



DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE, CORRECTIONS SERVICE

WORKPLACE ASSESSMENT

STAFF SUMMARY REPORT

CONFIDENTIAL DOCUMENT

NOVEMBER 27, 2020

DESCRIPTION OF THE WORK

As a result of various concerns raised by staff and other individuals., the Deputy Minister of Justice engaged HR Atlantic to complete a workplace assessment for Corrections Service (the “Division”) encompassing the staff of Headquarters, three Corrections facilities, and Community Corrections.

Purpose

The purpose of this workplace assessment is to clarify the issues and concerns from the perspective of staff across various levels and workplaces within the Division so that these concerns can be productively addressed and create an improved workplace for all staff.

Process

The consultation process consisted of two data collection methods. In an effort to provide a voice to all staff, all staff were invited to participate in a confidential survey over a 3 week period. The staff survey had a 52% response rate with 162 staff participating. Staff were then offered an opportunity to participate in a one-on-one interview and 98 staff participated in an interview, 24 declined an interview, 16 did not show up for a confirmed interview and did not reschedule, and 32 did not show up for their confirmed interview but did reschedule and participate.

The data collected from the survey and interviews was collated and organized into themes to protect individual confidentiality. This report summarizes what was heard from staff.

WHAT IS WORKING WELL

Interview participants were asked to share what they believed was working well within their job and/or workplace:

- The strongest positive response was that they enjoyed working with their team;
- Many Corrections Officers shared that their team members were also their friend group outside of work;
- Probation Services staff enjoyed their small teams, and for the most part the autonomy of their work;
- Most staff reported good relations with their direct supervisor;
- Many staff identified that the pay and benefits were “great” in particular Corrections Officers given the minimum entrance criteria of grade 12 or equivalent;
- Probation Services staff were proud of their education and enjoyed their client work;
- Within the smaller communities, staff valued their job in terms of both pay and location;
- For Corrections Officers, particularly those working at NSCC, overtime pay was a significant boost to their annual income;
- Staff in the FSCC women’s unit appreciated the new building and said it was a significant improvement over the old building;

- Headquarters staff saw many positive things happening within the Division such as the new *Corrections Act* and the transformation of SMCC to a Therapeutic Community Centre;
- Senior management in facilities were proud of their “open door policy” with staff;
- Many in senior management positions started their career as a Corrections Officer and accordingly felt they had a good base of knowledge about the Corrections facilities.

THEMES HEARD FROM THE CORRECTIONS FACILITIES

Following is a summary of the various perspectives shared by interview participants from the three Corrections facilities within the following themes:

1. Staffing;
2. Policies & Directives;
3. Safety;
4. Communication; and
5. Leadership & Facility Management.

Staffing

Staffing issues were the most significant theme heard from Corrections facilities staff, in particular staffing at appropriate levels for known work demands and challenges with recruitment and training.

Staffing Levels

For Corrections facilities staff, and NSCC staff in particular, the frequency of operating “*short-staffed*” in reference to minimum staffing requirements was the most acute issue. The prevailing view was that facility management always staffed at the minimum number, without consideration for increased work demands and short notice absences which occurred daily. While the Corrections Officer relief pool was intended to provide staff to cover day-to-day absences, the reality was that relief staff were not readily available or did not want to work certain shifts or on certain teams. In addition at NSCC it was felt that management was inappropriately counting non-security staff present at the facility to meet the mandatory staffing numbers.

From the frontline’s perspective, the impact of staffing at the minimum level was that “*if something happened, there is no one to have my back*”. Personal safety on the job was a compelling and very real concern to most Corrections Officers interviewed. Corrections Officers felt that management did not share their concern for the potential risks of their job and staffing at the minimum levels was a demonstration of that.

Recruitment

While it was heard that the external recruitment process for Corrections Service positions was generally challenging and time consuming, people talked most about the Corrections Officer position and the Corrections Northern Recruitment Training Program (“CNRTP”). Many staff were critical of the outcomes of the CNRTP and the application of the GNWT’s Affirmative Action

Policy, resulting in marginally qualified employees. When staff talked about marginally qualified, they were referring to knowledge and skill level as well as physical ability to meet job requirements.

