

# CORRECTIONAL OASIS

HELPING CORRECTIONAL & OTHER PUBLIC SAFETY AGENCIES BUILD A MORE ENGAGED WORKFORCE

VOLUME: 21

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A NON-PROFIT FOR THE HEALTH OF CORRECTIONAL & OTHER PUBLIC SAFETY AGENCIES, STAFF AND FAMILIES

# THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

This issue is dedicated to the families of correctional staff and other public safety staff. Why? Because they are truly the unseen and usually unrecognized heroes and heroines that keep correctional staff's worlds together and functioning, often at a great cost to themselves. Correctional family members oftentimes continue to accommodate and acclimate, adjust and start over, get ready and wait, embrace and forgive, try to understand and keep on giving.

The following quotes were gleaned from a correctional family wellness listening session held on the east coast.

"I can't sign my daughter up for sports because we can't count on his schedule."

"Promotions can be a step down for us because his schedule gets all screwed up."

"My husband was assaulted, and I found out on Facebook; no one contacted me."

"There is a difference between being home and being present."

"You become reactionary."

"I'm trying to maintain family life the way it was."

"I'm worried about my mental health and well-being. You go into survival mode."

"I feel like a single parent."

"Why is it just us that has to do all this shit to make it better?"

"It's too late for us."

At Desert Waters, we recognize the daily sacrifices you're making as a family member of corrections staff. We trust the following stories will further acknowledge and validate your unique experiences. We appreciate you.

*Caterina Spinaris*



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#nationalcorrectionalfamilyappreciationweek

# DON'T EVER "I'M FINE" ME AGAIN

BY BECKY ZOCCOLA

"I'm fine."

Are you fine? Am I fine?

I realized that after a decade of hearing that answer from you, I started giving the same one. I was not fine and neither were you, but I had to be. I was taking care of you, was taking care of our daughter, of our home, working full time, doing everything and anything to stay afloat, but who was taking care of me? Does anyone care how I'm doing? Do you even see me anymore? Does anyone realize how hard it is for us? We are the ones that may not work in corrections, but that were being held captive by the job. We are the family members of corrections staff.

I watched you, an officer for 18 years, slowly become a person that was unrecognizable to me physically, emotionally, and mentally. You put the job before me, our family, and the life we were supposed to be building together. I was alone. Always walking on eggshells. Making excuses and trying to justify your absence, whether it be physical or mental. But "I signed up for this," right? "I knew what I was getting myself into" and how your work affected you, right? **No, I didn't sign up for this.**

Who was asking me if I was ok? If my daughter was ok when she hadn't seen her Daddy all week? I was alone, overfunctioning on every level, and burnt out. I was done. Does that even matter? Do I matter to anyone?

Do you care? Are you still in there?

I love you, but I can't do this anymore.

You don't want to be this way anymore either? I'll believe it when I see it, but what are the chances you put YOURSELF before the job? Before your pride? Before the brothers and sisters you work with? To save yourself. To save your family. To save me.

One day at a time. One hard conversation at a time. One small adjustment at a time. Facing emotions, facing trauma, and lifting the fog that has been dragging you down for years to let the light of healing in.

Talk to someone who understands your trauma. Talk to your peers. Be vulnerable. Face the hard truths of what you've experienced that got you here. And, most importantly, talk to me.

I see you. Coming back to me. Coming back to yourself. Is this really happening? Are you really back? Not

fully yet, but you are better. You are the man I always knew you were. My family, my rock, my husband. I need you. Your family needs you. Don't ever leave me again. Don't ever "I'm fine" me again... I can't go through that again.

I see you. When you give your best to help those around you. When sometimes it's hard to help yourself.

When you want to help others not go through the pain, trauma, stress. When sometimes it's hard to face it yourself.

What you are doing now to bring light to this subject in order to better yourself and the lives of those in corrections is the true meaning of strength and resilience.

You are not replaceable. Your family is not replaceable. Don't give up on yourself. Don't give up on your family. It's all that truly matters at the end of it all.

