatedly reminded of the stark realities of seduction by offenders. In conjunction with that, staff need to be able to openly discuss this issue during supervision times, in-services, and continuing education trainings. Sharing with one another about ways staff members identified, exposed and countered offender “games,” would help keep staff away from the slippery slope.

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2. Staff need to be alerted against complacency which makes staff believe that "it would not happen to me." Anyone can be seduced. (As the saying goes, "There, but for the grace of God, go I.") No one is exempt, unless they continually hold themselves accountable for their behavior and even their thoughts.
3. Staff also need a safety net to fall back on when they realize that they are contemplating committing policy violations with offenders. Several options, such as counseling with professionals educated in the corrections culture or confidential peer support must be in place for them to get preventative help without jeopardizing their careers.
4. Staff are responsible for ensuring that they seal chinks in their armor as they become aware of them. This may require a variety of interventions, ranging from asking trusted coworkers to give them feedback about their conduct to seeking professional counseling to address personal insecurities.
5. Staff are responsible for looking out for one another. If they sense that one of their team is showing signs of starting to compromise their ethical standards, they need to approach that coworker with their concerns and support. If the pattern persists, they have to take it to a higher level, as boundary violations undermine the safety of the entire institution or agency.

We all seem to have a phenomenal ability to deceive ourselves. So, the bottom line is how could staff tell if they are approaching the slippery slope in their dealings with offenders? The easiest diagnostic test is to ask themselves if whatever they contemplate doing with offenders is something they would be comfortable reporting to their supervisors. If they intend to keep their activities secret, then that is proof that they have left the solid professional ground and are about to slide downhill.

Corrections work can be like swimming through shark-infested waters. Staff need to be vigilant and honest with themselves and others. They also need courage, self-control, the ability to think on their feet, and the ability to firmly say NO to themselves and to others as needed. And they must keep from being overconfident—if you think you're beyond temptation, watch out!

There is of course another side to the slippery slope issue. That is the matter of predatory staff who zero in to exploit vulnerable offenders. Such conduct, no matter how infrequent, once reported in the media, makes indelible negative impressions on the public's view of corrections professionals. It tarnishes the image of thousands of corrections staff who do the right thing and who conduct themselves professionally day after day. That will be the subject of a future article.

## **Words of Wisdom for New Recruits**

*Quotes offered by staff and shared at the Correctional Officer Training Academy (COTA), Arizona Department of Corrections (ADC), Class 1000 Graduation Ceremony, June 27, 2014. Reprinted with permission.*

- Approach determines response.
- Once you get to your units, figure out how to make the great training you received work for you.
- Never take anything personally.
- Always remain professional and support your coworkers and chain of command.
- Come to work each day as if it is your first. Positive energy will help you deal with daily challenges.
- Be yourself and treat every individual the same.
- Be the change you want to see in the Department.
- You will always get out of the Department what you put into it! So every time you walk through those gates, you make sure you "Bring it!"
- Get involved. Consider trying out the different operations positions and learn as many posts as you have available.
- Have integrity—doing the right thing even when no one is watching.
- Your credibility is a critical factor in how you will be perceived by inmates, who judge those around them, including staff, by their word. Don't compromise it.
- Think of employment with ADC in the long term. There are so many opportunities in this organization.
- Leave work at work; enjoy and cherish your time outside work—balance is a key to a fresh mind at work.
- Communication can be your best friend.

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**Words of Wisdom for New Recruits (Continued from page 3)**

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- Always challenge yourself. There is too much to learn and do in the Department to ever be bored.
- You must have a moral compass, a standard that guides you. You can't decide when the decision is before you, you must decide now what your standards are.
- Integrity is the cornerstone of leadership. Integrity means that you are honest and truthful in what you say or do. You put honesty, sense of duty, and sound moral principles above all else.
- Correctional Officers face numerous mental and physical challenges. They should be prepared for unpredictable events. Be safe, ask questions and know that you are not alone.
- Everything you learned at COTA and what you will experience and learn in your new job is valuable. When you least expect it, you will be able to reach back in your memory and make decisions and perform actions quickly based on all your previous training and experiences.
- This is a career that can take you far. Be open to new correctional experiences, such as different shifts, job assignments, units, custody levels, and complexes.
- You must rise above the challenges and obstacles you face, have loyalty and pride in who you are and where you work, and have self-confidence based on expert knowledge.
- Ensure you separate work from family. Have a hobby that provides stress relief. Engage in healthy relationships with family and friends to balance your life.
- Look around at all of the opportunities, every job here is available to you. ADC is a land of opportunity. If you want to be the Warden or even the Director, that is possible.