It appeared to staff that the current approach to filling management positions, both within the facilities and at Headquarters, was to promote from within. There was a significant amount of distrust expressed with respect to the filling of management and senior management positions. There were a number of people who felt that female staff were being held back from progressing in their career as they did not have the same opportunities as men within the Division, as well as some reflection that this was getting better than it had been in the past.

Training

Training was an issue of concern for many staff interviewed. People identified two main training issues:

1. the quality of the graduates of the CNRTP and the lack of confidence that existing staff had in their knowledge and abilities; and
2. the lack of recertification or refresher training for mandatory training.

Corrections Officers and other facility staff were critical of the CNRTP and the quality of recent graduates from this program. The concerns expressed were about the oversight of the program, the competencies of graduates, and their level of preparedness for working on the floor. Specifically, people said that those in the CNRTP were being pushed through and graduated regardless of their performance due to the overwhelming need for relief Corrections Officers.

Some observed that Deputy Wardens are also not being sufficiently trained for the new aspects of their job when they are promoted and the biggest gap was the lack of basic people management skills that Deputy Wardens demonstrated.

Many staff talked about the lack of training over the past several years and expressed concern for mandatory training such as CPR, First Aid and Use of Force which reportedly has not been made available to staff for some time, resulting in expired certifications. Staff saw the lack of availability of refresher training overall in the facilities as a safety risk to all staff.

Uniforms

For both new and existing staff getting appropriate uniforms, personal protective equipment, and other tools to do the job safely and effectively has been a challenge. This concern was heard most strongly from staff at NSCC and to a lesser degree at the other two facilities. Many Corrections Officers at NSCC talked about not being issued a complete uniform. Staff talked about buying their own PPE, such as appropriate footwear, cut resistant gloves, and tactical belt to complete their uniform as a Corrections Officer. A number of staff shared that female Corrections Officers are issued male shirts and pants that clearly do not fit and are told to make it work. This was seen as disrespectful to female staff. Staff felt that not equipping them properly

in a professional uniform spoke to how they were valued by management, especially female Officers.

Policies & Directives

Policies, directives, and standard operating procedures were a significant topic of conversation and source of concern for staff interviewed. Staff raised four issues regarding policy documents:

1. The absence of consultation by Headquarters on policies that impact frontline staff directly in their work;
2. The volume and constant change to policy documents has overwhelmed staff;
3. The lack of compliance with policy by staff and facility management and the resulting safety concerns; and
4. The lack of enforcement of policy by frontline supervisors.

Approach to Policy

Staff believed that the absence of consultation with those who carry out the policies compromised the credibility of those policies. In the opinion of staff, sometimes policy documents did not “*make sense*” with respect to either how a particular facility operated or their ability to implement a change “*effective immediately*”. The communication received from Headquarters with policy changes most often did not address the reason for the change. This made it more challenging for staff to appreciate the need for the change and also created an opportunity for multiple interpretations of policy. In general, Headquarters approach to policy was perceived to be top down, non-consultative and absent of consideration of the facilities ability to comply.

The volume of policy documents and the frequency of changes issued via email by Headquarters was overwhelming for staff. Most frontline staff felt that it was impossible to keep up with the documents in a meaningful way. As a result, many frontline staff were signing off on policies because they had to, without understanding the changes made. While senior management appreciated the challenge of emailing all staff with new or updated policy documents, they did not see an alternative given the number of permanent and relief staff working in the 24/7 facilities.

Non-Compliance & Accountability

Consistent compliance with policy documents was a significant safety concern heard from frontline staff at all three facilities. When Corrections Officers talked about a lack of consistency between security teams in adhering to policy, they saw two reasons for it:

1. different interpretations because policies were not sufficiently explained by management to ensure consistent application; and
2. lack of supervisory enforcement of procedures across teams and in the facility as a whole.

The lack of consistency was frustrating for staff and has resulted in some Corrections Officers not wanting to work with certain teams or supervisors. Staff felt it was the supervisor's primary responsibility to observe and correct non-compliant actions. Many Corrections Officers felt that their supervisors were not on the floor enough to observe or provide support as they were too busy staffing for the next shift or completing paperwork. Supervisors tended to agree.