\*\*I love you and I'm proud of you. You are everything to me. And now you're everything to yourself. \*\*





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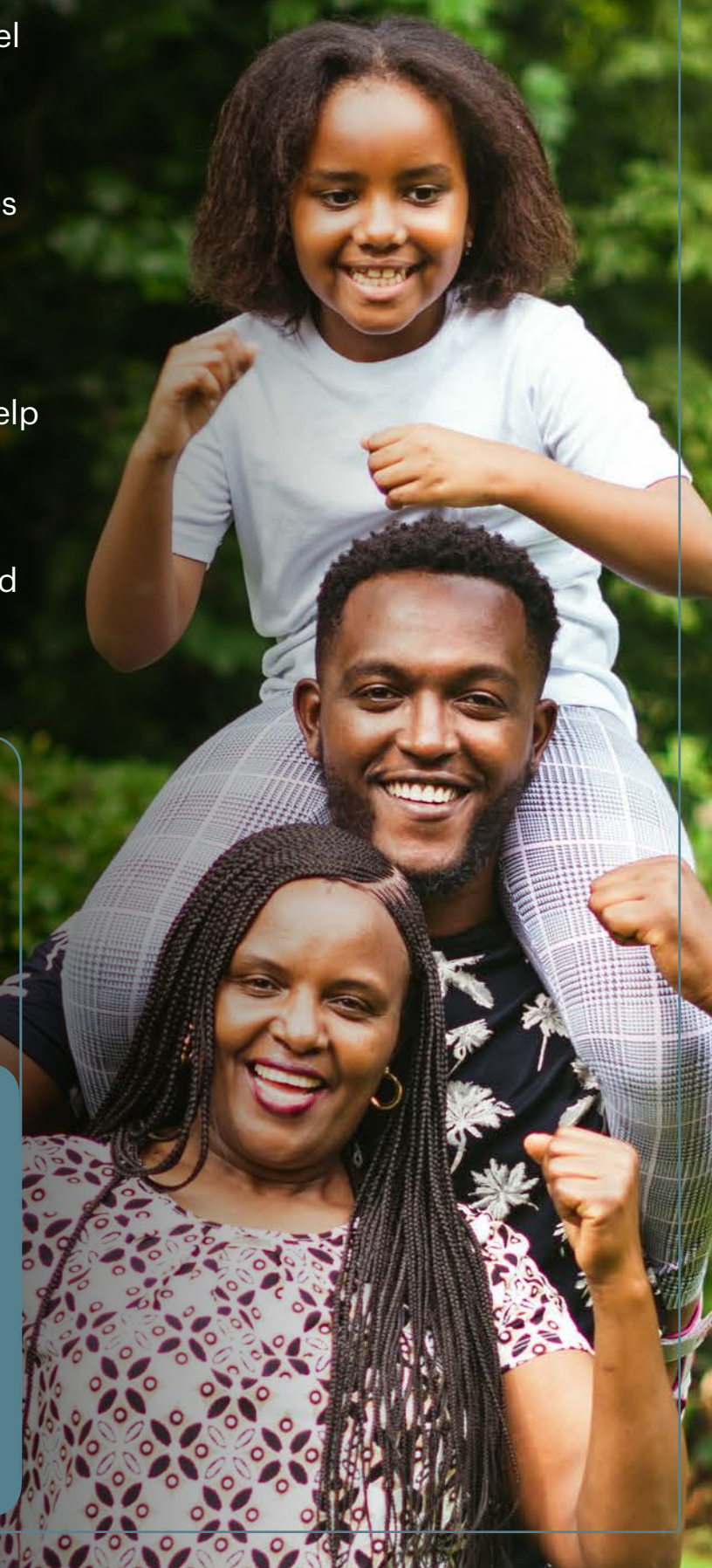
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# “LEAVE IT AT THE DOOR”

BY SERGEANT JOE ZOCCOLA

One of the first things I learned in the academy was to “leave it at the door.” That was almost 19 years ago, and I never realized the damage five words could do.

When I began telling people that I was going into corrections, I heard a lot of negative comments. A few rubbed me the wrong way because they basically assumed I couldn’t do the job. I used the negativity and just tried to do my best.

Once out of the academy, I became a master of leaving everything at the door. Whatever happened that day, good, bad or indifferent, I left it at the door. I had no clue the damage I was doing to my own mental health. I slowly was becoming a different person. I didn’t see it, and I never allowed anyone close enough to tell me otherwise.

