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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY THE FOCUS PROGRAM

The Proposed Program

This program, originally named the Correctional Officer Maintenance Program, (COMP), was designed to increase awareness of personal and work stress, and to present ways to manage it, thus reducing the impact on officers' personal, family and work lives. There were four facilities originally chosen to participate:

- *York CI*—The state's only female facility, housing pre-trial and sentenced women at all security levels, 325 COs
- *Webster CI*—A low-level security, pre-release facility, 77 COs
- *Cheshire CI*—A high-level security facility, housing long-term sentenced offenders, 335 COs
- *Manson Youth CI*—A high-level security facility, housing offenders ages 14 to 21, 173 COs

The method was to present a series of one-hour, introductory workshops at the facilities and at off-site training areas, during the day as well as in the evening, with pizza and childcare available during the evening sessions.

Proposed topics for the workshops included "Active Parenting Skills", "Managing Stress," "Effective Communication Skills," and "The High-Risk Lifestyle." Consideration was also given to some type of program on "Managing Credit Card Spending" and "Financial Planning."

Upon completion of the introductory sessions, there would be more "in-depth" sessions, two hours in duration, offered at each facility. In order to have the program accessible to officers, manageable for the Department of Correction (DOC), and meet coverage needs, sessions were planned as follows:

- Four topics presented twice at each facility, for a total of 32 one-hour presentations.
- Follow-up sessions with two, two-hour presentations at each facility, for a total of 16 hours. There would be a total of 48 hours of presentations.

All COs from the participating facilities would be invited to voluntarily attend any and all of the workshops, and to invite their family members and/or significant others.

A short, pre/post, self-report survey instrument would be mailed to the homes of the officers at the four facilities, and to the officers at one representative control facility. We anticipated a 30 percent response rate from the surveys.

FOCUS also proposed to look at the life cycle of an officer, and prepare a series of short, educational brochures describing what we saw to be significant events during the career of an officer:

- Graduation from the academy into their assigned facility and promotion after the probationary period

The national Institute of Justice Grant award # 98-FS-VS-003 funds this program

- Leveling off in the 4th to 5th years; looking at options in the Department
- Critical Incident involvement—an event beyond the officer’s control, i.e., a riot, an attack, suicide of an inmate
- Reassignment—circumstances beyond the officer’s control
- Retirement

Also to be included:

- Development of a web page with pertinent information and links.
- Technical assistance to an in-place family support program that had been established by the wife of an officer.
- Increased Employee Assistance Program (EAP) response to critical incidents that occur at the four facilities. This would be coordinated with the in-house Critical Incident Response Team, and at the request of the facility warden.
- Attendance at DOC Health Fairs, with FOCUS information, as well as EAP information.
- Another, more informal goal of the program was to increase awareness of the Department’s Employee Assistance Program (EAP). Although usage was good, often COs were coming into the program at a point where they were facing serious discipline, usually related to reliability issues. If we could educate officers to reach out for help sooner, we felt absenteeism and discipline could be reduced. The majority of EAP participants reported some stress related concerns when calling the program for help.

Process

The original proposal was written by the vendor of the Department’s EAP, ETP Inc, and a DOC personnel representative, with input from other DOC administrators. Once the Grant was awarded, a multi-disciplinary team was put in place to implement the project.

In looking at the many “lessons learned” from this process, the first was not including the officer’s union from the start of the program design. Prior to submitting the proposal, we asked the officer’s union presidents from several AFSCME Locals to write a letter of support for the program, which they did. The plan was to have them be part of the team once the grant was awarded. The team was comprised of union stewards from the participating facilities, several union presidents, an EAP liaison, the project manager from ETP, and the Principal Investigator from the Department of Correction

The name of the program was changed to FOCUS (Families, Officers, and Corrections Understanding Stress) almost immediately, in response to the union’s concern that the name COMP is too close to “Worker’s Comp” – a system that for many COs has a negative connotation.

We added the Hartford Correctional Center, one of the Department’s three jails, with pre-sentenced and short-term sentenced inmates, 180 COs; and Northern CI, the State’s super maximum security facility, 236 COs, to the project, and removed the youth facility. The total number of COs for the project now was 1153, up from the original 910, however, including these

facilities gave us a much more accurate cross section of the Department. This also increased the number of participating facilities and added extra training sessions.

As it was initially written, the program assumed a relatively small number of participants, with the hope of learning and then expanding in the future. The union began to look at this as an opportunity to survey all COs (4,100), thus having a significant amount of data with which to evaluate stress in the Department for officers. The FOCUS Program would be a way to make some intervention with a selected group, while the richness of the data could be used for future planning.

Training and Survey Design

Once this idea was accepted, seeking the survey instrument took on a different level of importance. Searching for an intact survey that would suitably measure the specifics of the setting proved unsuccessful. We brought in Mark Sullivan and John Rogers, of S&R Associates, researchers with experience in the customized development of surveys measuring issues such as employee morale and work related stress. In addition, one of the researchers had involvement with the union in the past around this very issue when AFSCME had explored doing something similar several years ago.

