

INSIDE CORRECTIONS

Newsletter of the New Jersey Department of Corrections

DEPARTMENT SUCCEEDS IN FULL DEPLOYMENT OF BODY WORN CAMERAS

By Mackenzie Fitchett
Senior Public Information Officer

As of January 2024, the New Jersey Department of Corrections (NJDOC) has become the second corrections department in the country to equip and deploy Body Worn Cameras (BWCs) at all of its correctional facilities and specialized units.

“The implementation of the Body Worn Camera initiative has allowed us to improve upon our accountability measures, preserve evidence and resolve investigations more rapidly,” said Deputy Commissioner Erin Nardelli. “The Department is extremely proud of this accomplishment as these cameras have provided us with another tool to aid our mission to protect both the staff, incarcerated population and those who visit our institutions.”

The NJDOC began deploying BWCs in 2021, starting at Edna Mahan Correctional Facility and Northern State Prison. Bayside State Prison began using BWCs in 2022, and five more facilities received BWCs in 2023. The final facility to implement BWCs was the Adult Diagnostic and Treatment Center in January of 2024. Other units that received BWCs include the Central Transportation Unit, the Special Operations Group, the Central Medical Unit and the Training Academy.



BWCs are used for a multitude of situations by law enforcement officers when in performance of official duties. At the Correctional Staff Training Academy, recruits are trained on all possible scenarios along with how to use BWCs during specific situations. Within the first few weeks of their training, they are taught the Internal Management Procedures, which provide guidance on how the cameras are to be utilized. The recruits are also taught which scenarios require cameras and how to write a corresponding report.

“The BWCs are new to corrections as a whole,” said Correctional Police Lieutenant Egan Shimonis. “We try to introduce the body worn camera into all blocks of instruction. It is infused into the entirety of their training.”

On a regular basis, correctional police officers are equipped with BWCs in accordance with their duty assignment. The camera is placed so that it maximizes the ability to capture video footage.

“It is important to note BWCs and fixed cameras are important tools, but, ultimately, they can never replace the direct supervision of our staff,” said DC Nardelli. “It is critical that we continue to support the work of our custody staff which includes physical presence, vigilance and situational awareness when walking the toughest beat in law enforcement. Ensuring the secure, safe and orderly operations of prisons requires both technological tools as well as personal interaction. The Body Worn Cameras are a valuable tool that layers with other security measures to ensure accountability, transparency and safety for all.”

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Serving Up Morale: One Plate at a Time

The Bayside BBQ Crew has brought smiles, laughs and a whole lot of food to state correctional facilities for the last two years. Their mission? Boost morale and bring the staff of the New Jersey Department of Corrections (NJDOC) together as a family.

“Not every facility has morale like us,” said Senior Correctional Police Officer Jess Tozer, Bayside State Prison (BSP). “We are very close at Bayside, and we want to help the other facilities have the morale that we do. We want to show them what we do and how we work together so they can come together, too.”

All her life, Tozer has facilitated events from birthday parties to benefits and fundraisers. When BSP decided to host an employee appreciation barbecue two years ago, it was Tozer’s extensive party-planning knowledge and cooking skills that made her a perfect event assistant.

From that experience, the Bayside BBQ Crew was born. Now, the crew travels across the state to NJDOC facilities for Committee of Employee Morale and Innovation (CEMI) and staff appreciation events hoping to boost morale and bring the NJDOC officers together as a family.

“When the NJDOC started initiating a wellness program, we were told we could host things like summer barbecues,” said Tozer. “That is when they asked me if I would help plan the event. It took off from there.”

The first barbecue offered by the crew included large amounts of smoked pulled pork and ribs along with potato salad made according to a recipe by Tozer’s mother. The crew has become an in-demand part of staff celebrations beyond BSP.

On Wednesday, January 31, the crew served their largest number of guests yet at the South Woods State Prison CEMI open house event, which more than 800 people attended. To prepare for this endeavor, the group began prepping as early as Sunday.

“We make our own barbecue sauce and we use different seasonings, but whatever we order has to be through state vendors,” said Tozer. “It isn’t like we can just go to BJ’s and pick out our own stuff. So we started with nothing. We had garlic powder and adobo, and then we make it work with whatever we got.”

“The Bayside BBQ Crew dedicates countless hours preparing for each event they are involved in,” said BSP Administrator Alycia Lewis. “The group takes pride in the quality of the food they serve and are a great example of teamwork and dedication.”

While the delicious barbecue is the main draw for most of the event attendees, it is not the only positive component. According to Tozer, these events allow administrative and executive staff to spend time with their officers in a relaxed and upbeat setting.

“During our breakfast sandwich event, the administration was out serving food,” said Tozer. “The South Woods facility is so big that the administration is not always in a setting where they can speak with the officers. For this event, the administration made sure everyone got relief so they could come out and get breakfast. Those officers needed the morale and they deserved a break.”

Food is not the only way the Bayside BBQ Crew assists those in need. In the past, Tozer participated in the Officer Fred W. Baker Memorial Golf Tournament, which for many years raised money for high school scholarships in the name of Officer Fred Baker, who lost his life in the line of duty in 1997. She plans to host a Baker Bash in March to raise funds that could help kick-start the event once again.