I had a string of “bad” relationships that I would simply end when the other person got close enough to start noticing there was something wrong. It was easier to walk away and continue leaving everything at the door than dealing with what was going on with me. I didn’t realize I was slowly becoming numb to everything in my world. I was never an emotional person to begin with, but I had no idea how unemotional I was becoming. I had no idea that leaving everything at the door was slowly killing the person I was.

I had become a master at leaving everything at the door. I didn’t notice how different I had become, but it didn’t matter to me. I thought I was doing exactly what I was supposed to do. It made a great CO; I did my job to the best of my ability. My outside life was suffering, though; I was losing touch with lifelong friends. I was pushing away my family. The only place I felt truly comfortable was either at work or if I was out with my coworkers. They understood me. They knew exactly how I felt. I spent most of my time with them, and they made me feel comfortable.

About eight years into my career, I met Becky. At the time, I had no idea she would be the one who would eventually force me to be the man I used to be. We had our ups and downs; I shut her out like I had done with every other relationship I had been in. Becky was different than everyone else, though. She was the kindest person I had ever met. She tried her hardest to make me talk to her about everything. At this point it was already too late. I had learned how to pretend and lie my way through everything. I was completely numb inside, but I pretended just enough to seem normal.

Becky is truly amazing. She saw something in me that I don’t think I even saw at that point. She never wanted to give up on me. But at a certain point it became too much for even her. She finally reached her breaking point with me. Even then, she wanted the best for me. She still tried to pick me up. Even at the

lowest point of our relationship, with nothing holding us together but one tiny string, she still tried to pick me up. Ultimately, she couldn't save me at that point; I just wasn't ready to be saved yet.

With things all but done, she was scheduled to have knee surgery. She needed a ride to and from the appointment, so I decided to give her a ride. That decision was the best decision I ever made. After dropping her off at the doctors, I went back to the car and decided to read a book everyone was talking about. It was *The Nothing that Never Happened* by William Young. I remember reading the book and having to put it down multiple times because it was freaking me out. It was like someone else knew exactly what I felt and was going through. I had never met or talked to William Young before. How did he know exactly how I felt? It was at that moment that I realized I was not alone. That other people out there felt like I did. It literally brought tears to my eyes because I knew at that moment that I could be better.

I immediately went online and found a therapist who specialized in first responders. I had tried multiple therapists before, but I never felt comfortable with any of them. I felt like they were always judging me. They didn't understand where I worked. Finding the right therapist was a game changer for me. Once I found her, everything changed. She is a retired detective, and even though she wasn't a corrections officer she understood everything I was feeling. One of the first things she ever told me was leaving everything at the door is the biggest mistake you ever made, and that was before I even told her I was told that in the academy. It's like she knew me even before I walked through the door.

I still had a ton of work to do on myself before Becky decided to fully take me back. I met it all head on. I did everything I could do to make myself a better man. It took a lot of work, but it was all worth it. Becky and I are in a better place now than we ever were before.

I never leave anything at the door now. Regardless of how small it might be, I try and tell her something about my day. I have learned what I can and can't tell her. If something is too much for her, I tell my therapist.

I hate to think where I would be without Becky in my life. I am not sure I would even be here. I was in a really bad place, and the only reason I came out of it was because of her.





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# OPERATION: MY BROTHER'S KEEPER...SO NO ONE HAS TO FIGHT ALONE

BY CAREY MENDIBOURE

(First published in the Sept 2020 issue of the *Correctional Oasis*. Reprinted with permission.)

Toward the end of July, my husband John casually mentioned that a piece he had written was selected for publication in the *Correctional Oasis*. I asked him twice if I could read it and each time, whether purposefully or coincidentally, he put it off. On what turned out to be the day before the August volume was emailed out, I randomly checked to see if I could find the article on the website. There it was: "Keeping the Demons Behind the Walls."

Whatever I thought his article would be about, I was not prepared for what I read. The knowledge of how deeply he was affected, and that he didn't feel able to reach out to me, absolutely gutted me. We don't have children and as far as couples go, we are very closely connected, more than most others I know. He mentioned in the article that I knew things were wrong, and I did, but I didn't fully comprehend the extent to which it was affecting him. I love my husband dearly, which means I am well aware of his stubbornness, but until that moment, I fully believed that he would have felt he could open up to me in his own time.

