



FIRST STEPS:

*Understanding the Culture of Corrections*

 NATIONAL MINORITY  
AIDS COUNCIL



T A B L E O F  
C O N T E N T S



*Introduction* 01

**Lesson 1: Objectives: Security vs. Assistance** 02

**Lesson 2: Words Make a Difference** 04

**Lesson 3: Appearances Matter** 05

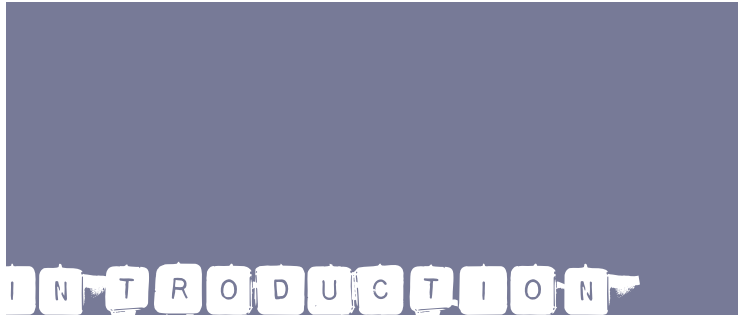
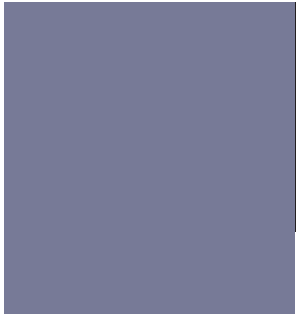
**Lesson 4: Following the Rules** 06

**Lesson 5: Correctional Officers Are People Too** 08

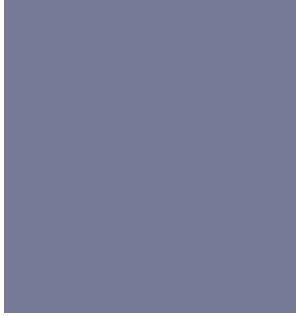
**Lesson 6: Challenges and Possible Solutions** 09

*Final Word* 11



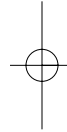
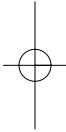
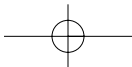
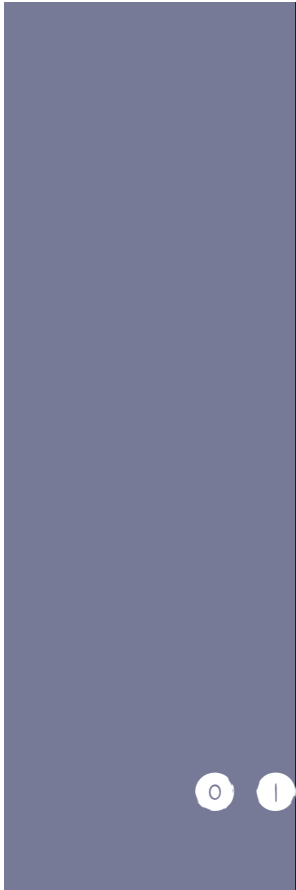


# INTRODUCTION



Community based organizations can provide invaluable services to inmates. They offer a link to the community, which is crucial to facilitating the re-entry process when inmates are released. In addition, CBOs set up programs that benefit the inmates and cost the correctional facility nothing. Why then is it so difficult for CBOs to get past the walls and into correctional facilities to provide much needed services? Often, it is because of the lack of understanding that occurs on both sides of the walls.

This pamphlet offers an introduction to the 'culture of corrections' to help CBOs learn how to successfully work within correctional facilities. The lessons learned are from the contributions and comments of numerous community based providers who have learned the hard way—by trial and error.

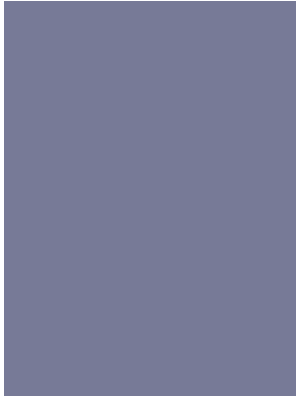


LESSON I  
OBJECTIVES:  
SECURITY VS.  
ASSISTANCE

*Regardless of the specific discipline in which a staff member works, all employees are "correctional workers first". This means that everyone is responsible for the security and good order of the institution. All staff are expected to be vigilant and attentive to inmate accountability and security issues, to respond to emergencies, and to maintain a proficiency in custodial and security matters, as well as in their particular job specialty.*

The above quote is directly from the Federal Bureau of Prison's website and clearly states that the federal correctional system's priority is security. You will notice that nowhere in the quote are the words 'help', 'improve', 'quality of life' or 'empowerment' used. These terms are words that community based organizations often use to describe their missions and objectives. This is where the problem comes in: CBOs want to *assist inmates*, Correctional Officers want to *maintain security*. Whose objectives come first? The reality of the situation is that the objectives of the correctional facility are top priority.