“The Bayside BBQ crew have become a staple at events throughout the state,” said Director Patrick Miller, former administrator at BSP. “When they are called upon, they put actions behind their words and not only come through, but excel every time. They show us all what is possible when you truly care about your fellow staff and are willing to put forth the effort to make a change. They are more than just a barbecue crew. They are a family.”



BAYSIDE BBQ CREW



Lending A Helping Hand



A career as a correctional police officer can be stressful and lead to burnout, anxiety and depression. Recent research has shown that correctional officer suicide rates are seven times higher than the national rate. Since 2015, the New Jersey Department of Corrections (NJDOC) has lost at least 18 officers to suicide.

Taking steps to combat these issues, the NJDOC applied for and secured funding in the amount of \$175,000 in September 2022 to provide mental health and wellness training to uniformed staff under Law Enforcement Mental Health and Wellness Act (LEMHWA) Implementation Projects.

“Uniformed staff are invaluable members of the NJDOC community,” said Dr. Laura Salerno, Director of the Office of Compliance and Strategic Planning as well as Project Director.

“Stress, trauma, fatigue and burnout are very real consequences of corrections work that not only have an effect on the work environment, but can extend to family life as well,” she added. “These mental health and wellness trainings and initiatives are an important step in making sure that the mental health of our uniformed staff is recognized and protected.”

The proposed project is a three-pronged approach to provide mental health and wellness services to NJDOC uniformed staff. The project will aim to create an evidence-supported correctional officer wellness training curriculum that prioritizes trauma, stress and suicide risk.

The first two cohorts participating in this project attended trainings during a three-day period in June and October 2023. The training was facilitated by Dr. Kristin Briggs, a licensed psychologist, with co-facilitation by Dr. Kristen Zgoba, an Associate Professor at Florida International University (FIU) who also served as a Research Supervisor for the NJDOC for 15 years.

The training is designed to help uniformed staff build resilience and provide coping skills that can be utilized while working in the facilities. Participants learned about trauma and its impact, workplace fatigue and burnout, de-escalation, crisis intervention and safety, and self-regulation and self-care. To put these tools into practice, the group also participated in a mindfulness exercise. The next round of trainings will be held in May 2024. A voluntary opportunity will be released in the coming month.

According to Wellness Coordinator Nicole Sargenti, the grant facilitators are also required to participate and engage in virtual calls with other state law enforcement agencies.

“These calls have been extremely helpful and collaborative in learning and understanding the various wellness programs and methods utilized in other law enforcement agencies throughout the country,” said Sargenti. “Resources for mental health are discussed, as well as best practices, successful initiatives, potential program drawbacks or roadblocks, and various ways to incorporate mental health and wellness into the correctional setting. It is helpful to see what other agencies have done to get the idea for what may or may not work for the NJDOC.”

To further the success of the program, in the coming months, a peer-to-peer mentor support program for uniformed staff will be introduced as well as a family-outreach program.

The peer support program will help to provide a level of comfort that is not easily established with outside professionals while the family outreach program can assist in helping adult family members understand stressors that stem from corrections work and teach strategies to help with life at home.

If you are interested in being a mentor or mentee, or for more information about the upcoming training in May or the family outreach program, please email the Project Director, Dr. Laura Salerno, at laura.salerno@doc.nj.gov.



GET TO KNOW ERICA BLUESTONE SOCIAL SERVICES

Tell me about the job you have here at the NJDOC:

I am a Social Worker 1 at Northern State Prison (NSP). I run the RECAP (Reconnecting Children and Parents) program, facilitate the Helping Offenders Parent Effectively (HOPE) parenting class and am in charge of all Department of Child Protection and Permanency (DCP&P) requests. On a daily basis I meet with incarcerated persons to determine them for RECAP eligibility, communicate with family members to schedule visits, create the RECAP calendar, send out letters to families and remind them of their visit dates. In the HOPE group, we discuss child development, communication styles with children/caregivers and discipline techniques. For DCP&P visits, I assist with scheduling visits and facilitate communication between the DCP&P worker and the incarcerated person. On occasion, when the social services department is in need, I help with other departmental tasks.

How did you get here?

I started my career in social work in 2011, working with juvenile delinquents at Bonnie Brae School to help the youth rehabilitate into society. I was part of one of the first staff members to open an in-community home at Bonnie Brae to support the youths' reintegration into society. I then went to work at DCP&P, where I worked as a permanency worker and intake worker. During my time at DCP&P, I obtained my Masters in Social Work at Rutgers University. I began my career at DOC in 2019 and was hired to implement the RECAP program at NSP.



How did you get involved with the HOPE and RECAP programs and why are they important?

I was specifically interviewed for the RECAP program based on my employment experience working with children and families. The HOPE program is important because it provides education to the incarcerated persons to help them understand what to expect of their children developmentally and how to better engage/communicate with their children. HOPE is an extension of the RECAP program --- what they learn in HOPE should be implemented during visits in the RECAP program. The RECAP program is important because the social services staff promote healthy conversations, positive interactions and family bonding so the familial relationships can be strengthened. Additionally, rebuilding relationships with their children can help reduce rates of recidivism for the incarcerated persons in the future.

What are your NJDOC goals for 2024?

I would like to continue growing the RECAP program at NSP and other facilities. I would also like to plan additional father/child events, such as a Father's Day event and Winter Celebration.





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