John gives a lot of himself to more people than I can count. He's the one people trust and confide in. Unfortunately, it can be lonely at the proverbial top. He takes on the burdens of so many other people without question. It's my belief that he doesn't feel that it's right to lay his troubles back on them. That's huge. It's an obvious issue. I KNOW my husband. After reading the article, I knew that I couldn't push him to do anything...I couldn't push him to find a therapist, or try any specific kind of a therapy, or find a new way to practice self-care. John's going to do what John's going to do. At the same time, I'm a problem solver and this was a problem that I needed a solution to...and my fingers were crossed that I'd figure out the RIGHT solution. I realize that seems incredibly ignorant, or perhaps arrogant, to think I could solve the problem, but when you have such deep love and respect for someone, standing by and letting the status quo continue is not an option.

I gave it a lot of thought in very little time, a day or two really. I came up with an idea: create a Facebook group for employees of corrections and law enforcement departments that could be a kind of an online peer support program and resource hub. The theory being that people are often able to open up more through the anonymity afforded by being online. Those who need to reach out, like John had been in need, might feel more comfortable doing so in a protected social media platform. My plan formulated, I floated the idea to John one day, mentioning that it would complement his suicide awareness and prevention seminar at the upcoming CPOF Project 2000. He liked it! We went back and forth on names, ultimately deciding on

"Operation: My Brother's Keeper" (OMBK). We also quickly agreed that the group had to be private and members had to be vetted to the greatest extent possible to ensure privacy of such sensitive topics.

I spent the whole of August 1 creating the page and setting up the "skeleton" for it. I didn't want to put too much out there too quickly for fear of overwhelming people right off the bat. I also didn't want to have too little and turn people off, believing there wasn't anything there for them. The next day, August 2, John invited the first official member, a dear friend of ours who is a team leader for peer support at California Men's Colony. He has a Facebook group of his own for CMC, and he started inviting his network of people to join OMBK. We had over 100 members by the end of the day; more than 200 members by the end of the next day. The growth went much more quickly than we had dared hope for. OMBK had over 1,000 members the night of August 9, just a week after the first member joined.

The numbers indicate a need. Most of our members have joined through invitations, so networking really. A great many still have joined through posts in other LEO-centric groups. The vetting process is time consuming and there is resistance occasionally. However, I feel that the people that are opening up and sharing their stories need the protection of ensuring their audience is who we say it is. And people ARE starting to share. Each day more members are coming forward, some giving voice to their battles for the first time, others doing so out of relief that they finally have somewhere that offers support from those who understand the demons they are fighting. I am not surprised to hear over and over again that those outside the field don't understand what these warriors are going through. The thread that is tying everyone together, the shared experience in serving in a niche professional area, is what allows the group to function, in my opinion.

Each day I try to create a post that gives a resource or article on relevant topics, and I encourage others to post those that they have encountered as well. The resources and stories that are shared in individual posts are tagged with a topic. New topics are added as necessary or as I think of a need for them. Current post tags include Suicide/Crisis; PTSD/PTSI; Peer Resource (those who have offered to talk to anyone in need); COVID-19 (shout out to the Desert Waters' Coping with COVID series); Links; International support; Book Recommendations; CA Resources; Humor; Member Pics.

Yes. You read that right. "International support." OMBK is predominantly American. However, there are members from Canada, New Zealand, and Britain as well (that I know of). Attempting to find relevant resources for those outside the United States is something I need to tackle soon. In addition to being an international group, OMBK members represent the rank spectrum in its entirety, from officers to wardens and chiefs. The experience level of the members runs the gamut from a few months to 35+ years of service. Sworn officers make up the bulk of the membership, but there are civilian employees, like me, as well.

The group is still young. It's still relatively small, considering how many people are out there that are dealing with issues brought on by their career in law enforcement and/or corrections. There is a lot I want to do and it's just going to take time. This is my labor of love for John. My gift to him, the only way I could think of to

help him and others like him who felt unable to speak up about needing help in their battles. It is my contribution to my law enforcement family that I love and believe in and whom I have seen suffer.