**Corrections Employee Appreciation Week**

*We recently celebrated Corrections Employee Appreciation Week. The email below was sent to us by a staff member who appreciated the words of encouragement that the Chaplain at his facility sent to the staff. Reprinted with permission.*

It is Corrections employee week, and I just wanted to drop you a note to say thanks for all you do. I have been in many public school classrooms as a substitute teacher and parent. On many "career days" over the years I have asked hundreds of children what they want to be when they grow up. Never, not even once, have I heard a child say that they wanted to work in corrections. That's due in a great part to the fact that the work you do is invisible to the world unless you do something wrong.

The work you do day in and day out is done quietly, stressfully, professionally and most of all with very little recognition. Rain, sleet, snow, ice, extreme heat does not keep you from doing what you do. The constant awareness that danger can present at any given moment does not keep you from doing what you do.

Your reward at the end of the day is knowing that the world is safer because as a corrections professional you provide a safe environment for those who society has adjudicated to confinement.

My hat is off to you, and how you do it. When you go home from your next shift take my thanks, and tell your families that I thank them too.

Michael Walker  
Chaplain

## **Perceptions about the Status of Corrections/Detention Work**

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Very few people grow up thinking that they want to become a correctional officer or a jail detention officer. In fact, corrections and detention careers are rarely discussed in primary or secondary educational settings. The exception may be in areas of the country where the prison or jail is a primary employer. The job of a "prison guard" is often considered to be a less desirable occupation than many others. Many occupational surveys do not include "correctional officer" as a choice to be rated. However, progress is being made. On April 2014, CNBC's Cindy Perman reported the results of the Career Cast 2014 jobs [survey](#) that examined jobs based upon the work environment, income, outlook and stress. In that survey being a corrections officer was listed as the tenth worst job in the country. The corrections officer career was rated as more favorable than career choices such as garbage collector, flight attendant, taxi driver and lumberjack. The fact that the job of corrections officer was included on the survey is an improvement over surveys done by other researchers in the past. And the fact that the term "prison guard" was not used is perhaps a positive indicator of a shift in public perception.

Starting in the 1990s, corrections and detention professionals worked to move the field towards a more professional status, and began an all-out assault on the label of "guard" due to its being considered undesirable. Today the term "guard" has been discarded by many criminal justice professionals and has been replaced by the title of correctional officer (for prisons) or detention officer (for jails).

Moving corrections work into an arena where it is considered a profession has not been easy even though many of the components of a profession are present: a sense of identity, members who share common values, clear role definitions, common language, etc. (Goode, 1957). However, the achievement of professional status has not yet been fully achieved as reflected in the words of Chris Epps, the President, and James A. Gondles, the Executive Director of the American Correctional Association as published in the May/June 2013 edition of *Corrections Today*:

*Unfortunately, unlike other public safety entities, correctional employees receive little or no appreciation for doing their job. On the contrary, correctional officers and officials are perhaps the most scrutinized and criticized professionals in the entire criminal justice system ... with limited staff, limited funding, and little or no reward or commendation. (p. 60)*

In a recent *Newsweek* article written by Oscar Lopez that was published May 27, 2014, Lopez summarized the image of correctional officers in this manner: "The job is hard enough without what many officers describe as an inherent sense of shame about what they do, perpetuated by stereotypes of the big bad prison officer."

Research has also reinforced the public image of corrections work as lacking professionalism, such as the simulated brutal environment described by Zimbardo's Stanford prison experiment where the correctional officers were portrayed as power-hungry, sadistic people (Zimbardo, 2007).

Relevant and interesting information about public perception of corrections work was provided through two surveys conducted by the Colorado Department of Personnel & Administration of the engagement of Colorado state employees. These surveys assessed, among other dimensions, employees' views on the public's perception of the value of their public service. This dimension was measured by including the item: "The work we do in my department is respected and valued by the public."

The survey process was completed twice, in 2011 and in 2013. In the 2011 survey 60% of all Colorado state employees rated favorably the item "The work we do in my department is respected and valued by the public." In 2013 the percentage increased to 62%.

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Survey results however reveal a dramatic difference between the Department of Public Safety employees' and the Department of Corrections employees' views on the public's perception of the value of their public service. The results for the Department of Public Safety indicated that 76% in 2011 and 77% in 2013 rated as favorable the statement regarding their work being respected and valued by the public. In stark contrast, the results from the Department of Corrections indicated that only 39% of employees answered this item favorably in 2011, and in 2013 the percentage decreased further to 36%.

The fact that the employees of the Colorado Department of Corrections believe that the public in general does not place a high value upon their work may negatively impact their own view of the value of corrections work. That is, while lack of respect from others does not make corrections work any less important, it may make it more challenging for some individual corrections employees to continue to find meaning and pride in what they do.

