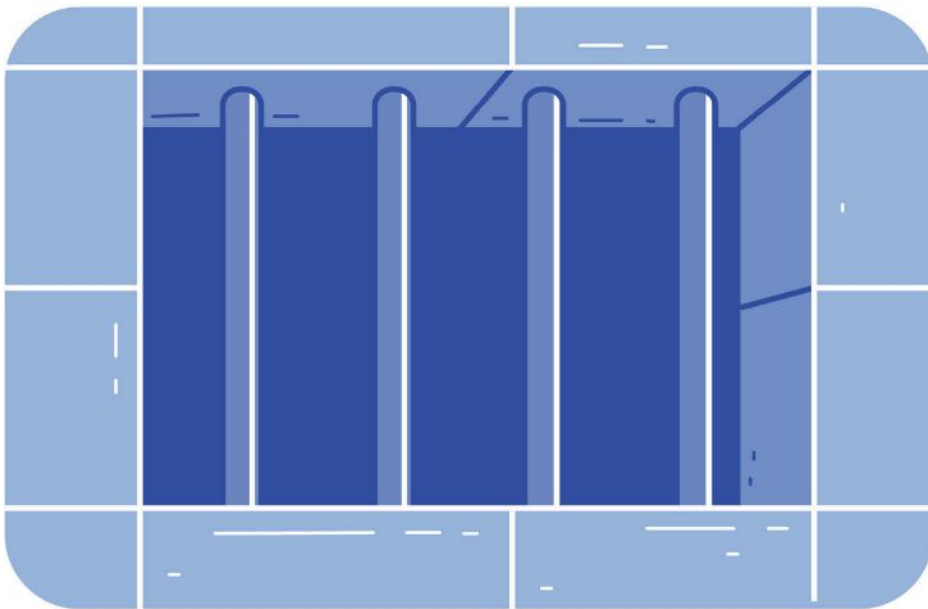


Guidelines for Social Workers Visiting and Working Inside Corrections Facilities

BY SUSAN RADCLIFFE, LCSW-C, AND DANIEL POLLACK, MSSW (MSW), JD

Best-selling author James Michener said, “We are never prepared for what we expect.” That certainly applies to social workers visiting and working inside corrections facilities.



million people in 1,833 state prisons, 110 federal prisons, 1,772 juvenile correctional facilities, 3,134 local jails, 218 immigration detention facilities, and 80 Indian Country jails as well as in military prisons, civil commitment centers, state psychiatric hospitals, and prisons in the U.S. territories.”

Not many social workers choose to work in correctional settings. A 2004 NASW report notes that only 2 percent of social workers were working in the criminal justice field, but it was difficult to ascertain if those employed were actually working in a corrections facility.

The culture of corrections is different. Really different. Correctional facilities historically have used an “incapacitation” model, not a rehabilitative one. They have placed little stock in understanding trauma and real rehabilitation. Inmates are expected to follow the rules. Period.

As a social worker and attorney, I (Daniel) recall visiting a juvenile maximum-security facility and speaking with a 13-year-old boy. After some introductory pleasantries, I asked him, “What are you in here for?” I was not prepared for his response: “Murder.”

“I wanted to join a gang and to get in I had to kill

someone,” he said. “So, they gave me a gun and while this guy was eating his lunch on a park bench, I came up behind him and shot him in the head.”

His affect was as stone cold in relating the story to me as it probably was when he murdered the man on the park bench.

Entering a correctional setting for the first time is

similar to Dorothy arriving in Oz. You are no longer in a nurturing and welcoming environment. Exchanges of pleasantries are not in the nomenclature. Sensory overload reigns. Everything is gray: the walls, desks, chairs, equipment.

The Prison Policy Initiative reports that the U.S. criminal justice system “holds almost 2.3

Social work philosophically holds that individuals can change, and we try to meet clients “where they are.” This is not in sync with most correctional systems. The result is a conflict between philosophical constructs.

Social Work Guidelines

To be an effective social worker in a correctional facility, here are some practice guidelines:

- **Safety first.** The top priority of every correctional officer (CO) is safety. This does not diminish your efforts as a social worker.
- **Remember that you are a guest in the facility.** Don't be disrespectful to staff.
- **COs are trained to communicate quickly and effectively.** They don't have time to ask how your day is going. They don't often share things about their personal lives. COs always have on their “game face.” They never know when they'll have to act in an emergency.
- **Dress appropriately.** If you don't know what that is, ask. It is unacceptable to come into a facility and break the rules. This creates tension and resentment. To be on the safe side, don't wear anything tight. No jeans, no open-toe shoes, and limit the logos on your clothing.
- **COs don't fully trust you.** Your mere presence, and the things you bring in for programming, can make a CO nervous. They don't know if you are going to leave contraband behind, either intentionally or unintentionally.
- **Boundaries are essential.** An unspoken concern for COs is to have someone come into the facility who will establish a romantic relationship with an inmate.
- **Social workers see family visits as essential to maintain relationships during periods of incarceration.** Corrections staff don't disagree, but they may also see them as opportunities to bring in contraband and possibly encroach upon everyone's safety.
- **COs know trauma.** The rate of post-traumatic stress disorder in corrections officers is greater than in other law enforcement occupations. It is even greater than trauma returning combat veterans experience.
- **Don't underestimate the professionalism of being a CO.** It is demanding and tiring work. They must be available to work overtime, with little or no advance warning. Despite this, they have to be able to establish and maintain effective

working relationships with many people. Their communication and listening skills are finely tuned. Jane Sachs, director of correctional training for the Maryland Police and Correctional Training Division, comments: “We work hard to earn respect for this profession, but most people not only have no interest, (they) look down upon us. Correctional staff need to be included in discussions of essential frontline workers, public safety professionals, etc., just as much—if not more—as police officers and firefighters.”

- **Whatever critique you may have regarding how a facility is managed, even constructive criticism may not be well received.** If you want the

culture of a corrections facility to change, it is going to come from the superintendent or warden.

The NASW *Code of Ethics* states, “The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty.”

This certainly sounds applicable to social workers in correctional settings. For whatever reasons, relatively few social workers have ever visited, volunteered, or worked in these facilities. Perhaps it's time to reconsider. 🙏



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