



News for Immediate Release

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Crisis Intervention Training for Corrections Employees Working with Mentally Ill Offenders

Harrisburg – Department of Corrections officials have trained more than 100 employees in the area of crisis intervention since December 2012, with a goal of eventually providing training to all employees who have day-to-day contact with inmates with mental health issues.

In addition to DOC staff, officials plan to offer the course at no cost to all Pennsylvania counties with jails.

“In early 2012, I called upon current and retired DOC employees to work together, along with the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill and the PA Center for Excellence, to teach our staff members how to better understand mental illness and how to better work with mentally ill offenders in our prison system,” Department of Corrections Secretary John Wetzel said.

“These trained individuals are now our agents of change as we work to continue to improve our mental health system,” Wetzel said.

Crisis Intervention is a front-line response to mental illness that can be used by all classifications of corrections employees. The training provides tools, strategies and techniques that will allow these employees to work together to implement comprehensive services for inmates with mental illness.

The Crisis Intervention Team concept has been used by the Memphis (Tennessee) Police Department since 1988, and has proven to decrease arrests and the use of force incidents, as well as reduce the use of restraints in emergency rooms.

According to the Memphis Police Department and the National Alliance on Mental Illness, crisis intervention offers an immediate, calming approach that reduces the likelihood of physical confrontations and allows for better patient care.

Pennsylvania DOC’s four-day training reinforces skills taught previously to employees during basic training and on-the-job training. It also provides them with a better understanding of mental illness and ways to deescalate situations that could become quickly volatile if not handled appropriately.

The training uses role playing, videos and lectures to educate employees about:

- the history of mental illness over the centuries;
- problems encountered with the mentally ill in prisons;
- an overview of medications used to treat mental illness and possible side effects;
- communication skills to prevent, intervene and deescalate situations;
- strategic plans for working with those with mental illness as well as their family members and advocates;
- a review of the DOC's use of certified peer specialists; and
- an overview of community reentry issues faced by the mentally ill.

Along with DOC employees and retirees who have worked in the prison's mental health system, officials from the National Alliance of the Mentally Ill (NAMI) and various county mental health and reentry services representatives participate in the training, providing perspectives from outside the corrections setting.

"Our goal is to give our employees the skills they need to effectively and respectfully provide care and custody for mentally ill offenders," Wetzel said.

"More than 10,000 of our inmates require some sort of mental health service, and this training is a step forward in our efforts to continually improve our mental health system."

Pennsylvania is in an excellent position to improve the mental health system and Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) training thanks to the experience brought to the DOC by newly-hired Training Director Michael Dooley, Wetzel said.

Dooley previously worked in this area while at the National Institute of Corrections (NIC). In 2008, Dooley was assigned to oversee NIC's mental health program initiatives.

"Who better to have on your team at a time when you are working to implement CITs than the man who worked to incorporate the concept into the correctional setting?" Wetzel said.

"It was quite the challenge," Dooley said. "My only experience with mental illness in corrections was supervising offenders who had some issues, some serious, around a mental illness. I needed a crash course in mental illness and its impact on corrections. I decided to immerse myself in all available programs, advocacy groups and efforts available at the time to address mental illness in justice and corrections."

With the prevalence of mental illness in prisons and jails running three to four times as high as that seen in the general public, NIC had a critical role in helping agencies address the problem.

"I soon landed on a program that was well underway with demonstrated success in law enforcement – Crisis Intervention Teams," Dooley said.

With the help of several experts from the mental health community, the consumer community and corrections, Dooley developed a CIT program for implementation in a corrections setting.

The program focused on “frontline” officers who were always the first to respond to problems related to person’s mental illness.

The program showed a great deal of promise in de-escalating problem behaviors associated with mental illness as well as connecting persons with the appropriate care and treatment. Most of all, a skilled CIT officer uses specialized knowledge, tools and techniques to create a much safer, and ultimately secure, environment for staff and inmates.

“Not only are we focused on the offender, but this is for the safety of officers and the institution as well,” Dooley emphasized.

The NIC training program, started in 2010, was designed to prepare three-person teams to develop and implement CIT in their local jails and state prison systems. Teams representing corrections, mental health and consumer advocacy learned how to develop and implement a CIT program.

The highlight of the program was the demonstration of the “site visit” aspect of the 40-hour CIT training that included meeting with inmates and family members, as well as various programs that provide support and services to consumers within the local community.

Since the original launch of the program, many state prison systems and county jails have participated in the training and the response has been overwhelmingly positive.

“Seeing and experiencing this highly collaborative program in action, in and of itself, was well worth the time,” Dooley said.

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