Numerous meetings were held with S&R Associates to look at the feasibility of their working with us; they reviewed the Gershon survey as well as reviewing some of the literature. The final recommendation from them was to design a survey specifically for the DOC, with the thinking that much, if not all, would be applicable to any state department of correction.

The first step in the survey design was to facilitate series of CO focus groups to meet with Sullivan and Rogers in order to validate the issues identified in the project and in the literature review. Fifteen groups were interviewed, and all participants were randomly selected for each group, each session was representative of a different group, i.e., males, mixed sex, females, 1st shift, etc. There were eight specific areas targeted in each session, with guiding questions introducing each topic. The areas were: 1) burnout; 2) job satisfaction; 3) personal finance; 4) family life; 5) race; 6) gender; 7) employment issues; 8) other matters. The sessions included between 9 and 12 participants and lasted approximately 90 minutes.

The information from the groups overwhelmingly indicated a strong level of suspicion about the process, and the anonymity of information shared in the groups. There was an overwhelming feeling of distrust for the administration, and especially a lack of confidence in mid level management. There were concerns about favoritism, sexism, racism, and a lack of respect for COs and their work. There was also concern expressed as to what, if any, impact this type of program could have, and suspiciousness expressed as to the motivation for such a program. The union and the EAP were both mentioned as groups that don't always address the COs needs, and at times pander to the administration. The issue of confidentiality within the EAP was challenged as well. The inmates were not described as a source of stress for the COs.

The union and the Department both began to see this training as having a much greater impact if it were to be mandatory rather than elective, and a full day's duration rather than the shorter

sessions originally planned. Further discussion led to this becoming part of the required, in-service training days that all officers must complete annually. With much discussion between the union, the Department liaison, and the training academy management, a plan began to unfold to present a mandatory, full day of FOCUS training to every CO in the five-targeted facilities.

The next two challenges were how and where to schedule these sessions, and what the structure would be. We initially looked at multiple locations, with simultaneous sessions, however, that was unmanageable because of the number of trainers we would need. We wanted to have the training occur away from the worksite, keeping it unique, while at the same time, meeting academy requirements.

We finally settled on doing the training at one of the union offices that was centrally located in the state. Although not an ideal training site, we felt it was a good choice in that it made a very strong statement about the union's support of the program. More importantly, it was a statement of the union's commitment to addressing the issue of stress within the Department, and taking steps to make some changes.

The design of the training went through several "metamorphoses" as we looked at the shift from several one and two-hour presentations to full day of training. Once we ruled out multiple offerings/multiple sites, we settled on a six-hour day of training, with one trainer per group. The day would cover conflict, and communication, two major factors in stress, as well as general hints for handling stress, and an action-planning piece at the end. The program was highly interactive and experiential.

To cover the 69 training sessions, we used seven trainers, with three of them providing a majority of the training. Although there was a curriculum provided, it was important that the trainers be flexible enough to "roll with" the particular group in front of them. Over time they became quite adept at working with the officers and keeping the sessions on track, while addressing some of the unique needs of a certain group or individual.

Once the survey instrument was completed, the committee met numerous times to review and make suggestions for changes. When it was finished, we had a 352 item questionnaire that we felt covered both personal and work related stresses as well as current coping mechanisms. We had six officers take the survey and give us feedback concerning both the level of difficulty and the time involved in responding to it. There were no reported problems understanding or responding to the questions, and the time averaged 30 minutes.

Because of the expanded survey size, as well as the unanticipated development costs, mailing the survey to 4100 officers became cost prohibitive. Conventional wisdom predicts low return rates on mailed items, even with pre-paid return postage; we wanted as high a return as possible in order to produce worth while results. The union suggested, and the Department agreed to allow time on shift for each officer to complete the survey. This entailed a Herculean effort by the Wardens and other ranking facility managers to schedule and cover time for this to happen. The union agreed to have reps at each facility hand out the surveys and collect them, hopefully reducing any suspiciousness on the officers' part. Only union members would handle the surveys. We anticipated a very high rate of return for three reasons: 1) the issue of officer stress

is paramount, 2) this is the first opportunity to capture this information in a legitimate, systematic fashion, and 3) the officers are being paid to fill out the survey.

In order to accurately measure any impact the training may have, there had to be some type of identifying code for each survey. Much discussion ensued with the union regarding this matter, and there was a great deal of concern expressed right away concerning confidentiality and how an identifier would cause some alarm amongst the officers. The researchers spoke in depth with the union regarding why this was necessary, however, it was an issue that came back to haunt us once the surveys were distributed. The code used for ID purpose was the last four digits of the officer's social security number, and the last four digits of their phone number.