The facility's objectives may also include punishment or constraints in the form of segregation, denying privileges, withholding information and denying inmate requests. This mentality of "security first" and punishment requires CBOs to adjust their programs to fit the institutions' restrictions. One example of this is space; private areas for interviews and visits are not always available. Case managers, counselors, educators and volunteers have to be prepared to alter their programs and agendas to meet correctional facility rules and limitations. This may mean meeting in a large recreation center with lowered voices or with discrete materials. Often even private areas can have an observation window or a correctional officer present. Be prepared to be creative and flexible.



Another example of "security first" is that CBOs may not be allowed to bring in all the educational materials or literature that they use in their programs on the outside. Risk reduction materials that discuss safe sex or needle cleaning may not be allowed in the facility. Most facilities view condoms as a security risk and almost all consider them contraband. Something as simple as a plastic bag can be considered a weapon by the facility, so *check first with administration to determine what is forbidden*. And once you find out what is not allowed inside, *do not bring it*—this jeopardizes your program and those of other CBOs. This applies to materials and contents of CBO programs.

FIGURE



Your program materials may be considered contraband.

0 3



LESSON 2:  
WORDS MAKE A  
DIFFERENCE

Community based providers who have successfully started programs in prisons and jails stress the importance of *learning* and *using* correctional terms. This may seem simple or silly, but think how important labels are in the social service profession—are you assisting *clients*, *consumers* or *patients*? Labels are equally important to correctional professionals. In a correctional facility, you are assisting *inmates*. When correctional officers are present, it is imperative to call the inmate by his or her last name.

Getting the terminology right is an important step to building trust and respect with the correctional team. Examples of terms to learn and use when in correctional facilities are:

- NOT** Clients.....*Inmates*, usually called by last name.
- NOT** Guards.....*Correctional Officers*, usually have titles that reflect rank; they are professionals and rank titles hold a great deal of weight. **Ex.** *Deputy, Sergeant, Lieutenant, Major, Captain*
- NOT** Correctional Staff....*Civilian Employees*, Ms./Mr./Mrs. More formal than merely first name.

# LESSON 3: APPEARANCES MATTER

Many facilities have dress codes for visitors and/or restrictions on jewelry and personal possession that can be brought into the facility. To avoid hassles and frustrations at the gate, discuss with your supervisor at the facility what rules may apply.

Dress codes may include limitations on colors that outsiders can wear (so not to confuse them with inmates or officers), seductive clothing and earrings. Jewelry, handbags, briefcases and backpacks can cause delays at metal detectors and security checkpoints or they may not be allowed inside at all. Shorts, skirts above the knee, bare legs and sheer clothing may not be considered appropriate.

On the other hand, over-dressing or dressing too formally can hinder you also. If other professionals within the facility are wearing shirts and khakis, leave the three piece suits at home. To maximize your time at the facility, call ahead for the rules and then follow them closely.

## FIGURE

3.1

Dress codes can prohibit casual and formal wear



0 5

# LESSON 4: FOLLOWING THE RULES

Correctional facilities have a lot of rules, *know them* and *follow them*. This goes for rules that are written down, even if they are not currently being followed. All correctional officers may not all adhere to the rules equally, so be prepared to be flexible depending on which correctional officer is on duty.

Knowing the rules is the easy part, following them can be difficult. Correctional rules and regulations may seem arbitrary or harsh but they usually are in place for reasons that reflect the security functions of facilities. Some CBOs have said they do not feel their services are appreciated because of the way correctional officers treat the CBO staff. To the officers, allowing CBOs to conduct programs in a facility creates extra work because they have additional lives to worry about. Officers may not always appear to welcome the presence of outsiders. CBOs must always remember that the officers feel responsible for visitor safety and that of the general prison population, as such CBO visits can be stressful to the officers.

Knowing the rules and following them is key to maintaining a positive working relationship with correctional facilities. Most facilities will not let visitors (this means CBOs) bring in or take out items for inmates. So do not do it. Even if the request or favor seems harmless, the rules apply. Do not bend them, stretch them or otherwise play with the rules. Know what is considered contraband and do not bring it in. This includes cigarettes, money, magazines, toiletries or food items; it may also include items that you use in your program.



**One important example.** Do not give inmates a home phone number or home address. Remember always that this is a working relationship with different boundaries than most CBOs have with their clients. Inmates are often isolated and may have few social supports, but CBO staff cannot assume the role of social support. CBOs can facilitate a support system through referrals to pen pals, peer education programs or inmate advocates. CBO staff must maintain a professional working relationship with inmates; no hugs, no home phone calls, no behavior that the CBO staff would want to hide from the correctional staff or would feel uncomfortable documenting.

