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## **Building Healthy Habits: A Wellness Program for Juvenile Detention Officers**

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Author Note

This Content of this paper is done so in affiliation with Boise State University, specifically within the department of Multidisciplinary Studies

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on the creation of a wellness program for the Snake River Juvenile Detention Center in Twin Falls Idaho and how it has started to make a positive impact on the juvenile detention officers at the facility. Wellness is something that detention officers take for granted. Most of the officers eat a lot of junk food and believe that lack of sleep and low energy levels are a normal part of being a juvenile detention officer. Juvenile detention officers work in an environment where they need to have empathy for the youth in their custody. Constant empathy for another person or group of persons with trauma in their lives can cause compassion fatigue or secondary traumatic stress. Compassion fatigue is one of the causes of sleep and energy issues. Chronic sleep deprivation can cause mistakes on the job, accidents with injury, and other medical issues if not addressed. The wellness program at the Snake River Juvenile Detention Center was created to teach the officers the importance of taking care of themselves physically and mentally.

*Keywords:* compassion fatigue, secondary traumatic stress, juvenile detention officers, wellness

## Introduction

Juvenile detention officers work tirelessly with youth who struggle with mental health and behavioral disorders. The youth we work with suffer from childhood trauma that may contribute to criminal behaviors and mental illness. Many officers struggle with secondary traumatic stress or compassion fatigue when dealing with traumatized youth.

The symptoms of compassion fatigue may include feelings of isolation, anxiety, dissociation, physical ailments, and sleep disturbances. Additionally, compassion fatigue is associated with a sense of confusion, helplessness, and a greater sense of isolation from supporters than is seen with burnout. (Figley, 1995, 2002). It is preventable and treatable, however, if unaddressed, the symptoms can result in problems with mental and physical health, strained personal relationships, and poor work performance Pryce, Shackelford, & Pryce, 2007). (Administration for Children & Families, n.d.)

The problem was that the Snake River Juvenile Detention Center in Twin Falls, Idaho did not have a wellness program. Twin Falls County has a wellness program for all county employees, but there was not a program that focused on the unique needs of juvenile detention officers. On top of not having a wellness program, many officers did not know what a wellness program was, nor did they know what the county had to offer them to take care of their mental and physical health.

In this paper I will go over my innovative approach to a wellness program for the Snake River Juvenile Detention Center. Including bringing together different perspectives, awareness of self and others through emotional intelligence, my creative framework, and the unique approach I took to create the wellness program. I will discuss what was accomplished during the 55+ hours I took to work on the project and the impact and benefits the wellness program had on my stakeholders.

## **Innovative Approach**

### **Bringing Together Perspectives**

The Snake River Juvenile Detention Center has four different teams with four distinctive styles in how they deal with the youth in the detention center. The plan was to have a member from each team participate in a wellness committee. But creating a committee took longer than planned because many of my teammates did not understand or know what a wellness program looked like. So, my first big step was to create a survey and receive feedback from individuals. I found a survey template on 123 Form Builder (2022) and used the questions from the *Wellness Questionnaire Template* to create my survey. After I received feedback from ten of my team members I put together an infographic using Visme (<https://my.visme.co/view/n0yvrm07-dz6517re0vn85k0w>) to share with my detention manager so he could see what our facility needed. Any money needed to fund the wellness program would need to be approved by my detention manager.

### **Creating Innovative Approaches: Beyond Either/Or**

The approach for a wellness program for the Snake River Juvenile Detention Center is innovative because there was not a wellness program focused on juvenile detention officers in our community. The wellness program is based on the needs of our officers and tailored specifically to our detention center. I spent time researching information from other law enforcement agencies and what they have done to improve the wellness of their officers. One of my favorite sources comes from a YouTube video called, *Mental Health Initiative: Washington County, MN - Sgt. Tim Harris* (2020). In the video, Sgt. Harris discusses a peer support program that allows employees to help other employees as well as a clinician who specifically helps those officers. I started peer-to-peer support while on shift. I spent about an hour a week with each team talking to them about what was bothering them and what they would like changed or improved upon. I have a unique position as the Training/Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA)

Coordinator where I can float to other shifts and continue peer-to-peer support. The feedback I received from my teams was that they enjoyed connecting with each other and taking the time to voice their opinions.