Some correctional agencies conduct public opinion surveys to assess the public's perception of corrections work. In a 2006 survey, the Florida Department of Corrections (FL DOC) asked members of the public questions regarding their understanding of and satisfaction with the FL DOC (Mears & Mancini, 2006). The results of this survey indicated that 47% of the respondents believed that the DOC was doing a "good" job. This is itself is encouraging. It would have been helpful to have included additional questions in that survey that assessed the public perception of corrections work in more detail.

One of the recommendations from the FL DOC survey was that the department needed to educate the public about the objectives, goals and progress of their department. This types of objective or recommendation is commonly based upon the belief that the public does not understand the work that goes on inside prisons and jails, and that lack of understanding is the reason why there is so little respect for the profession.

If this assumption is accurate then people who are informed about the work of corrections should place a higher value upon corrections work. Toward that end, the perceptions of college/university criminal justice professors in one western state were surveyed by the author in 2012 regarding various aspects of corrections work. A survey was constructed to examine the opinions of professors that at the time of the survey taught in a college-level criminal justice program. An email invitation was delivered to them asking them to complete the survey through a link to an internet survey site. The survey link was delivered to 106 professors, and 25 (24%) of these individuals completed the survey. The demographic information collected for the respondents revealed the following: the average age of the respondents was 53 years old, and the average length of time teaching in a college/university was 11. 8 years. Thirteen (52%) of the respondents possessed a master's degree, 11 (44%) possessed a doctorate degree, and one (4%) respondent possessed a bachelor's degree. Twenty-three (92%) respondents indicated that they had previously worked as practitioners in criminal justice: twelve (48%) in police work, six (24%) in corrections, and five (20%) in other parts of the criminal justice system.

Perceptions of six law enforcement career types (police, corrections/detention, probation or parole, court services, victim services, and investigative/security/intelligence) were ranked by this group of respondents along four dimensions.

**Ranking was based on the following four content areas:**

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- (1) The amount of prestige or social standing that they believed each law enforcement career type is afforded by the public
  - (2) Their beliefs about the salaries commonly earned in each law enforcement career type
  - (3) The amount of pre-service training or on the job training needed to perform in each law enforcement career type
  - (4) The ability of individuals to make a difference for the good of society in each law enforcement career type
-

**Perceptions about the Status of Corrections/Detention Work (Continued from page 6)**

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When asked to rank the prestige of the jobs in law enforcement, 44% of the respondents indicated that corrections/detention was the job with the lowest prestige and 20% ranked it as the next lowest. The remaining responses varied with only 4% of the respondents indicating that corrections/detention work was the most prestigious of the law enforcement options.

**Prestige/Social Standing**

Rank	Percentage of Respondents per Rank for Corrections/ Detention						
	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	No response
Corrections/Detention	4	8	12	12	20	44	0

The estimated/expected salary earned by each type of law enforcement was the next question. A total of 32% of the respondents indicated that corrections/detention work was in the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> lowest paid type of law enforcement work.

**Salary**

Rank	Percentage of Respondents per Rank for Corrections/Detention						
	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6 <sup>th</sup>	No response
Corrections/ Detention	8	12	24	20	20	12	4

The amount of pre-service or on-the-job training needed for corrections/detention work was ranked the lowest or next to lowest, that is, the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> rank, by 40% of the respondents.

**Pre-service Training or OJT**

Rank	Percentage of Respondents per Rank for Corrections/Detention						
	1 <sup>st</sup>	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6 <sup>th</sup>	No response
Corrections/ Detention	8	20	16	12	20	20	4

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## Perceptions about the Status of Corrections/Detention Work (Continued from page 7)

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The final question, concerning the ability to make a difference for the good of society revealed that 44% of the respondents believed that corrections/detention work was either the lowest or the next to lowest of the types of law enforcement careers listed that made a difference (5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> rank).

**Make a Difference**

Percentage of Respondents per Rank for Corrections/Detention

Rank	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6 <sup>th</sup>	No response
Corrections/ Detention	8	8	28	8	24	20	4

The survey respondents were also asked to indicate whether a college degree was needed for the six types of law enforcement career, and if so, what type of college degree. When asked if corrections/detention work required a college degree 24% indicated that no degree was needed, 52% identified the need for an associate degree, and 24% identified the need for a bachelor's degree. When comparing these answers with the other law enforcement careers, only 16% respondents did not believe a degree was needed for police work, and all respondents believed that at least a two-year degree was needed for probation/parole work.