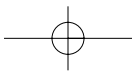
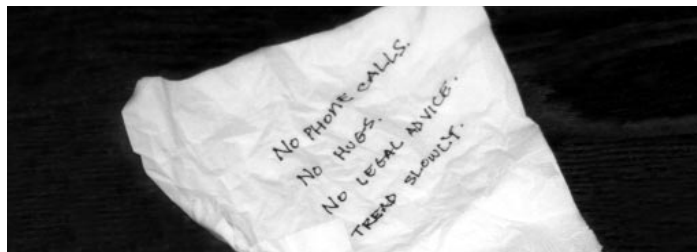
**Another important example.** Do not get involved with inmate legal issues. This is considered inappropriate by other CBOs and by the facility and officers. Remember your program objectives and do only what you and the facility agreed upon. Explain to the inmate that you are unable to assist with legal issues but that you can refer them to an organization that does. This may be your local community legal services or a national organization like the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). Have the contact information on hand to give the individual. Do not call a lawyer, do not take letters for the judge; follow your program and keep interactions within those boundaries.

**FIGURE**

5.1

Be sure to establish basic rules with inmates

0 7



# LESSON 5: CORRECTIONAL OFFICERS ARE PEOPLE TOO

Correctional officers and correctional personnel often feel uneasy about CBOs coming in to ‘their’ facilities—often the public is quick to criticize facilities on how duties are carried out. In order to work in a facility with ease and maximum effectiveness, a CBO must learn to work with the correctional personnel. The first step is introductions and clear communication. Call ahead, make appointments, arrive for a preliminary meeting with the materials that you wish to use. Arrange to be at the facility at change of shift or ‘roll call’ to do brief introductions. Ask correctional officers what their job entails and about the facility before explaining about your program.

Take the time to tread slowly during the start up phase of your program. Allow the officers to understand what you are there to do and how you expect to do it. Allow time for questions and be patient. Avoid making sweeping predictions of the positive effects that your program will have. Learn when the new recruits are training and make sure that they meet CBO staff and have time to ask questions about the program and materials. If possible, offer the correctional officers some training or materials that may be of interest to them. Be accessible to officers or correctional personnel, hand out business cards or let them know that similar services are available to people in the community as well as inmates.

# LESSON 6: CHALLENGES AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

**Challenge:** Inmates may not be able to make toll free calls.

**Solution:** Many states do not allow inmates access to toll free numbers and the cost of a local call may be inflated from the jail or prison payphone. Ideally, your CBO should have a set time frame several times a week where collect calls from inmates are accepted. This number and the days and times that collect calls are accepted should be distributed to inmates with every visit. Make sure that your staff is available during this set time period to accept the calls.

**Challenge:** Inmates may not be able to have any contact with their correctional medical provider after release.

**Solution:** Due to medical liability concerns, many medical providers are not able to write prescriptions or care plans for inmates after an inmate is released. This includes filling out the requisite forms for public assistance or entitlement programs. Make every effort to ensure that necessary forms are completed well *before release* and that every client is released with a medical discharge summary.

**Challenge:** Correctional facilities have certain confidentiality safeguards that are meant to ensure that sensitive information is not released without the individual's permission.

**Solution:** This can be addressed by obtaining a release of information form with the *first client contact*, so come prepared with the appropriate consent forms. Without this release of information form, CBOs will be unable to obtain and communicate any information regarding HIV or other medical issues pertaining to client inmates.



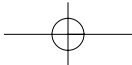
**Challenge:** Inmates may have few autonomy skills regarding their medical care, nutrition and medication.

**Solution:** With medlines, regular clinic schedules and standardized meals and snacks, a person who has been living with HIV/AIDS in a correctional facility may not have had the opportunity to learn self-care skills that are needed on the outside. Be prepared to 'practice' via role-playing, situation review and client education the skills that will help maximize treatment success. This includes learning names of medications, public transportation routes, food preparation, stress management techniques, to name just a few. Make sure that each new client intake starts with an assessment of the inmate's self care skills and HIV/AIDS knowledge. Remember to do initial assessments for those individuals diagnosed inside and those diagnosed before their conviction.



**Challenge:** Correctional schedules are tight and must be adhered to. When there are conflicts in scheduling, correctional programs come before CBO programs.

**Solution:** Know the facility schedule and work around it and with it. Find out when the infectious disease clinic has hours and see if your program can work with the clinic. Remember that role call, change of shift and meal times are never a good time to have programs—the officers are not free to escort inmates.





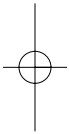
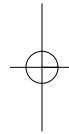
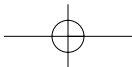
FINAL WORD



Inmates often have learned behaviors that have been reinforced by the correctional setting. These include survival skills that may incorporate behaviors such as withholding information or requesting special favors or services. Know that these are part for the individuals coping skills and that they are not personal attacks or displays of disrespect. Be prepared to respond in a professional manner and maintain the boundaries that you have established.



1 1



*This manual was written with the valuable input of the following:*

Margaret Beauchesne, RN, Graterford Prison  
Superintendent Mary Leftridge-Byrd, SCI-Chester  
George Mercer, LCSW, Health and Education Services  
Lanere Rollins-Holmes, ACE-Out

*Photography + Design:* [www.zincdesign.com](http://www.zincdesign.com)



1931 13th Street NW  
Washington DC 20009-4432

[www.nmac.org](http://www.nmac.org)