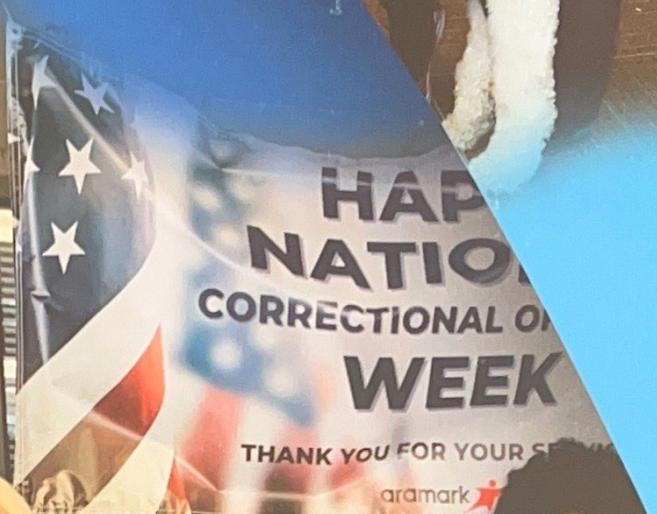


AMERICAN

jails

THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN JAIL ASSOCIATION
September | October 2023



Honoring Correctional Staff

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OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH & SAFETY:

Implementing Corporate Programs in Correctional Institutions

LETITIA HESHMAT & JIM ALEXANDER

Working in a prison environment is a challenging job with its own set of stressors and safety concerns. Despite the difficulties, steps can be taken to minimize the risk of job-related injuries for corrections officers. By implementing an effective plan and enforcing basic protocols, the likelihood of harm to staff can be reduced.



Like many industries, one of the biggest challenges facing corrections is recruiting, which has increased staff shortages nationwide. This strain can negatively impact employee health and wellness, given the increased demands of a shorthanded workforce, which can often be required to work overtime. When corporations are

faced with this dilemma, they often add new protocols that can help with recruitment and retention by focusing on employee health.

Several employee health solutions can help corrections officers remain in the best physical condition possible. These programs currently operate within many types of corporate environments

and state-run correctional facilities and have proven to benefit both the employer and employees. Let's examine a few of the top occupational health industry trends that are positively impacting institutional operations:

Onsite Clinics

Implementing onsite health clinics can effectively provide real-time, immediate care for staff as injuries occur and urgent medical situations arise. Programs like a "Minute Clinic" can reduce employee downtime and help with budgeting, as having an internal "one-stop shop" can increase efficiencies and lower healthcare costs. Other options for corrections staff health, like mobile clinics and telemedicine services, have been proven to save time and increase productivity. These can lead to fewer emergency room visits, better adherence to preventive health advice, and reduced absenteeism, which, in turn, can help to reduce costs and workers' compensation claims. The American Hospital Association (AHA) even cites statistics showing telemedicine can reduce the need for follow-up visits, which translates into significant healthcare savings.

These programs are designed to put the safety and health of an employee first and foremost and can promote loyalty and invoke a sense of employer care in the workplace.

Injury Prevention

The Liberty Mutual Workplace Safety Index 2020 reports that severe and nonfatal workplace

injuries cost U.S. businesses more than \$1 billion every week. With that in mind, the strategy of providing proactive care is a much more cost-effective method for practicing early intervention. While there is no way to completely prevent workplace injuries from occurring, particularly in physically demanding or potentially dangerous professions, there are steps to take to help create a safer environment. Injury Prevention Specialists are experts at looking at the way tasks are performed and determining the potential harm. Fixing these issues could be as simple as changing how someone grabs inventory off a shelf or demonstrating how to sit or walk for long periods properly. Strengthening programs, implementing stretching programs, as well as implementing an ergonomic program can not only help the officers in being fit for duty but can also effect their level of engagement at work, lost work days and overall workplace morale.

These programs are called preventative injury programs and ergonomics. Defined as the science of customizing a workplace to the user's needs, ergonomics aims to increase efficiency and productivity while reducing discomfort. And while it can take time to analyze the routines of multiple employees, Injury Prevention Specialists are experts at identifying potentially hazardous work routines and have been shown to mitigate injury through hands-on intervention by up to 95% and lower recordable injuries by up to 30%.

Employee Wellness Programs

Developing a program with wellness benefits that aren't just OSHA mandated but promote healthy habits can be one of the most valuable benefits for employees and could lead to an increase in job interest by potential new hires.

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Rather than just implementing a standard employee wellness program, a customized program can cater to the needs of the corrections industry and include what corrections officers find most valuable. Wellness programs can consist of services such as: primary care, physicals, lab tests, and prescriptions; health screenings; chiropractic care; health coaching for stress reduction, weight loss, and smoking cessation; fitness and exercise; nutrition education; vaccination clinics; and many other benefits.

The Budget May Already Be Available

We all understand that budgets for prisons and their employees are not infinite. Sometimes adding more protocols can be costly, but with many budgets today, there is a line item that can be used for the betterment of the workforce—the COVID line item. Protocols for COVID have peaked and now appear on a downward trajectory, leaving the budget item ripe for

reallocation. And no one wants to lose a line item, as you may never get that money back.

So, the question most should be asking is—What is the best use of that money now? Keeping it for the safety and health of employees should still be the number one priority, as a qualified workforce will always be less expensive in the long run than the cost to implement preventative measures to make and keep them that way. One study estimates that for every dollar spent on safety protocols in the workplace, injury prevention returns can range anywhere from \$2 to \$6. This is important to understand and should inform decisions when determining how to ensure your corrections team is kept in the best shape possible.

An environment that promotes safety and health is integral to the success of jail operations. There is real value in ensuring your employees understand and have access to the necessary benefits that can help prevent severe injury and sickness. ■

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