

Training staff to work with special needs offenders

Correctional programs, services and supervision must be designed or modified to fit the diverse needs of special needs offenders. Staff will need to be knowledgeable, sensitive, creative and flexible in finding new ways to manage special needs offenders.

In many cases, this means correctional professionals trained and educated to handle the general population of inmates will be forced to assume new responsibilities.

An examination of a training program recently conducted by the South Carolina Department of Corrections demonstrates how an agency can prepare staff to work with special needs offenders. In this case, the training focused on working with older offenders and offenders with significant physical disabilities. Program planning An evaluation conducted by the health services staff of the South Carolina Department of Corrections identified a need to train staff to better manage special needs offenders. The central office designed a training program after consulting institutional administrators, program specialists, community service providers and representatives from advocacy groups.

To ensure the training was tailored to each institution's specific needs, the trainers then met with the warden and key staff from each of three correctional institutions that would be offering the training to their staff. The existing training program was then modified to meet their needs (see the table).

Table 1

Staff Training Program Basics
The training workshops were tailored to fit each institution's particular needs. Specific examples used in exercises were therefore based on actual problems encountered by special needs inmates in the institutions.
The warden and other upper-level administration and support staff participated in the training. The chief medical, security, food services, industries, classification and social work officers, as well as all staff members involved in managing special needs offenders, were encouraged to attend
The wardens decided on the training location (two wardens chose to hold the workshop at the institution and one chose a correctional training academy).
Thirty to thirty five staff from each institution participated in the five-hour workshop and the recommendations arising out of the session were recorded. Staff will now use this report to improve the management of the special needs population in their institution.

Warm-up exercise The training workshop begins with a warm-up exercise. Following a review of the workshop objectives, participants are paired up and spend a few minutes talking with their partners about

some skill or experience they have that is relevant to the management of special needs offenders. Participants then introduce their partners to the group. Pairs should be chosen beforehand to guarantee that everyone has a partner with a different job.

This warm-up exercise has several benefits. First, even though staff work in the same facility, they sometimes do not know each other well. This exercise helps to break the ice. Second, it allows staff to identify previously unrecognized skills they acquired from former jobs, family experiences and elsewhere - skills that might help them manage special needs offenders. Inmate comparison Participants are then asked to describe characteristics of a typical inmate, an older inmate, and an inmate with a disability. As characteristics are suggested, they are placed in three separate groups (typical, older, inmate with a disability) and are discussed. When the three lists are complete, the trainers then compare characteristics across the different groups.

During the discussion, participants explore myths and commonly held stereotypes about special needs offenders. For example, participants almost always see older people as frail, dependent and inflexible. The trainers then ask the group to think about older people they know, such as parents, grandparents and friends, and about how they function. This helps participants to understand the range of differences among older people and among those with disabilities.

As well, this discussion provides an opportunity to begin addressing two of the major problems faced by staff in working with special needs offenders.

First, staff often have personal misgivings about growing older or having a disability. Many participants have fears and prejudices about these conditions and need to resolve their own feelings before they can work effectively with special needs offenders.

Second, with limited resources available in many communities, staff with family members or friends who cannot get badly needed services sometimes resent either offenders receiving these services or offenders receiving higher quality services than offered outside the institution.

The trainers simply emphasize that while these feelings are natural and normal, correctional staff are responsible for caring for people under their jurisdiction, not for people in the community. Policy explanation Next, a senior correctional official goes over the legal mandates for service provision and the agency's policies and practices relevant to special needs offenders.

In South Carolina, most older and disabled inmates are "mainstreamed" into the general population. Inmates with two or more conditions impairing their functioning are placed in a special needs unit. Medical staff are responsible for making this assessment.

Following this review, representatives from various state agencies explain their roles in working with both the correctional agency and offenders and then answer participants' questions. Sensory-deprivation exercise The sensory-deprivation exercise is the longest part of the workshop and the key component in sensitizing participants to some of the problems faced by special needs offenders.

First, participants are given latex gloves and then asked to do simple tasks such as light a match, pick up

a penny or tie their shoelaces.

Participants are then paired with their previous partner and given walkers, wheelchairs, crutches, arm slings, blindfolds, and fogged or scratched glasses. After everyone has at least one simulated disability, they receive cotton balls to place in their ears to simulate hearing loss.

The pairs are then sent to eat lunch while maintaining their disability. (Additional sensory deprivation, including loss of the senses of taste and smell, can be simulated at lunch by grinding or pureeing bland food and using nose plugs).

After lunch, each pair is assigned a common institutional task to complete, such as being sent to the infirmary to bring back a signed "sick-slip." By previous arrangement, the groups encounter difficulties - the infirmary closes as they reach the window, or the person needed to sign the form is busy or away from the institution.

Once the first set of tasks is complete, the pair exchange their simulated disabilities. Those who pushed wheelchairs now ride in them; those who were blindfolded now lead their blindfolded partner. The teams then complete another set of assignments.

After the exercise, participants are asked to describe their feelings and observations. Feelings of anger, frustration, fear and fatigue are common. Many recognize barriers they had been previously unaware of and comment on the time and planning it took to complete a simple task. Long distances between buildings, a lack of comfortable places to rest, weather conditions, and questions about who to trust suddenly become important. Participants tend to express appreciation for the helpful people they encountered and amazement at the callous, insensitive nature of others.

During this discussion, the trainers suggest strategies for addressing some of the problems the participants encountered and talk about the appropriate etiquette for helping people with special needs. They also demonstrate the proper ways of talking to inmates who are hard of hearing or are wheelchair users, of helping inmates with vision problems, of securing wheelchair users in vans for safe transportation, and other strategies for working with special needs offenders. Specific issue session The final exercise is designed to allow participants to identify issues or problems in working with special needs offenders in **their** facilities and to begin forming strategies for managing these offenders more effectively.

Participants are divided into small groups of six or seven and are asked to list problems they experienced during the sensory-deprivation exercise. Each group then presents its list, and there is open-ended discussion of potential solutions. Most of the problems identified can generally be resolved without investing additional resources; they simply require increased communication, sensitivity and flexibility.

This part of the workshop is recorded. A report is prepared for distribution to the participants, to be used as a guide for future staff management of their institution's special needs offenders. Wardens are also encouraged to resolve the problems and issues identified during the workshop. Wrap-up and evaluation In a brief wrap-up, trainers review the workshop objectives, summarize the day's activities and answer

questions. Participants and trainers then talk over unresolved issues. Finally, everyone completes a detailed evaluation of the training program and makes suggestions for future sessions.

The program is generally well received. It is designed to build on existing knowledge and skills and to increase sensitivity to the needs of older inmates and those with disabilities. The discussions before, during and after this training indicate that to manage these offenders effectively, institutions need to modify both physical structures and the routine practices and procedures used within the institution.

Adapted from I. Morton, "Training Staff to Work with Elderly and Disabled Inmates," *Corrections Today*, 55, 1 (1993): 42-47.