A number of staff made the point that it was not only staff who have not consistently followed policy. Some staff have experienced their supervisor or higher management directing them to take action in contravention to policy. Many of the examples of facility management directing staff to violate a policy involved minimum staffing for Corrections Officers.

Corrections Service Approach

Many participants at FSCC and SMCC commented on the reduction in inmate programs offered, as well as the frequency of the offerings. Staff held the view that programs focused on building inmates' activities of daily living and interpersonal skills, recreational activities, as well as the addictions services, domestic violence, anger management, and educational programming, were no longer a priority. It was heard that inmate programming which supported Aboriginal culture, practices and relationship with the land, as well as interactions with the communities and Elders, had been terminated under former Division leadership.

While the changes in programming were seen to have impacted all inmates, particular concern was heard for youth inmates. As a result of changes made, many believe programming for youth has been compromised.

Staff at SMCC and FSCC reported seeing a shift in the service approach in terms of how staff work and interact with inmates. Staff from these two facilities spoke of previously being more engaged with inmates and working with them to gain the skills needed to rebuild self-esteem and be successful upon their release. Some staff felt what has been lost was the support and focus on rehabilitation and reintegration. This perceived shift in service approach with inmates has negatively impacted how some longer serving staff feel about their work.

Safety

With the exception of Corrections Officers, the majority of staff reported that they felt safe working at a workplace with inherent risks.

Personal Safety

Many people interviewed spoke passionately about personal safety and their belief that the safety of staff and inmates was being compromised as a result of two factors:

1. insufficient staffing to ensure Corrections Officers are not alone with inmates when they should not be and that help will be available when needed; and

2. a perceived conflict of values within the Division elevating budgetary concerns above safety concerns.

“Will someone have my back?” was a common statement heard from Corrections Officers throughout the interview process. Context provided for this comment focused primarily on the competence and ability of staff to be able to respond to an incident involving inmates. Corrections Officers spoke of the importance of knowing that their partner and/or team members knew how to respond, were physically capable of responding, and that they would respond if required. A number of female Corrections Officers and several male Corrections Officers spoke to their experience that female Corrections Officers were more at risk due to a differential treatment in terms of emergency support.

Staff also spoke of concerns regarding the level of training and experience of newer supervisors and Deputy Wardens. There was a perception among staff that management has not been responsive to their concerns regarding safety and has adopted a more reactive approach. This perceived approach by management has created the belief among many that the safety of frontline staff is not a priority. Many people pointed to budget cuts as the reason for what they considered to be inadequate staffing. This led them to feel that management did not really value their personal safety and only reacted when necessary.

Staff concerns about safety were centered on the previously discussed areas of skills and refresher training; equipment deficiencies; and inconsistent policy application and enforcement.

Communication

When asked for their comments on communication in the workplace interviewees consistently identified three major issues:

1. Email communication is used almost exclusively by management at all levels with no apparent consideration given to more inclusive forms of communication for some issues. Staff felt bombarded by emails and saw it as a very restrictive and one-sided form of communication;
2. While Wardens talked about having an open door, many staff said that was not really the case. Two of the three Wardens were reportedly rarely on the floor and did not seem accessible to many staff despite their open-door policy; and
3. Staff did not feel listened to on issues which impacted their daily work. In addition to reporting a lack of consultation regarding new policy or revisions to policy, many staff said that their opinions, ideas, and concerns did not matter to management.

Staff at all three facilities talked about the infrequency of staff meetings. Staff felt that regular meetings would be a better way to communicate some information and also allow for two-way dialogue, giving them the voice in the workplace that they have not had. Other concerns regarding communication were heard, including a lack of performance feedback (particularly positive feedback) from management.

Communication within frontline teams and with direct supervisors was generally reported as fair. Staff said that supervisors communicated what they knew about what was going on in the facility however, they often did not know any more than staff did. Some supervisors were better than others in having regular meetings with their staff, and those who did received positive acknowledgment from staff for doing so.

While disrespectful communication was not presented as a common concern, it was heard that some female Corrections Officers have been subject to lewd verbal remarks and gestures from inmates. The number of female Corrections Officers interviewed was not significant enough to be able to state with accuracy the extent or regularity of this inmate behavior or how it was managed.

