



2024 BJA'S IMPROVING INSTITUTIONAL CORRECTIONS TRAINING ACADEMY SPOTLIGHT



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Staff Development:
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As a training instructor for most of her career, Ashley McCarthy started serving her role as the Director of the Connecticut Department of Correction's (DOC) Training Academy in 2021. Every individual who comes through the DOC goes through the training academy. The academy conducts various trainings, including centralized training, specific training, and facility training. Having been an instructor her whole career, she saw firsthand what worked and didn't in the training environment. With the support of her commissioner, she went right to work in 2021 to implement some changes to the academy.

Training for the DOC in Connecticut is run by The Maloney Center for Training and Staff Development, so when Ms. McCarthy started her role, she wanted to ensure that the DOC was getting training that fit their responsibilities. The correctional officer physical agility test (COPAT) was changed in several ways. Considering the daily tasks of COs, the COPAT was changed to include more relevant activities that align with the skills needed in the agency. For example, they implemented carrying a practice dummy into the training to ensure someone can carry a person's natural weight. If you pass the COPAT, you can secure an interview date. This adds more credibility to the training, improving staff wellness, and giving them a sense of pride in their line of work.

DOC values people's understanding of the job and its duties before starting. To assist with this goal, videos that provide insight into the job are shared online, and a family night was incorporated into the training curriculum. The whole idea of family night is to help loved ones of COs better understand what they are signing up for with this job.

Another unique component that Connecticut has included in the DOC training is the involvement of previously incarcerated individuals. Using former inmates is a way to demonstrate success in their reentry. The goal of including previously incarcerated individuals is to weave human dignity into all aspects of the job.

Once on the job, accreditation is available through the academy! COs can receive a maximum of 12 credit hours toward a degree. To do this, a partnership with colleges was developed. Another change the training academy made for COs once on the job was the implementation of monthly drills. Every lieutenant has the obligation to conduct a monthly drill based on the facility's need for that month. These drills are above and beyond the initial training hours, and a liaison at each facility ensures the drills are completed on a monthly basis.

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Staff with DOC love the monthly drills and hands-on training. At the end of the day, staff know that if something crazy happens, they will be okay because they have been trained properly to do their job duties. Formalizing this process has given the staff a sense of autonomy and it has helped alleviate imposter syndrome.

Ms. McCarthy's biggest piece of advice is to give your staff pride and a sense of autonomy. You need to include people in what's going on to improve communication; otherwise, there is an absence of facts, and this is when things start to get made up. Providing clarity and transparency for staff is important, and it allows staff to ask questions. She believes there must be credibility in everything you are doing.

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.