



Restrictive Housing: Attracting Your Best Staff Where They Are Needed Most

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“I felt it was important to find a way to incentivize our restrictive housing staff. We are asking them to help change the behavior of our most difficult group of offenders, improve facility safety and ultimately public safety...That is a tall order and we want staff to know how much we value their efforts.”

— CABINET SECRETARY DENNY KAEMINGK

There is little question that restrictive housing units are the most challenging areas within correctional facilities. Corrections officers in these units often work in understaffed conditions and regularly experience physical danger trying to control aberrant and reactionary behaviors without sufficient training in how to prevent them in the first place. It stands to reason that having the right staff in these settings is of the utmost importance. Prison wardens and jail administrators face challenges in attracting the right staff to work in the complex setting of restrictive housing and address the behaviors that occur. How can we attract staff that have the skills, attitude, demeanor, professionalism, motivation and experience to work with this challenging set of offenders?

ONE STATE’S SOLUTION: SOUTH DAKOTA DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS STAFF INCENTIVE AND SELECTION PROCESS

In late 2013, South Dakota Department of Corrections (SD DOC), with technical assistance from Crime and Justice Institute (CJI) at Community Resources for Justice (CRJ), funded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), embarked on a wholesale effort to change how it administers administrative segregation, or restrictive housing. Given the staff capabilities that would be needed to implement this new way of doing business, South Dakota Department of Corrections and State Penitentiary leadership determined that it had to find a way to attract motivated and talented supervisors and officers to the restrictive housing units.

To transform the way restrictive housing is administered, department leaders understood that it was in their best interest to identify staff who could best meet the unique needs of that environment. To ensure the right staff would be posted in those units and, furthermore, that staff would want to stay with the new restrictive housing program, the department decided that it would no longer rely solely on seniority and instead instituted an incentive system and rigorous staff selection process.

STAFF INCENTIVE SYSTEM

The key to attracting talented staff to restrictive housing was incentivizing them. SD DOC sought meaningful incentives that would not only attract staff but retain them. Toward this end, four incentives were instituted (see below for more detail):

- Pay differential for restrictive housing staff;
- Unique work schedule;
- Permanent team structure; and
- Specialized training.

SOUTH DAKOTA DOC STAFF INCENTIVE SYSTEM

Pay Differential. Each restrictive housing officer receives \$1 more per hour than officers who work in other housing units.

Unique Work Schedule. Staff in restrictive housing units are on a 2-week rotating schedule (44 hours in week 1 and 36 hours in week 2), resulting in working no more than 3 days in a row and having every other Friday, Saturday and Sunday off. Other penitentiary staff work 10-week rotating cycles that periodically result in 9 consecutive workdays.

Team Concept. The schedule described above means that there are two squads who work together consistently. The old schedule led to different people working together nearly every day. The restrictive housing schedule has resulted in increased efficiency because everyone knows their roles and tasks. Overwhelmingly, officers see the opportunity to work in teams as the biggest benefit.

Specialized Training. All restrictive housing officers receive three days of training with their respective teams on:

- Restrictive housing operational procedures and behavior management within the level system
- Skills to work with mentally ill inmates
- In-depth de-escalation techniques
- Cognitive-behavioral and other programming in restrictive housing

Upcoming in-service trainings will include Mental Health First Aid to help respond to crises in the mental health units and Dialectical Behavioral Therapy skills to motivate offenders and reinforce what they learn in the program.

STAFF SELECTION

To select staff, the department posted job openings for restrictive housing Sergeant, Corporal and Correctional Officer posts. As Restrictive Housing Unit Manager Jessica Cook explains, “We were not looking for individuals with specific skills. Skills can be taught. We were looking for staff with certain qualities and characteristics. Are they motivated and proactive in their duties at work? Can they communicate effectively with inmates and others and is their attendance good? Have they demonstrated a willingness to take direction? Do they have a positive attitude and do they work well with others?” To answer these questions, the department established a three-part staff selection process.

1. Staff apply for open positions and participate in a panel interview process.
2. A list of all applicants is distributed to supervisory staff within the State Penitentiary, who select individuals from the list whom they would recommend for the restrictive housing program and their rationale for each selection.
3. Sick leave usage over the prior 12 months is reviewed and considered as a factor in selection on a case-by-case basis¹.

BENEFITS

Every jurisdiction takes different approaches to staffing its facilities and each faces challenges to safe and appropriate assignment of employees including funding, political issues, constraints due to union contracts, or facility cultures that at times can seem intractable. Even with all the challenges, each department has leadership and staff with the ability to develop creative, facility-specific solutions to this important problem. South Dakota’s path was not easy, but the Department of Corrections has seen many benefits:

1. Increased interest in working in restrictive housing (e.g., 39 correctional officers applied for the initial 18 open positions);
2. Improved morale because staff have been chosen through a competitive process, and have themselves chosen to work with inmates in restrictive housing rather than being required to rotate through;
3. A highly motivated and talented set of individuals to implement the department’s new approach to restrictive housing;
4. A more consistent environment for inmates, fewer behavioral issues, cleaner housing units, and better inmate attitudes and communication;
5. Increased efficiency in the restrictive housing areas;
6. Improved officer adherence to daily procedures and rules; and
7. Increased staff awareness of how to work best with each inmate to meet individual goals and increased ability for staff to meet the department’s facility safety and public safety goals.

¹ Sick leave usage is not used to reject any applicant.

Corrections departments across the country are leading the right-sizing of restrictive housing through significant reforms to reserve this type of housing for offenders who exhibit violent and dangerous behavior. Staff working in these housing environments are not only being asked to contain and control this type of behavior but to help correct it. SD DOC found a way to select the best staff for the job and recognize them for the challenges they face daily. And, the result has been what SD DOC Director of Prisons Bob Dooley describes as “a whole new level of job satisfaction, productivity and efficiency” and work conditions that led an officer to say “makes it fun to come to work every day.”

This project was supported by Grant No. 2013-DP-BX-K011 awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the 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 Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking. 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.

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Photos courtesy of Michael Winder, SD DOC Communications & Information Manager.



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