



2024 BJA'S IMPROVING INSTITUTIONAL CORRECTIONS TRAINING ACADEMY SPOTLIGHT



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Maine's Criminal Justice Academy (MCJA) is administered by an external agency, the Department of Public Safety. Prior training practices were fairly outdated and driven by an entity that doesn't value corrections, so there was no correctional lens when these trainings were initially developed. Laura Rodas, the Director of Education, Staff Development, and Training, sought to change these trainings to better fit the corrections environment.

Wanting the curriculum to be designed more with a collaborative effort in mind, MCJA sought help from their local sheriffs. This allows sheriffs to share their input while relieving the burden on one agency. Maine is keenly aware that how you talk and interact with people has a huge impact on your ability to be effective in your space, so they built a 16-hour training module that is new to the academy and interactive. In this module, common scenarios that staff may encounter on the job are shown, and staff are given hands-on and experiential training. These scenarios came from incidents that are common in the correctional setting, and more were based on incidents caught on security footage. Communication is emphasized throughout all modules, and these changes have provided higher-quality instruction and a better curriculum. Completing the correctional officer training requires residing on the training campus for five weeks of instruction.

Like many agencies, Maine has struggled with employee recruitment and retention for several reasons. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these struggles. Maine wanted to develop a better understanding of cultural awareness to tackle some of these struggles. For example, Muslim women may want to work for the DOC, but due to cultural differences, the five-week on-site training could prevent these women from applying. Without awareness of cultural differences, Maine was restricting who they were hiring, but being more mindful and accommodating of cultural diversity opens the door for more diverse new hires. Currently, Maine's DOC is well-staffed for the most part.

Maine has also adopted the Maine Model of Corrections. The Maine Model of Corrections has four pillars: normalization, humanization, incentivizing, and reducing stigma. Normalization provides more realistic settings and wants potential staff and staff to have practice for the job. Humanization is rooted in treating people with respect. This respect is not just for residents but also staff. Reducing stigma for residents and staff is important for basic human dignity and respect, which are the foundation of reducing stigma. Staff are also given incentives and opportunities from the department. Maine believes that corrections does not have to be a terrible workplace, nor does it have to be a career that tears you down. Since employing these measures, facilities are safer with fewer assaults on staff.

Maine's greatest challenge when implementing these changes is challenging the agency's culture. By changing your culture, there can be more opportunities for change. Another challenge is that Maine has struggled to have enough leadership development available. Technology has been a useful tool in these challenges as it has enabled the training academy to keep training people. This has pushed people to think differently, which goes back to the normalization pillar.

Implementing changes in their practices is ongoing, but Maine suggests being willing to experiment and recognize when and if you got it wrong. They also ensure equity and accessibility lenses at the forefront. Maine is looking to develop a better way to evaluate the effectiveness of their practices as they continue working on the development of their training curriculums. By advancing their evaluation assessments, Maine will be able to gather more detailed data and further develop their practices based on the data from their agency.

This project was supported by Grant No. 2019-RY-BX-K002, awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Office for Victims of Crime, and the SMART Office. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.