Leadership & Facility Management

It was commonly heard that Headquarters was disconnected from the realities of front-line facility operations. Staff in all facilities said that they rarely, if ever, saw anyone from Headquarters in the facilities. Senior management at Headquarters were frequently referred to as an old boys club. This group was seen as protecting one another and actively promoting their own into management and senior management positions without fair and open competitions. The old boys club was also reported to exist at the facility level. Those considered to be in this club again occupied the management positions, had the ear of those in authority, shared information exclusively among themselves and excluded women. This widely held perception of an exclusive group who are advantaged has impacted the trust that staff have in senior and middle management.

Generally speaking, staff at the three Corrections facilities did not perceive competent strong leadership at any level of facility management. When staff made this observation, they talked about a number of things:

1. the progression of management from within;
2. a lack of people management skills;
3. an absence of accountability; and
4. a lack of support from management.

While many staff reported a good relationship with their direct supervisor, they also saw a lack of accountability at the supervisory level. Many staff said they wanted to see supervisors, Deputy Wardens, and Wardens on the floor more often to hold staff and inmates accountable. Many believed that the inconsistencies between staff and teams and the lack of enforcement on the part of the supervisors created an opportunity for the inmates to take advantage.

Staff indicated an absence of feedback, either good or bad. Several staff talked about not getting any feedback at all from direct supervisors regarding their job performance. Supervisors were aware that they have not been adequately supervising the work of others and talked about being

challenged by an ever-increasing workload. NSCC supervisors reported spending significant time staffing shifts to the detriment of their other work.

Staff described a culture of blame at NSCC in particular. When something happened with an inmate, staff saw the management response as allocating blaming rather than providing support. Not following the chain of command was an example that many staff talked about when discussing a lack of support for the frontline. When staff talked about the breaking of the chain of command, they most often made reference to inmates' ability to skip all the levels and go directly to the Warden. When this happened, they felt that management did not make the effort to hear their side of the story and felt undermined.

THEMES HEARD FROM COMMUNITY CORRECTIONS

The content provided in this section is a summary of the various perspectives shared by interview participants from Community Corrections within the following themes:

- Staffing;
- Policies & Directives;
- Safety;
- Communication; and
- Leadership & Regional Management.

Overall, the staff of Community Corrections (most commonly referred to as "Probation Services") reported being positive about their work with clients, felt safe as they conducted their work, and felt supported by their small teams. In comparison to the Corrections facilities staff, there were fewer and less acute concerns about their work and work environment.

Staffing

Similar to the Corrections facilities, staffing was a significant topic of conversation in the interviews with Probation staff, in particular recruitment and retention and training and education.

Recruitment and Retention

Staff shared the challenge of keeping the Probation Services adequately staffed, especially in some communities. A commonly heard comment was that local recruitment was a challenge for positions in Probation Services due to the educational requirements of the job. It was also shared that the smaller communities and more remote areas had a harder time recruiting and retaining staff than the more centrally located offices. While recruiting locally was acknowledged as a challenge, staff also spoke about local hiring being a positive thing for their workplace.

Generally it was felt that recruitment efforts lagged and were not initiated in a timely manner, resulting in positions being vacant for lengths of time. In the regions and offices most affected

by turnover and vacant positions, staff spoke about higher caseloads and the effect that being short-staffed had on their work environment and on staff morale.

Training and Education

Several staff spoke about having had little to no access to professional development opportunities. Staff expressed interest in additional training to upgrade their knowledge and build their skillsets, but funding was not available. Staff highlighted several gaps in competencies for Probation Officers in both youth and sexual offender assessment processes. It was heard that there are only a few staff left who can do these assessments and the belief was that the Division has not identified these gaps as priorities and nothing has been done as a result.

Policies & Directives

As was heard from staff in the Corrections facilities, Probation Services staff expressed significant concern regarding the volume of policy documents and a perceived lack of consultation regarding policies which impact their day to day work. A significant number of staff stated that policies are written by individuals without a probations background and without an appropriate understanding of their work. They similarly expressed concern about the frequency of policy changes issued by Headquarters and the fact that these changes were issued by email without much explanation.