## **Emotional Intelligence**

### **Awareness of Self and Others**

I chose to create a wellness program for the Snake River Juvenile Detention Center because personally, I needed to take better care of myself. I struggle with depression and anxiety just like a majority of people in today's fast paced world. I also noticed that my teammates needed to take better care of themselves too. Several team members have mentioned their own struggles with depression and anxiety and how they need more than medication to help them. Creating a wellness program required that I was, and still am, aware of the needs of my team as well as being aware of my own needs. The survey I created asked what their biggest stressors are; how they currently deal with their own health and wellbeing; and what they would like to see in a wellness program (123 Form Builder, 2022). However, after reading the surveys, I discovered that a majority of the team did not know what they would want in a wellness program because they have never worked for an agency or organization that had a wellness program.

This insight changed my proposal creation because I felt I needed to dig deeper into what everyone really wanted/needed. The biggest stress that many of the surveys mentioned was shift work. Teams either work 6:00am - 6:00pm or 6:00pm - 6:00am. They rotate from days to nights every 8 weeks. On week one they work Monday, Tuesday, Friday Saturday, and Sunday. On week two they work Wednesday and Thursday. Each team gets a three-day weekend every other week. The purpose of this type of schedule is to give everyone an equal opportunity to have weekends off for family.

**Consideration of the Audience: Emotional Intelligence**

Each team has its own personality, and each team has a unique working relationship. As the training coordinator, I have relationships with each person individually and each team that is completely different from one another. One team in particular, I feel, has a lower emotional intelligence than the others. They yell, complain, and talk negatively about other team members. Sometimes this team gets angry about something another team missed; or they are angry because someone called in sick again, on another team. I do not always understand their anger, but I do listen to their underlying problems. Three of the four team members are struggling financially or in their relationships. So, their anger at work could be a projection of what is happening in their personal lives. When I sat down with this team I discovered that they were having an issue with one of their own team members who was actually doing (or not doing) the things they were upset about. This allowed my partner and me to help the supervisor address the situation and start helping them through their team issues. So far, their moods have improved, and we are seeing increased productivity as well as happier demeanors. Also, taking the time to get to know this team better made me realize that they connect in a unique way than other team members do. The other three teams try not to let their personal lives interfere with how they work with the youth. I have worked hard to build trusting relationships with my teammates. So, I feel I can get real answers from them when it comes to what they need.

**Value to Others: Emotional Intelligence**

What makes my research/work valuable to others is the fact that there was no wellness program for juvenile detention officers. I spent a decade working with adults in prison and jail and the stress I have with the youth is different from what I had working at a maximum-security prison with rapists and killers. There is a different level of empathy that goes with the territory of working with troubled youth. We work in a trauma-informed environment where we no longer ask, "What's wrong with you?" We now ask, "What happened to you?" With that said, my

research/work into a wellness program included research on secondary trauma and compassion fatigue and how we can combat that while still helping our youth. Too many times these kids have had the adults in their lives quit on them. Our wellness can be important to their success.

## **Creative Thinking**

### **The Creative Framework**

I discovered a blog by Ashley Bell called 121 Employee Wellness Program Ideas, Tips, & Activities For 2022 That Your Team Will Love on the *Snacknation* website. The blog has tons of great ideas that I felt I could use for my team. Several of the ideas incorporated contests between teams with a healthy snack box as a reward. I took some of the contest ideas and put together a two-week team challenge I titled “7 Days of Play.” Each team works a total of seven days in a two-week period. This allowed me to create seven different challenges each team needed to complete to earn a prize. The goal for this team challenge was for the teams to work together, build camaraderie, and have a little fun at work. In order for them to prove to the detention manager and me that they completed the daily challenge, the activity had to be recorded and a copy sent to us. The team or teams who complete the daily challenges received a healthy treat box. I purchased enough treat boxes for each team in case they all participated. The goal was team building, having fun, and de-stressing. I have witnessed the teams having fun with these challenges and this, in turn, relieved my stress. Sometimes I was the one doing the recording.

### **Unique Approach/es to Project**

Most wellness program information found on the internet is focused on the office environment and on those who work 9:00am-5:00pm. I had to take the time to reach out to my teams and find out what they wanted in a wellness program and how to translate the wellness program ideas found on the internet into our work environment. When we feel good, this translates to how we work with the youth in our custody and how they react to us. I cannot make

everyone participate in everything that we incorporate into our wellness program. However, having something to alleviate the stress available to them does make a difference. Something as simple as getting new gaming chairs for everyone to rest their feet, free coffee, lunch ordered in, donuts (although not healthy, everyone loves donuts), a hole-in-one competition for free pizza, and more have been proven to lighten the mood of an exhausting day.

