



2024 BJA'S IMPROVING INSTITUTIONAL CORRECTIONS TRAINING ACADEMY SPOTLIGHT



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After doing an efficiency review, the Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation and Reentry (ADCRR) realized its hiring process was taking too long, leading to losing applicants during the hiring process. Using a huge team of people from different agency areas, they worked to remove barriers and backlogs in the hiring process. In this process, they were able to remove unnecessary parts of the process, such as changing reference checks to letters of recommendation. This has helped the hiring process be more efficient and thorough.

Another element the academy employed to help with high turnover rates is the addition of career advisors. The goal of advisors is to introduce themselves to those in the academy and present a class on career success. Staff are contacted by their advisors every few months throughout the year to show them what is available to develop their careers. Staff need to see consistent messages from the agency and ongoing efforts. What can make or break this process is hiring the right people for advisor roles. It is important to be deliberate in who they hire for career advisors to staff.

ADCRR's training vision is at the forefront of what they do and has solidified the impact on the agency. The Correctional Officer Training Academy (COTA) is excellent for new hires, but its training vision is much more than that. While embracing some discomfort, ADCRR is on track to determine how to employ professional development in a "correctional" way and is always looking to improve its curriculums and delivery methods. Partnering with external partners has allowed staff to be sent to different locations for training, and all these changes have added more value to staff training(s).

Upon graduation from the training academy, ADCRR hosts graduation ceremonies. This intent was to invite families and loved ones to celebrate the COs' success, which comes at a time with a high state of morale. Professional development opportunities has also implemented by ADCRR to equip leaders with the basic skills to supervise and lead people. This basic leadership academy grew from the need to promote COs into leadership roles, but they are not yet equipped to supervise people. This has been shown to re-energize staff and increase their motivation for the job.

Following extensive feedback from the field, the agency noticed that it took new graduates a lot of time to learn where to get equipment, how to get it, and where to return it. ADCRR adopted a turn-it-in policy for its equipment. Staff check out equipment and turn it in before they leave the facility after their shift.

Currently, ADCRR is recruiting more people than it is losing people. When looking into changing their hiring process and making it more efficient, the agency has looked at what other agencies were doing to speed up their hiring process.

Despite making the hiring process speedier, ADCRR noticed retention rates for the agencies they looked at dropped. They may get many people in the door, but something happens, and staff leave. Often, people look at a one-size-fits-all approach. With this in mind, ADCRR decided to help its retention rate with a new hiring process that is efficient and thorough. This has helped get the right people in the door and weed out those who will leave the job soon after starting.

ADCRR relied heavily on its data to determine the effectiveness of these practices. Using data at every level, every course has an evaluation for students and instructors, so courses are reviewed constantly. Data is the best way for ADCRR to make the most informed decisions, so data collection ranges from training evaluation data to longevity tenure data to data to back up hiring decisions.

The time that it took to implement these practices varied. Graduation ceremonies took approximately two months of planning to implement. The development of the basic leadership academy was a two-year process. The planning process and implementation for including career advisors has been long, though. First, they had to get enough excitement from the agency to move forward with establishing these positions, and then they had to find the right people.

ADCRR has received positive feedback, especially in regard to having career advisors for staff and the basic leadership academy. Career advisors have saved the department from losing people because staff problems can be solved by going to their career advisor. The basic leadership academy has been regarded by some staff as the best class they have ever taken.

Despite this feedback, the biggest challenge has been the sustainability of its practices. You want to find the best ideas that are built for sustainability. ADCRR's overall advice for anyone needing to make modifications to training practices is to focus on sustainability. You need to determine your agency's needs and be willing to take risks. Also, keep looking at the data and reassess, and always be open to changes. You have to start somewhere, so push through and make the leap, take risks, and adjust along the way!

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