Through this group, we are meeting some amazing people who are just as passionate about mental health in law enforcement as we are. One incredible person who has joined us is Chris Thorp with Operation Enduring Warrior/Task Force Sentinel, who said it best: "If we all decided to take on the task to ensure our own personal responsibilities to give ourselves, and others, the place to freely discuss these topics, we'd shatter the stigma forever." "Operation: My Brother's Keeper" strives to be that place.

**"Operation: My Brother's Keeper"**

Facebook Page ([click here](#))



# A FAMILY AFFAIR

BY CATERINA SPINARIS, PHD, LPC

The wife of a corrections officer once told me, “When my husband got a job at the Department of Corrections as a Corrections Officer, I had no idea that it was a package deal—that we’d be signing up too, as a family.”

Since then, I’ve heard similar statements expressed by other family members of corrections staff as they navigate through the uncharted waters of their loved one working in corrections, and while trying to understand and adapt to changes in their life as a family.

More often than not, your spouse and your other family members enter into the world of corrections uninformed and unprepared for the toll this occupation can take on you, and by extension on them, and the changes they will be experiencing in their home life as a result of your job demands.

Your family members are happy that you will have a steady paycheck with benefits. They are thrilled to hear that your paycheck could be augmented through the pay differential of shift work, through working on holidays, and through overtime. But they do not yet know how these work conditions translate in real life, or how they can affect your family life and your well-being.

Your family members usually do not know or understand:

- That, when you enter the corrections workforce, they too will be entering a world with its own language and its own rules, a world which operates on basic assumptions that are vastly different from those of the free world
- That in the corrections world things happen that are so far out of the ordinary, that if they were told to people on the street, many would just refuse to believe them
- That your family’s established rhythms, traditions, and practices will be affected by the nature and demands of corrections work, and what may be needed to address that
- The lifestyle changes that shift work, overtime and changing schedules bring, and they are not mentally and practically prepared for the sacrifices that these changes require
- That the corrections mindset will come home with you, and that, in addition to you acquiring desirable new skills, you might also be shaped negatively by the job, and so become someone quite unlike who you used to be prior to starting your corrections career
- Your department’s policies and procedures, your administrative regulations, your work circumstances and details, the work jargon you use
- What it is like to work all night and try to sleep during the day
- The power dynamics of the paramilitary rank structure that is now your workplace
- That their ability to intimately “connect” with you may be impacted as time goes by, possibly eventually you two becoming strangers to one another at the emotional level (*explaining to your partner what life behind the walls or in the field is like often proves to be too unpleasant to you, too energy consuming or too difficult to do. And you don’t want to be talking about work when you are*

*home. You also do not want to scare or traumatize your spouse, or you cannot discuss a case under investigation. So, conversations might tend to stay shallow, superficial, with you typically answering the question, "How was your day?" with "Fine," regardless of what has actually happened that day at work. After a while, your spouse may feel like they do not know you anymore, and/or they may stop asking you questions)*

- Your being chronically physically and emotionally exhausted, and not having the energy or motivation to do much when off work; why you no longer want to engage with the children like you used to do *(and your spouse may get angry at you about that)*
- Why you are steadily gaining weight, with your blood pressure and blood sugar readings no longer falling in the normal range
- Why you are becoming more impatient, irritable, or prone to anger outbursts for no apparent reason *(your spouse may snap back at you, resulting in verbal clashes that you are likely to win, just because you are well practiced at doing so at work. Only the victory at home comes with a steep price tag of emotional distancing and something dying inside after each such fight. And the fact that your fuse keeps getting shorter may quite simply scare your loved ones. As a result, they may avoid spending time with you or discussing sensitive or controversial family needs and issues, again leading to emotional distancing and disconnection)*
- Why you have increased your alcohol or tobacco consumption, or why you now engage in other compulsive and escapist behaviors, such as excessive playing of video games, gambling, or online sexual activities
- Why you have developed gallows humor that may be appalling to them, rendering you not very likeable to them, and perhaps even repulsive
- Why the sky-rocketing, shocking-to-them increase in your use of profanity, often regardless of who is present;
- Why you are becoming harder, more calloused, or judgmental of others (your stinging comments about people stun them: "What happened to the person I married?")
- Why you seem to be indifferent when you hear about instances of harm befalling on people, and your apparent lack of compassion *(a spouse once asked me, "Does this come with the job, or is he just heartless?")*
- Why you talk to strangers curtly, perhaps even aggressively, apparently assuming the worst about them *(your family members may be embarrassed by your behavior, thinking that you are being unnecessarily mistrusting, biased against certain groups of people, and no longer kind, considerate or objective, which can lead to friction between you)*
- Why you talk down to them in ways that they find to be demeaning, insulting and hurtful, ordering them around and trying to control their every move, sometimes even using the very same language with them that you would at work with individuals you manage
- Why you are becoming increasingly stricter with your children, overly worried about their safety, laying down rigid rules, and running background checks on their friends and their parents *(your spouse cringes when you say things like, "I'll make sure that none of my kids will ever become inmates!")*
- Your objections as to why they must not go to certain places or associate with certain people *(they find your increasing concerns about danger and your pervasive mistrust of people to border on paranoia that interferes with normal social functioning)*