The return rate for the initial survey was in the 50% range – disappointing, given the structure that was in place. As one would expect with a project of this size, all things did not go as planned – the survey distribution wasn't as smooth as we had hoped for; some surveys were picked up by Lieutenants and stored in Warden's offices causing the level of distrust to rise. Although we had set a time frame of two weeks for the surveys to be completed, they came in for up to almost eight weeks after they were handed out. Many came back unusable, unreadable, or incomplete. There were many angry comments written in the space for feedback about the Department, this project, etc.

The survey results showed a high level of dissatisfaction with management, namely the Lieutenants, the next largest group of Department employees after the officers, and the group who directly supervise the officers. There was also distrust and dissatisfaction expressed about how officers are treated during an internal investigation and/or inmate attack or accusation. This tone carried over into the training sessions.

The Training

We were not prepared for the anger that was present during the survey distribution and the subsequent training. We viewed this as an opportunity for COs to gain new skills in the areas of conflict and communication that would help to reduce stress. This program was strictly focused on behaviors that could be controlled, and thus changed, by the officer. It was also a day out of the facility, and we arranged to have the officers approved to wear civilian clothes rather than their uniforms. In order to promote open discussion, there was no DOC management staff at the training.

There was a sense that this was a punishment, and many felt they didn't need it. The trainers soon learned how to balance allowing time to vent with covering the content. We were never able to get away from the pervasive tone of anger towards the administration. Often with training around stress, participants find it easier to complain about that which they can't change (the administration, the boss or supervisor), rather than those they can (how one responds to criticism, how much one smokes, drinks, eats junk foods, one's attitude, etc.). At times disruptive behavior was a serious problem, although no one was asked to leave the sessions.

We began each session with a detailed explanation of the program, the survey, the confidentiality of what is said in the sessions, etc. We also had a union spokesman address the groups to talk

about their role in, and support of, the project. This was helpful in setting the tone for the training. We also used this time to encourage participants to give us feedback through the evaluation sheets provided.

Because the officers were often focused on the Department as the cause of their problems, it was difficult to introduce the issue of how they handle work stress directly influences their marital/family and other relationships. Many stated they keep their work and personal life totally separate, and were unwilling to look at those areas at all. There were also strong feelings about involving spouses and significant others in anything connected to work. The overwhelming majority saw no value to including family except to have family understand the stress of their job more fully. It appeared that a result trying to separate work and family, with the perceived uniqueness of their work often made it difficult for the officers to see the impact of their own behavior on their relationships. It was hard to make the connection between changing individual behavior, regardless of the politics in the Department, and less stress at home.

At the training site, there was information and handouts available on topics such as domestic violence, kids and violence, talking to kids about violence, stress, communication, finances, drugs and alcohol, PTSD, anger management, etc. Each participant received a packet with information and handouts about some of the above topics as well as the training slides and the basic handouts for the training. We also included brief bios of the trainers, EAP information and an evaluation sheet. Officers were encouraged to “personalize” their packets with information they were interested in, and to share the info with their families. We also encouraged discussion about the training with family members, and even trying some of the exercises at home.

FOCUS II and The Survey, Part II

The format of the program had changed from the original plan, with training hours exceeding four times the total proposed by the time we completed phase one. It was determined that for the second part of the training, we would present one day long session that would be open to seventy-five officers from the targeted facilities, and their spouses or significant others.

This was a voluntary session, and participants attended on their own time. Although originally planned to be more in depth, because of the size of the group, this session focused on specific stress relieving techniques. Because they were self-selected, the group was open to the training, and more participative.

The second survey was distributed to all the officers from the targeted facilities as well as 300 randomly selected officers. The format was the same, however, we reduced it to 145 items. The union again was responsible for the distribution and collection. The response for the second survey was also disappointing. We anticipated a high response because of the familiarity with the training, however we ended up with only 200 usable returns. Unfortunately we are not able to discern any impact from the program based on survey results.

Wrap Up

A question that had come up frequently during this project as well as once the training was complete was "Was this successful?" It depends on what "successful" means. Overall, we would say the program was successful. Even with all of the grumbling and anger that was evident with the FOCUS training, much of the feedback was positive, and many officers were able to see personal benefit. Most significantly, we broke new ground in the department and how they look at the issue of stress. Although the survey results were disappointing, we developed a program that has begun to address the issue of Correctional Officer stress.

Although many officers expressed anger towards their Lieutenants, and the administration, many suggested that similar sessions with COs and Lieutenants together would be helpful in learning to understand each other. This kind of innovative idea may not have surfaced without this training, and although it may not happen immediately, it is a great idea to test with several small groups of volunteers.

The union and the administration worked together on a joint project in an extremely amicable fashion. The Department showed a tremendous willingness to work with the committee to have the training delivered. Both sides made concessions, and the union signed an agreement stating they would not use any survey results information in the bargaining process.

Did we accomplish everything we set out to? No, we didn't, and at the same time we accomplished more than we planned when changed the scope of the program. We learned more than we anticipated we would, and much of that learning will be used to augment the training provided to all staff annually.

The modified FOCUS training begins Department wide in September 2000!