

JOB CORPS:

A Training Program Pipeline to the Corrections Profession

By Carl Nink, Carol Blair Johnston, Troy Oldbury, George Cheeseman and Ramon Rodriquez

With the nation's correctional agencies struggling to find and retain correctional officers, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) is trying an innovative approach. TDCJ has partnered with the Gary Job Corps Community in San Marcos, Texas, to create a program that is the first of its kind in the United States and represents an important work force development pipeline for students wishing to enter the corrections profession.

The Gary Job Corps Center is considered a college program, similar to any other college program within Texas offering TDCJ curriculum. Additionally, the Gary Job Corps Center is investigating dual-credit opportunities with local colleges because students currently do not receive college credits for program completion. Job Corps is an important program within the U.S. Department of Labor to help young people overcome barriers to employment.

In March 2001, Management & Training Corp. (MTC) officials representing corrections and Job Corps met with TDCJ officials to discuss a correctional officer training program at the Gary Job Corps Center. MTC proposed expanding its security officer training at the center to include correctional officer training that would meet TDCJ standards. The contract that grew out of that initial meeting between the department and Gary Job Corps is renewable annually. Job Corps instructors receive specialized training at TDCJ academies and attend an annual TDCJ in-service training session.

What Is Job Corps?

Each year, Job Corps helps thousands of young people begin satisfying careers. Job Corps is a 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week residential program. The U.S. Department of Labor administers the program to meet the education and training needs of economically disadvantaged youths throughout the country.

Established in 1964, Job Corps has trained and educated more than 2 million young people and currently serves nearly 70,000 students each year. Job Corps has 122 centers located in 48 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. Many of these now have security training programs that could be adapted to meet standards and training requirements of state correctional agencies across the country.

To enroll in the program, a student must be:

- Between the ages of 16 and 24;
- A U.S. citizen or legal resident;
- Free of probation or parole;
- Free of serious medical or behavioral problems; and
- Willing to work and learn in a drug-free and violence-free environment.

All prospective Job Corps students undergo a thorough background check and sign an agreement pledging to comply with Job Corps' zero-tolerance policy for drugs and violence.

Job Corps offers an individualized program designed to provide students with a high school diploma or GED and a certificate in an industry-recognized trade. Applicants are generally assigned to a center near their home and the average length of stay is about eight months.

According to the National Job Corps Association, Job Corps' benefits exceed costs by a ratio of more than 2-to-1, returning \$2.02 for every \$1 spent on the program. Job Corps also has one of the highest placement rates among the nation's job-training programs. Nearly nine in 10 (86 percent) students who train at a Job Corps center for two months or more obtain jobs, enter the military or enroll in higher education, the National Job Corps Center reports. With the high demand for correctional officers, Gary Job Corps Center officials expect strong graduate placement success.

Significance of TDCJ's Partnership

The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects an annual average demand of 19,200 correctional officers through the year 2012. However, this figure may be low, since more than 34,000 correctional officers were hired across the country in 2001, according to the *2003 Corrections Yearbook*.

The American Correctional Association's *2005 Directory, Adult and Juvenile Correctional Departments, Institutions, Agencies, and Probation and Parole Authorities* indicates that the adult correctional security staff turnover rate for the United States, with three not reporting, was 15.5 percent on Sept. 30, 2004. In addition, according to the *2003 Corrections Yearbook*, one-fourth of new correctional officers are leaving before completing their probationary period. The demand for qualified correctional officers is growing. Programs that provide correc-



tional officer training and skills help fill a critical need by guiding young, trained professionals toward careers in corrections.

There are currently security officer programs at 25 Job Corps centers nationwide. These vocational programs run about six months, with graduates earning Job Corps certificates or state licensure to work in private security. However, only the Gary Job Corps Center offers a certificate from a state correctional agency.

Like many correctional agencies nationwide, TDCJ continues to face significant challenges in meeting the high demand for correctional officers. According to ACA's directory, the fiscal year 2004 turnover rate for TDCJ correctional officers was 21 percent. TDCJ is continually seeking opportunities to enhance correctional officer recruiting and retention initiatives to ensure staffing needs are met.

