

## Professionalization

The number of correctional employees has grown dramatically at the same time that the correctional population has grown. They are also a far more professional employee pool than they

ever were before.

The signs of this new professionalization are widespread. In the last 40 years a new national discipline of "criminal justice" has grown from a fledgling major with a weak reputation to a nationally respected field of study. New journals have been developed presenting the best research available on crime, justice, and corrections. Professional associations such as the American Probation and Parole Association and the American Corrections Association now offer professional certification programs for people who will become probation or parole officers; the National

Institute of Corrections also offers training.

The emergence of a profession has had two important consequences for corrections. The first consequence is that the field is "smarter," and performance meets a higher standard. With a large number of people who have advanced degrees in their areas of specialty, and with a host of employees who have special certification in areas such as substance abuse treatment and mental health, the standard of work for the field has improved. This augurs well for the future, as new methods and new knowledge provide a stronger foundation of training and abilities for those who

do the work of the field.

But the creation of a strong professional core for the field has also added a new dynamic to it.

Correctional employees are no longer content to merely follow the leadership of the administration of their agencies. With professional skills and knowledge of their own, the new correctional professional expects to have a say in the strategies undertaken by corrections systems and the programmatic priorities that correctional policy makers set. They have become a distinct voice in the milieu of correctional action, advocating policy and arguing for action in a way that reflects professional interests, not just narrow personnel matters. It is this aspect of professionalization that will pose some of the more interesting dynamics as the field moves forward in the coming years. Will the profession be a force for new and exciting ideas, or will it resist change? Will the new correctional professional adapt to the new techno-corrections changes of the field, or will there be conflict? Whatever answers to these questions the future holds, it is clear that the advance of professionalism in corrections has been one of the most important forces in the field today.

## Three Challenges for the Future of Corrections

After nearly 40 years of correctional growth, we have not seen compelling results. If this had been a deliberate experiment, we would have a much clearer picture by now. The crime rate today is about what it was in 1973, the year that prison populations first began to grow. Indeed, during most of those years, we saw crime rates much higher than those of today. Some claim that the crime rates would have been even higher had we not expanded the corrections system. However, to have the same crime rates but *seven times* the number of people under correctional supervision suggests that correctional expansion has not been an efficient crime-prevention method, to say the least.

Further, state correctional budgets have more than doubled in the past decade. At the same time, allocations for education, transportation, and the like have declined. Some argue that the fiscal consequences of a bigger corrections system have taken a toll that should be considered in evaluating this trend.

If we could go back to the early 1970s and begin again to build a corrections system with an eye toward the year 2014, would we aim for the costly, cumbersome behemoth we have today? Most people would say no.

But what are we to do? Of course, we cannot re-create history. However, we can examine today's corrections system in light of what we want it to become. Here are three challenges for re-creating corrections with an eye to the future.