



2024 BJA'S IMPROVING INSTITUTIONAL CORRECTIONS TRAINING ACADEMY SPOTLIGHT



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Before joining the criminal justice field, Lieutenant Colonel David Yebra served in the United States Army for 23 years before retiring in 2013. Mr. Yebra joined the department in 2018 and currently serves as the Training and Leadership Development Division Director at the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ).

Since Mr. Yebra started his role, multiple changes have been implemented to help with staff recruitment, staff wellness, and learning management. Physical agility testing has become more of a collaborative effort than a static standard.

TDCJ took an in-depth look at its physical agility testing when developing a plan for making such changes. They felt that the correctional officer's physical agility assessment did not match up with the correctional environment to assess the officers, so they looked to other agencies to see what they were doing. With limited resources, they decided to review their surveillance videos of instances where COs had to defend themselves from a violent physical altercation, and they adapted these instances as scenarios for training. In this case, COs are given real-life examples of violent situations where they may need to fight for their life. Training provides the tools and resources to COs for them to know what to do when confronted with a violent physical altercation.

Also, to ensure staff health, TDCJ developed an employee wellness program that includes preventative exams, on-site health assessments, wellness exams, virtual checkups, online health assessments, and more! The staff's health is monitored using on-site observations and reports from wellness exams. TDCJ strives to be the number one place to work in their state, so it's important for their staff to know that they will be taken care of.

TDCJ has also partnered with Sam Houston State University and other colleges throughout the state, where COs are granted credit hours for some of the courses they have completed. This partnership with Sam Houston State University granted access to some university resources that allowed for better production of online content, which has helped with marketing. Implementing the Mobile Crisis Outreach Team (MCOT) has also allowed some staff to work in multiple units. The MCOTs assist those who are at risk of harming themselves or others. Some of the services MCOTs provide are emergency care, urgent care, crisis follow-up, and relapse prevention for children, youth, or adults in the community. A benefit of being on the MCOT is that if you stay on the team for a year, you can choose the unit you would like to be assigned to, which incentivizes officers.

Like many other facilities, lack of resources has been a challenge as well as the idea of change. Changes, in general, are not easy, but neither is challenging an agency's culture, especially for an agency that is culturally rich in tradition.

In making these changes, Texas developed a three-to-six-month plan for implementing these new practices. However, employee recruitment and retention are developing practices. “Staffing is always a challenge, so never take your eye off it,” says Yebra. When Mr. Yebra first started serving TDCJ, they were losing more staff than they were hiring, but now job vacancies have gone from 8,000 to 6,000. Leadership in Texas is grateful for these changes and continues to support change.

If you want to modify your training program, Mr. Yebra’s advice is to figure out what your end goal is and its purpose. Then, communicate that purpose over and over again! If the purpose of modifying your training program doesn’t align with what you need, you will not achieve the success you are looking for. He said that you have to know the “why” to figure out the “how.” The changes TDCJ has made to its practices are rooted in the desire for its staff and families to live longer and healthier lives.

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