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The Department of Corrections (DOC) staff counselor program began with one prison, the Washington State Penitentiary, hiring a contract counselor to work on-site, full-time providing counseling and crisis intervention for its employees. In 2001, the staff counselor program was adopted as a regularly funded, statewide program with a counselor for each of the five regions and later one more for the Olympic Peninsula.

What makes the DOC staff counselor employee assistance program different is the counselors' intimate knowledge of and sole focus on the correctional environment with its unique pressures and situations. The staff counselors regularly spend time walking through the institutions and visiting community corrections field offices. During these visits, the staff counselors make themselves available to employees and supervisors for ad hoc consultations, making contact with employees who might never consider making an appointment to see the staff counselors at their offices.

In addition to short-term counseling, the staff counselors provide organizational and employee relations support through services such as mediation and teambuilding workshops and interventions. One of their most critical services is their role as the managers of the nationally certified Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) program. The staff counselors train and lead teams of volunteer employee interveners who report immediately to institutions and offices upon notification of critical incidents such as deaths, assaults, serious threats, etc. Even employees who do not feel they need the CISM teams' services express appreciation for the care and concern shown them by the teams. The staff counselor program has been established as a "safe" place for staff to talk and learn better ways to cope with working in the corrections environment. Certainly, this supports the Department's mission to retain qualified staff.

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1. There are six staff counselor positions located throughout Washington State. They are co-located with and share a support staff member with the Occupational Nurse Consultants at the regional Staff Resource Centers. The staff counselors are licensed mental health counselors or psychologists. They provide confidential, short-term mental health or relationship counseling and consultation for DOC employees and management. These services are provided on work time and are free for employees. Additional services include specialized staff development such as supervisory training and teambuilding workshops and interventions; crisis intervention and response, including the management of the Critical Incident Stress Management teams; and mediation between co-workers or co-workers and supervisors.

2. The program began with a contract staff counselor at the Washington State Penitentiary in or around 1994. In March 1998, the contract incumbent moved into a fully funded, civil service FTE staff counselor position. In early 2001, the agency decided to create four additional positions to provide staff counselor services throughout the state. A sixth position was subsequently added to provide services for the institutions and offices on the Olympic Peninsula. The program came under the supervision of Human Resources in September 2006. This change has resulted in more consistent services being offered in all locations, increased accountability, and increased engagement and partnership with HR field operations.

3. The employee assistance program provided by the Department of Personnel did the best they could but they were (and are) simply under funded and understaffed for the number of employees they are asked to serve. In addition, with offices only in Olympia, Seattle, and Spokane, it was impossible for most DOC employees to meet with them face-to-face. The Department of Personnel EAP reported that in the time period of 7/1/05 to 6/30/07 they accounted for 169 cases for all of DOC. In comparison, the sixth staff counselor assigned in the Olympic Peninsula reported 294 contacts for

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individual counseling, supervisory consultation, and teambuilding during the calendar year 2007. A simple arithmetic could be used to multiply the 294 by six staff counselors to estimate the full impact of the program for one year. However, the most critical need that led to the creation of the DOC staff counselor program was the sense that DOC employees faced stresses that were unique to the correctional environment. Employees and supervisors needed a counselor who understood those stresses and who could respond when a critical situation occurred.

4. The CISM teams and the “walkabouts” are what make the DOC staff counselor program most unique from other employee assistance programs. Agency policy requires that employees involved in specified critical incidents go through a debriefing with the local CISM team. The teams can also be asked to report to an institution or office even before the critical incident has been resolved. Having the CISM recognizes that emotions are important and allows employees to work through their emotional responses in a safe, acceptable manner. The “walkabouts” put the staff counselors in the midst of the employees. This increases the visibility of the program while demonstrating to employees the counselors’ familiarity with the correctional environment. Mostly importantly, the walkabouts make the counselors accessible to tough correctional employees who would never dream of making an appointment to go see a counselor. Using the same sixth staff counselor (Olympic Peninsula), she reported over 700 contacts through the walkabouts during 2007.

5. The start up costs included FTE funding for the licensed staff counselor position and her office equipment (funded as part of the FTE funding). Her office was located in available space at the Penitentiary. When the program was expanded statewide, funding was sought from the legislature for additional staff counselor FTEs. (Office furniture and IT needs for the positions were included in the funding request.) The staff resource centers were located in available space in existing DOC offices

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and facilities. Support staff members for the staff resource centers were redeployed from current staffing in the regions.

6. The ongoing costs are salary, training, and travel costs.

7. The staff counselor program is funded out of the General Fund, part of the agency's maintenance allotment from the legislature.

8. The program was established without knowledge or awareness of such programs in other states or corrections departments.

9. Many states and agencies have employee assistance programs. What makes this one different is that it is an in-house program in a corrections agency. The staff counselors know about corrections work and continually expose themselves to it by their presence in the prisons, work releases, and community corrections field offices. In fact, several of the staff counselors worked as mental health professionals within DOC institutions before promoting into the staff counselor positions. Day to day and when responding to critical incidents, this familiarity breaks down barriers that might otherwise prevent employees for accessing and benefiting from an employee assistance program.

10. A measurement of the program is the increasing number of employees seeking the services of the staff counselor. Anecdotally, staff counselors have reported the instances they have prevented an employee from just quitting or other inappropriate behavior. Or assisting the individual in thinking through to his/her decision. Another measurement is the reduction in type of injuries. The partnership between the ONC and the staff counselor is a systems approach to the mental and physical well being of the employee.

11. Originally the staff counselor program was one person working at the Penitentiary on a contract funded on a month by month basis. A permanent, fully funded FTE was eventually established. Shortly thereafter, the program was expanded across the state with the creation of four additional positions. An

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additional position was subsequently located on the Olympic Peninsula and a proposal is being made for the establishment of a seventh staff counselor in the next biennium. At the time of the statewide expansion, the concept of volunteer CISM teams throughout the state was also expanded. The CISM teams are made up of nationally certified employees from throughout the agency in all different job classes.