## Percentage of Responses

**College Degree Needed**

	No degree needed (%)	Associate (%)	Bachelor's (%)	Master's (%)	Doctorate (%)
Police	16	24	60	0	0
Corrections/Detention	24	52	24	0	0
Probation/Parole	0	20	72	8	0
Court Services	24	32	40	4	0
Victim Services	12	16	56	16	0
Investigative/Security/ Intelligence	8	20	64	8	0

In an effort to further explore the perception of college/university professors' views of corrections work, interviews were conducted with 24 former correctional staff from this same western state. These participants revealed that they were not encouraged to work in corrections by their college professors or that corrections work as a career was never discussed in college. A former corrections officer that earned a bachelor's degree said that he remembers being told by a professor that corrections work was ok, only if he couldn't find any other job. He stated that he was told that, "it is a good way to pay the bills until something better becomes available." Similarly, a former Warden reminisced about feedback he got from college professors. "I told one of my professors that I was going to work for the prison. He said, 'Don't do it; you will become just like them.'"

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Even though the sample of college criminal justice professors that was surveyed was very small, the responses provided by them and the former correctional employees suggest that the perception of corrections work by professors in this western state is not positive. This is significant in light of the expectation that the public would value the work of corrections if they knew more about what it involved. The group of professors surveyed should, arguably, be very knowledgeable about what corrections/detention work entails. However, they still ranked the profession very low in all four areas surveyed: prestige, salary, pre-service training, and the ability to make a difference for the good of society.

Perhaps it is overly optimistic to hope and expect that educating the public about the corrections profession will make them understand and value this public service. The corrections profession may be better served by focusing on increasing the skills, abilities and professionalism of the staff. Working to increase the minimum qualifications for those that enter this profession has met in the past with considerable opposition. In fact, the lack of qualified applicants has led some corrections organizations to remove requirements for college education or even applicable experience. Therefore, the profession should focus on educational opportunities within the agency or programs that offer financial support for pursuing education once the employees are hired. Increasing the formal education of corrections professionals may not lead to an overall public acceptance of the value of corrections work, but it may improve the support from other law enforcement professionals and professors in higher education institutions.

Additionally, corrections employees themselves must recognize the fundamental value of their work, regardless of public opinion. One former correctional employee summed it up in this fashion: "There isn't any status involved in being a corrections officer and never has been. You see on the hierarchy of law enforcement that it's pretty much the bottom, but I was not there for the status. I was there because I knew what I was doing mattered." This type of commitment to the work, because the work is important to public safety, is pivotal to the continued dedication of corrections employees throughout the profession.

Public recognition and respect of the corrections profession may not occur any time soon to the degree desired by corrections professionals. Therefore, it is incumbent upon all professionals who have chosen to dedicate their lives to corrections and detention work to support each other and ensure that our fellow correctional professionals are reminded on a regular basis that what they do matters.

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## It's a Shame By the Old Screw

It is a shame that after all these years, and the public knowing almost everything these days (thanks to the Internet), that people still don't understand corrections and the danger and stress on the staff and their families. In corrections there is no "I don't feel like doing that job." You are an officer and you say, "Yes, sir" or "Yes, ma'am," and you do it. Somehow you make it happen. And like any law enforcement job, you never know if you will finish your shift alive and in one piece.

Inmates that it took many law enforcement officers to capture are now in your face, and you have a pen and paper to control them. There's anger and frustration that you are supposed to control. (It really helps when the inmates know that the administration will back their officers.)

There is nothing that compares with the pride that's in my heart for correctional officers. Yes, there are sometimes bad eggs, but there are always bad eggs in all areas of life.

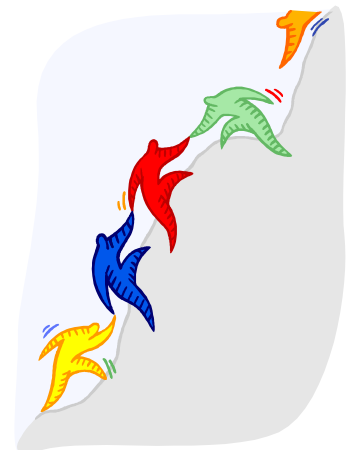
You have never lived until you hear a call for back up and see officers of all ages, races, male and female, responding. Some of the female officers are not very big, but they are not backing down a bit. Fellow staff need back up, that's all they have to know. I've said, time and time again, it's not how big you are on the outside, but how big you are on the inside.

Over and over the job affects your family and friends. It's hard to leave work and leave everything that happens behind. You hate what you sometimes become and your distrust of people. In spite of it all, it is amazing to watch the people that turn out to be outstanding officers and staff.

Maybe someday the public will understand the dedicated people officers are and the dangerous job they do that no one else wants to do.

Take care,

*The Old Screw*



# Desert Waters Correctional Outreach



*a non-profit organization  
for the well-being of correctional  
staff and their families*

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## Quote Of The Month

"I speak to everyone in the same way, whether he is the garbage man or the president of the university."

~ Albert Einstein

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To increase the occupational,  
personal and family well-being of staff of all  
disciplines within the corrections profession.