

LARGE JAIL NETWORK BULLETIN

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Structured Volunteer Clergy Program Improves Services to Inmates

*by Harold B. Wilber
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When I was hired in August 1989 as the Director of Detention in Broward County, I was the sixth director in five years. The detention department was experiencing phenomenal growth and employed more than 1,300 employees, two-thirds of whom had worked for the Broward Sheriff's Office (BSO) for less than five years. The county's three jail sites housed over 3,300 inmates, and a long-standing federal suit to improve conditions was in effect.

At that time, a full-time chaplain was not assigned, but an ordained minister occupied a position as "Crisis Intervention Counselor." His main function was responding to the counseling needs of BSO employees, especially following events such as shootings and SWAT callouts, and he played no role in religious programming for inmates.

Following that counselor's retirement from BSO, I converted a caseworker position to that of a chaplain and hired, coincidentally, a former caseworker who was also an ordained minister. The new chaplain

was clearly the best candidate, and we received the extra benefit of hiring someone who not only knew the system but was also aware of shortcomings of the existing religious programs.

Unstructured Programming

Religious programs in the jails at that time were "managed" by the caseworkers and ranged from very limited to excessive in scope. Local clergy involvement in the "auxiliary chaplain program" was strictly voluntary, and with more than 100 volunteers, the program was out of control. Volunteer rosters were outdated, and I had doubts about the qualifications, character, and even the agenda of some volunteers who had access to the jails.

In addition, past sheriffs had issued a variety of IDs to the auxiliary chaplains, even authentic-looking gold star badges. Volunteer chaplains roamed through the facilities at will, and, along with caseworkers who were notaries public, conducted such business as performing marriages with seemingly little regard for reason or control. The situation generally caused me concern, particularly regarding security.

A Structured Solution

I directed the new chaplain to square things away. I pointed him to American Correctional Association and National Institute of Corrections guidelines for inmate religious programs and the use of volunteers.

The first thing he did was to purge the outdated chaplain volunteer roster. Next, we developed a policy and procedure on religious programs and operations orders for clergy volunteer clearances. A form was created for volunteer applications, procedures for background checks

Components of the new program included volunteer background checks, standard clergy identification cards, scheduling, and volunteer training.

were set in place, and a new, standard "volunteer clergy" ID was adopted that contains a photograph, identifying information, and a statement that the bearer has no arrest powers. Further, we established a training program for the volunteers and published a schedule for religious activities. Past, current, and new volunteers were informed about what was being done, and why.

The sheriff supported our efforts. The volunteer clergy and religious programs were dovetailed with

other programs to ensure complementary effects. The Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Cocaine Anonymous, and GED programs also were scrutinized as to who was involved, when, and where, and there was a general tightening up all around. We discovered that the tightening up actually expanded inmates' overall exposure to real programs that were wholesome and in tune with security needs.

Program Development

Our chaplain develops the religious volunteer program by holding meetings with representatives from several major religious faiths. This recruitment effort includes those who speak other languages and represent such groups as Hispanics, Haitians, and Jamaicans. In our volunteer training, it has proven to be more effective to meet separately with each religious group, such as Catholics, Protestants, Jews, and Muslims. This also allows us to develop a team concept and get feedback from the groups, which prevents problems.

Groups now provide religious materials as well as special services during holidays. Both religious and non-religious days are observed, including Chanukah, Christmas, Thanksgiving, and Mothers' Day.

Our chaplain is often asked to speak to different congregations. He educates church members on the jails' needs and describes opportunities for members to become

involved. The chaplain also is a guest on radio talk shows. The whole process is a successful marketing effort.

Volunteer Appreciation

Inmate religious programs are not only required, they are certainly beneficial. Budgets don't always allow for full-time clergy and secretarial support; thus, our volunteers are a great asset in helping inmates adjust to confinement, providing valuable counseling, and serving as a vital link to the community.

We very much appreciate our volunteer clergy, and to show our appreciation, we hosted a breakfast for them on a recent Saturday. The volunteers, in turn, appreciate the clear guidelines and policies we provide them. We feel that we are more effective because everyone involved is operating off the proverbial "same sheet of music."

Anyone interested in obtaining copies of our regulations addressing religious matters may write me, Harold Wilber, or our Chaplain, Rick Braswell, at the Department of Detention, Broward County Sheriff's Office, 555 S.E. 1st Avenue, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, 33301. ■

Conducting separate volunteer training sessions for the various religious faiths allows the development of a team concept and facilitates feedback from each group.