The Gary Job Corps Center Corrections Training Academy is a valuable asset to TDCJ's effort to maintain correctional officer strength. The training program fulfills all of the TDCJ standards, including physical ability, firearms and chemical agent training. The program uses the same curriculum, materials and testing. Regular contact between TDCJ and the Gary Job Corps Center program staff provides the opportunity for continual quality improvements and exchanges of information. This helps graduates to make a smooth transition into the correctional work force.

The approach and format for this training program is easy to reproduce in other states. With the breadth of the Job Corps program and its ability to meet mutual interests, a correctional training program that produces qualified cadets at no cost to the state correctional agency is a win-win arrangement and worthy of investigation.

The 350-hour Gary Job Corps corrections training program includes the requirements for TDCJ along with additional physical training and defensive tactics. The core of the Gary program curriculum was developed to provide correctional officers with the information and skills necessary to perform their duties safely and effectively for the department. The TDCJ program is a 200-hour academy consisting of five major components:

- TDCJ overview and orientation;
- Health and wellness;
- Offender issues;
- Correctional awareness; and
- Security.

Admission Criteria and Clearance Process

Students are screened by the Gary Job Corps Center and then by TDCJ. They must meet the eligibility requirements of both organizations:

- Age 18 or over;
- No felony convictions;
- High school diploma or GED;
- Males must be registered for selective service;
- No drug-related convictions or domestic violence convictions;
- No class A or B misdemeanor convictions within the past five years;
- Cannot be on probation for any offense; and
- Must pass the TDCJ pre-employment screening (interview, assessment and drug test).

The TDCJ pre-employment interview is conducted by the recruiter who meets with student applicants at the Job Corps Center. Those accepted are screened through the computer criminal history checks (i.e., National Crime Information Center, Texas Crime Information Center). Once clearance is received, students are admitted into the class. Upon completing the class (e.g., within 48 hours), if selected for employment, student graduates are taken for a drug test. Once the student passes the drug test, he or she is offered a job at one of the TDCJ units or at another facility.

Placement of Graduates

The first Gary Job Corps Center correctional officer course began in January 2003. All six of the students in the first class graduated as well as the second class of 10 students. "We have been successful in placing the majority of the graduates in security-type positions," said Dan Gargaro, manager of vocational trades at the Gary Job Corps Center.

The second group of graduates toured the Diboll (Texas) correctional facility with one of their instructors. "I was impressed with the graduates who toured our facility," said



Dave Driskell, former deputy warden of the facility. “They were clean cut, had excellent knowledge of corrections and were ready to go to work.”

The Willacy County Regional Detention Facility recently hired Samuel Garcia as a correctional officer after his participation in the Gary Job Corps Center corrections training program. Facility supervisors say Garcia takes great pride in his work and is making a real difference in the facility’s success. They believe his Job Corps training has paved Garcia’s “road to success.” Kenny Bright, assistant warden of the TDCJ Connally Unit, also told the Gary instructors that the Job Corps graduates are well-trained and prepared for correctional officer positions.

As of this past summer, the Gary Job Corps Center Training Academy has placed 48 program graduates at various TDCJ facilities. About 40 additional candidates have also gone to work at other detention or private correctional facilities since the program was launched.

Instructor Training

To maintain their currency, instructors take a yearly 40-hour TDCJ in-service training. The Gary Job Corps program is also audited by TDCJ at least once per year to ensure all standards are being met and that documentation of training is consistent with TDCJ policy. Instructors also attend annual

specialized training (firearms, chemical agents and defensive tactics) to maintain certification through TDCJ. The Gary Job Corps Center Training Academy instructors maintain regular contact with TDCJ human resources to ensure placement of graduates.

The Program’s Value

In addition to placing students in positions that pay livable wages, the correctional officer training is also valuable because it is certified by TDCJ. Another positive point — in times of tight state budgets — is that there is no agency cost for students graduating from the Gary Job Corps Center Corrections Training Academy. The state of Texas avoids paying salary, supplies and workbooks for the cadets that would normally take the TDCJ Academy course.

With TDCJ-trained instructors and annual program audits ensuring consistent application of TDCJ curriculum, the Gary Job Corps Center Corrections Training Academy represents a valuable pipeline of certified student graduates who are ready and able to enter the corrections profession.

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