### **Your Innovative Solution**

#### **Accomplishment of Capstone**

I discovered that only two out of four teams liked the “7 Days of Play” that I created in the first two weeks. But that does not mean it was a failure. I discovered that the reason that the teams who chose not to participate was, one team did not think they had a chance to win against another team and the other team did not feel like they needed team challenges to build their team. But they felt that they had a good bond with each other and would rather have more mental health guidance than activities.

I recently took a workshop on the Community Resiliency Model® and its focus on the body’s neurobiological responses to trauma or stress. The workshop trained me to be a guide in helping my teammates calm themselves so they can face that stress in a healthier manner (Strand & Roblin, 2022). At the beginning of April, I taught Mental Health Training for Juvenile Justice (MHT-JJ) to all four teams (Trainer Network, 2022). There was a one-hour module on self-care. We spoke as a team on how we could improve our wellness and support each other. As the teams learn more about wellness and what a wellness program looks like, I have noticed that many of my teammates are making minor changes in their lives to improve their wellness. Once I began researching then educating the teams about wellness they have become more responsive to welcoming healthier behaviors in their lives. Some of those behaviors include eating healthier; getting a little exercise by taking the stairs instead of the elevator; opening up about what is bothering them at work and finding solutions to those problems.

## **Innovative Approach to the Problem/Project**

What makes my solution more innovative than other approaches is that there has never been a wellness program for the Snake River Juvenile Detention Center. I am one of the older team members and have spent fifteen years working in corrections and detention centers. As the Training/PREA Coordinator, I am in a leadership role where my teammates look to me for answers and I work to find them answers or fix what needs to be fixed. The county's wellness program is broad and does not focus on the needs of juvenile detention officers. But they are doing their part for all county employees. The county wellness team makes sure we have a fitness room to use for free; they provide an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) where we get eight free counseling sessions for each issue not per year; they have holiday parties for county employees and their families; and overall do an excellent job in creating wellness for outside of the workplace. But having a tailored program for our teams, inside our work environment, allows them to feel more inclusive.

## **Results**

### **Benefits to Stakeholders**

My stakeholders include my team (juvenile detention officers), the detention manager, and the youth in our custody. My team has benefited the most from my capstone project by starting to create healthy physical, mental, and emotional habits through support with our new wellness program. I spent time with each team educating them on what benefits the county provides for us. When I started my capstone project I put out an anonymous survey to everyone to see what the team would like to see in a wellness program. I spent a lot of time educating myself then educating my team. I incorporated a "7 Days of Play" to break things up and allow for some team building. Two out of four teams participated and earned a snack box of goodies for their team. These two teams had a lot of fun and enjoyed their extra snacks.

## **Impact on Stakeholders**

With the approval of the detention manager, we have integrated mandatory breaks for staff and the option for a team to shut the facility down for a bit to allow everyone the opportunity to take a breath. The night shifts do not require any scheduled breaks because once the youth go to sleep, they are free to do what they want as long as they stay awake and continue to check on the well-being of the youth. The two day shifts have taken the mandatory breaks. These breaks have team members leave the facility and get fresh air, go across the street to the convenience store and get a soda, go for a walk, eat a snack, check their phones, or whatever else they need to do. Occasionally teams have shut down afternoon activities which quiets the youth down. When the staff are stressed, the youth get stressed. Having the opportunity to just quiet their thoughts and catch up on their work allowed them to rejuvenate and proceed onto the next activity with a clearer mind and a better attitude.

## **Conclusion**

The juvenile detention officers are the ones who benefited the most from the wellness program. My hope is that improved wellness with the detention officers would pass on better behavior from the youth. Due to the fact that we work at a detention center, our population is constantly changing. We cannot always affect the behavior of the youth because the officers are mentally healthier. However, what I have observed is that the teams are taking more time with the youth in dealing with their issues and behaviors. In the past month we have seen fewer lock downs (youth kept in their rooms as a consequence) and more redirection. The detention officers will continue to benefit the most from the wellness program. What I thought was going to be a huge undertaking turned out to be not as difficult as I had originally thought. I found the process quite rewarding. The wellness program is constantly growing and evolving. I believe I have established a wellness program that will continue to help the juvenile detention officers and me at the Snake River Juvenile Detention Center in Twin Falls, Idaho.

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