



2024 BJA'S IMPROVING INSTITUTIONAL CORRECTIONS TRAINING ACADEMY SPOTLIGHT



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New employee training for Washington's DOC has continuously evolved for the last two decades. In the early 2000s, the department merged the training division into one that oversees all of the department's training. The ability to hire used to be based on someone's immediate availability, so onboarding would occur on Thursday if someone was on a Monday. Many of Washington's staff are unemployed, so a good chunk of prospective employees is lost because they need a job immediately. To resolve this, they allowed prospective staff to come on the job and shadow COs before training. This has been beneficial because it provides context to the job for the training, reduces the complexity of the training, and benefits their hiring technique.

There are various renditions of field officer training programs. Field training is important because it bolsters the initial training and provides officers with on-the-job training. Employing the use of spiral notebooks, Washington's on-the-job training for new correctional officers is sergeant-led and task-specific. There are numerous tasks that COs are expected to be familiar with and proficient in, and using notebooks allows for focusing on different job techniques in different phases. There are four check-ins where tasks start simpler and get harder and more complex. During these check-ins, progress is reviewed in the notebook, challenges and hurdles are discussed, and evaluations occur. The purpose of this field training is to give new COs a roadmap of what they should be working on for their role.

Looking to improve operations for a safe and humane environment, Washington has focused on implementing Norway's correctional system model AMEND, also used in California. AMEND is a public health and human rights approach for prisons and is implemented to continue with pro-social improvements to the department. AMEND aims to improve the health of people working and living in US prisons by transforming correctional culture. This is a health-focused approach that emphasizes the wellness of staff and helps those incarcerated prepare to return to the general population and return to society as a better individual. AMEND is an initiative that demands a major culture change. Challenging culture is not always easy, but Washington's DOC is committed to keeping up with the culture of change.

Although implementing tremendously promising practices, Washington DOC has faced recruitment and retention issues like many other correctional agencies across the country. Work-life balance is a recurring issue, so finding the right people for the environment is paramount but challenging. Like many others, the COVID-19 pandemic also played a huge role in the delay in implementing these practices and was the most stressful challenge. The demand to work from home has also grown exponentially, so the desire for people to work on-site in shift work is lower now than before COVID.

The implementation of job shadowing has shown to be very effective if, within reason and on-the-job training in the form of notebooks, it provides new staff with an environment where they feel welcome and supported. These notebooks have been received well by longer-term staff, who see more benefits in this method than other booklets they have used. Washington DOC suggests not to be concerned with perfection because it stands in the way of progress. It is hard to find a perfect solution to anything that scares people to make choices and decisions. If you are going to make changes, you must put some measures around it and move forward to see if the practices work. However, be willing to admit when things aren't working and adjust as needed.

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