- Why you turn down invitations to family gatherings, school events, or other social activities (*they may end up going alone, feeling more like a single parent than a partner in a marriage, raising the children and running the household on their own—no longer enjoying the teamwork they used to have with you*)
- Why you are starting to show signs of serious anxiety, alcohol abuse, depression, or post-traumatic stress
- Why you cannot get through a sleep cycle without thrashing, yelling, kicking and punching in your sleep (*this happens so often that even sharing the bed with you—when they get to do that—becomes an issue*).

My clinical and training experience with corrections families supports the fact that if these issues are left unaddressed, they will eventually hurt and even destroy marriages and parent-child relationships. Families cannot continue with life as usual after one of them hires on in corrections. Proactive measures, preparation and new learning are needed to protect your most valuable earthly investment and treasure—your family.

And the toughest situation right now is the extreme use of mandatory overtime, when families may not be able to have the time to “connect” with their loved one who works in corrections to spend meaningful time with them more than once a week. This may sound hard to believe, but this is what we hear from families.

Helping corrections families is not simply something to be addressed haphazardly, as an afterthought, or once a year during a Family Day. Rather, this goal must be pursued rigorously and systematically, starting before graduation day at the Training Academy.

I believe that it is also imperative, and a moral obligation, that corrections agencies help equip adult corrections family members with effective strategies for dealing with the “bleeding” of correctional work stressors into family life, such as training that includes coping and problem-solving skills on ways they can protect and prioritize their home life. Employees and their family members should be handed “hazmat suits” to wear as they tackle correctional work stressors. Additionally, agencies must do their utmost to provide working conditions that honor and protect their employees’ family life.

Doing so is truly a win-win both for employees and their families, and for the agencies for which they work. Agencies would most certainly benefit because an unhealthy family life will inevitably mar work performance, increasing the agencies’ liability, and even impact employee retention, as sometimes staff are confronted with the alternative of either quitting their corrections job or losing their spouse/partner at home.

Much is at stake. Let’s prioritize what’s important. Reach out to us at Desert Waters; we’d be honored to journey with you towards success in navigating this “family affair.”

# QUOTE OF THE MONTH

“Your  
family and  
your love must  
be cultivated like a  
garden. Time, effort, and  
imagination must be  
summoned constantly to keep any  
relationship flourishing and growing.”

Jim Rohn





# IN MEMORIAM

**Chanterria "Mackey" Alber**

Corrections Deputy  
St. Landry Parish Sheriff's Office, Louisiana

**Scott Busboom**

Deputy Warden  
Nebraska Department of Correctional Services

**Reymundo Caldera**

Correctional Officer  
California Department of Corrections and  
Rehabilitation

**William "Alden" Elliott**

Investigator  
N.C. Department of Adult Correction

**Joshua Eyer**

Police Officer Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police  
Department

**Leonard Johnson**

Sheriff  
Macon County  
Georgia

**Sam Poloche**

Investigator  
North Carolina Department of Adult Correction

**Thomas Weeks**

Deputy U.S. Marshal

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## Mission

Advancing the well-being of correctional and other public safety staff and their families, and the health of correctional and other public safety agencies, through data-driven, skill-based training

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Desert Waters Correctional Outreach is a non-profit corporation which helps correctional and other public safety agencies counter Corrections Fatigue in their staff by cultivating a healthier workplace climate and a more engaged workforce through targeted skill-based training and research.

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