



# ONE VOICE UNITED

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Dear Members of the Nevada Interim Finance Committee

Every year, on average, eleven correctional staff are killed in the line of duty while every week three Correctional Officers take their own lives. My name is Brian Dawe, and I am the National Director for One Voice United, a non-profit organization dedicated to providing a voice for the men and women who do the most underappreciated public safety job in the country. With over 40 years in the field of Corrections, I can attest that at no time since I began my career as a state correctional officer has the threat to correctional staff mental health been this great. Although all public safety officers need a solid Peer-to-Peer support program, my background is in Corrections and I respectfully offer you that perspective.

Traditionally Corrections has the worst statistics of all public safety professions when it comes to staff mental health. Our suicide rates are twice that of the police and our PTSD rate of 34% is nearly ten times the rate for the general population (3.5%). Our divorce rates and alcoholism rates surpass all other public safety staff and according to three studies our mortality rate is between 59-61, nearly 15 years shorter than the average American. Nationally our turnover rate reveals that 54% of new hires leave within their first 24 months of service. There is something about the psychological demands placed on staff that is behind these damning statistics and this mass exodus we are seeing from the corrections profession.

Although this is a mental health crisis, even the most callous analyst basing their opinion purely on economic grounds would reach the conclusion that the current situation is economically unsustainable. From a cost analysis standpoint, seeking, screening, interviewing and training a new public safety officer can cost on average \$28,000 per new hire. In Corrections with a 54% turnover rate that gets expensive quickly. Now consider that an employee with PTSD uses on average 7 more days leave time per year and that 34% of correctional staff have PTSD, and those combined costs cannot be ignored.

Anyone who applies for a job working in corrections knows there are inherent physical risks that come with it. Since the time we are children every movie we see or news story we watch

has taught us that prisons and jails can be dangerous violent places. What you are not told when you hire on is that the bigger danger is psychological. Ask any correctional officer if the job has changed them, better yet ask their families. At One Voice United that is what we specialize in, talking to staff, conducting confidential listening sessions, fielding surveys, and digging deep into the roots of the psychological damage this job can cause.

What we have found is that although there are well meaning attempts through various EAP programs to address the stresses of the job, often staff fail to use them for fear their confidentiality will be breached and a “weakness” exposed. In the field of corrections, the last thing you want is to be viewed as weak by anyone - the incarcerated population, fellow staff, or the administration. There is also a bond that develops among staff, a sense that only those who do the job understand what it’s like and the stresses involved. That camaraderie can provide an essential lifeline for those in need, a network of fellow staff to talk to – *if they are properly trained in peer support*.

We spend a lot of time and money on training staff in self-defense, as well we should, but we do not spend nearly enough on mental health – which staff themselves have identified as the greater danger. When we survey staff, and we have surveyed thousands, the incarcerated population and threat of violence come in fourth or lower when staff identify sources of job stress.

Simply put, our correctional facilities are extremely toxic environments. If we want to attract and keep professional staff, we must address the core issue that drives them away – stress. One of the key principles of a sound mental health wellness program for occupations regularly exposed to trauma is a solid Peer-to-Peer to support network, based in confidentiality and well trained.

We hope you will look favorably upon this agenda item for funding and add a Peer-to-Peer support network to your program addressing staff’s mental health.

Sincerely,

Brian Dawe,  
National Director  
One Voice United

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