Safety

Generally, staff reported feeling secure and safe at work and while conducting their work. Unlike many in the Corrections facilities, staff felt that their safety was taken seriously by management. It was heard that staff had secure offices, panic alarms or panic buttons under their desks, and access to safe vehicles and other safety equipment like satellite phones. Consideration for personal safety was the most commonly heard positive reflection from Probation staff.

Communication

Communication was generally seen to be good by Probation Services staff, with the exception of communication from Headquarters. While staff understood the chain of command, they felt that Headquarters imposed decisions with little input and insufficient explanation. A significant number of staff felt that if Headquarters communicated better, they would be able to do their job better.

In contrast, staff said that communication among co-workers and within the Regional Offices was going well. Staff felt that most of their co-workers were accessible to them. For those who worked in remote offices, communication with their Regional Office was mostly via telephone and email and was generally reported as sufficient and positive. Some staff expressed the view that there could be more opportunity for staff collaboration and more communication amongst staff.

Leadership & Regional Management

Probation staff felt the same as Corrections facility staff that Headquarters was disconnected from their day to day operations. People talked about this disconnection in terms of a lack of visibility and a lack of understanding regarding frontline work in communities and with clients. It was heard that Headquarters' staff has not visited the regional offices.

The effectiveness of regional management varied by region. For the most part regional management was spoken of favorably by staff. In one region however concerns were expressed. While these concerns have been confidentially shared with leadership, further detail cannot be provided due to confidentiality assurances to participants.

IMPACT ON STAFF

Through the workplace assessment process, Corrections Service staff have communicated their perspectives to leadership and have shared what is important to them. Not all staff responded to the survey or were interviewed, so the perspectives of some staff remain unknown. Given the insights from the staff survey and the interviews, the Consultants offer the following analysis of the impact on staff.

There is a strong consensus among staff that Headquarters is disconnected from operations. As staff do not see senior leadership visiting their workplaces, they assume that Headquarters is not in touch with the day-to-day operations and realities of their work. There is an expectation that senior leadership show interest in frontline work by being present and talking to staff, and that is one way that staff would see that their work is valued.

Another demonstration of this disconnection in the eyes of staff is the manner in which Headquarters develops and issues policy. There was a strong message from both the Corrections facilities and Probation Services that staff feel bombarded by policies that they cannot feasibly absorb in a meaningful way. Most felt that what was missing was meaningful input from the frontlines as a part of the development process. The perception that policy is not aligned with their own work opened the door to staff to devalue the policies and those that created them.

The lack of policy compliance was a significant issue heard from Corrections Officers in particular. For many, when they observe that others are not following policy or are directing action contradictory to policy, they feel personally at risk. People attribute the gap in management holding staff accountable in part to the increased workload of facility management and in part to a lack of supervisory skill and training in effectively holding staff accountable with clear expectations, corrective feedback, and consequences.

The lack of consequences for both staff and inmates who are not following the rules was of concern to many frontline staff. There was a sense that the power dynamic has shifted and that inmates now hold more power in the facilities than the frontline staff do. Staff feel this way because they observe inmates jumping the chain of command which undermines their authority

on the floor. Corrections Officers do not feel supported by management and therefore feel vulnerable given the inherent risks in their work.

Respect and trust in both leadership and facility management has been compromised. Staff do not feel consulted about their work, they do not feel listened to, and they do not feel valued. Staff feel that management is more concerned about budget than in staff's personal safety and well-being. Staffing levels in the Corrections facilities are having a significant impact on staff with many staff reporting being burnt out and looking for other job options.

Many people raised the rate of turnover in the Corrections facilities as a consequence of the current environment. There is significant concern about the dwindling level of employee experience both on the frontlines and with frontline supervision, and worry about how a more inexperienced workforce may further compromise safety.

From the Consultant's perspective and experience, what was heard from Corrections Service staff can be distilled into eight simple and yet meaningful requests to leadership:

1. *Keep me safe.*
2. *Equip me to do my job.*
3. *Listen to me.*
4. *Include me.*
5. *Trust me to do my job.*
6. *Value my contribution.*
7. *Help me to grow.*
8. *Care about me.*²

² Adapted from the Gallup Q12 Employee Engagement Index