

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Op-Ed | The Case For Prison Reform In The USVI, Part 2: Change The Approach And Change Lives

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One of the highlights of my career, albeit one of the most challenging, has been the work to reform New York City's Department of Correction (DOC) that I was humbled to lead while serving as Deputy Commissioner of Human Resources and First Deputy Commissioner. I don't say this because of the high-profile nature of the job, but because of the lasting impact my team and I had in transforming DOC into a well-staffed, professional, more efficient and humane facility.

In our quest to reform DOC after decades of neglect, the DOC created an Anti-Violence Reform Agenda with the goal of reducing violence and improving safety in our jails. Fourteen initiatives were developed based on their potential to systematically reduce

violence. Of the 14 initiatives, I was directly responsible for improving leadership development and culture, designing a staff performance management plan, designing a recruitment, hiring and staff selection plan, and expanding targeted training for officers and non-uniformed staff.

Among many of its serious challenges, DOC was woefully understaffed, which contributed to the violence at the jails--inmate on inmate, inmate on staff, and staff on inmate. Through a rigorous marketing and rebranding campaign, my team and I set out to recruit 1,800 new recruits within a 12-month period, which we successfully accomplished. It was a tremendous task, to say the least.

I am passionate about finding solutions to problems and equally passionate about sharing what works. Here are some real-life solutions that were successfully implemented at DOC that have led to the department's ongoing transformation and I believe, if implemented in some form in the USVI, could revolutionize our local prison system, too.

Solution #1 - Provide Mental Health Care for Inmates Who Need It

The Virgin Islands Department of Health and the Bureau of Corrections need to sit at the table and talk, figure out a plan and execute it. The longstanding and often adversarial relationship between the two entities have been a significant hindrance in prison reform just about everywhere. Studies have shown mental health support can reduce inmate incidents. Screening for mental health fitness could be done during intake. Furthermore, officers must be properly trained in mental health behaviors. To reduce suicide among inmates, either while behind bars or upon their parole, mentally ill inmates should not be placed in solitary confinement.

Solution #2 - Appropriate Use of Force

It is critical to properly train, and sometimes retrain, correction officers in appropriate use-of-force tactics. If it isn't, the USVI BOC should be collecting data on use-of-force because having this information will show trends surrounding excessive use of force at facilities--is it same officer, same inmate, what are the triggers that set off the violence. In addition, a 24-hour incident report should be issued to the BOC's leadership team daily. When I worked at NYC DOC, at 6 a.m. each day, I had a 24-hour report delivered to my inbox that listed every incident that happened the day before.

Solution #3 - Improve Leadership Development and Culture

Adopting a 'we're-all-in-this-together' posture will do wonders for the work environment and culture in our local prison and jail. Bringing uniformed and non-uniformed staff together and expressing the importance of everyone's role, helps to build a stronger team. Conduct surveys among officers to learn how they feel about safety and the overall work environment. If promotional exams are a requirement, provide free or reduced-cost study classes for officers taking the exams. Create an inviting workspace with properly working equipment, such as vending machines that offer fresh-food options. Ensure an accountability system is in place for employees and provide off-island training opportunities for officers. At DOC, we sent our officers to visit other jails who were doing it right; our officers quickly realized they were trailing their counterparts in the field of

corrections. When we empowered our officers to make decisions about the course of their careers and the environment in which they worked, there was a tremendous shift in the workplace culture.

Solution #4 - Expand Targeted Training for Officers

Implement a rigorous curriculum that includes courses in crisis management, mental health and first aid, with an emphasis on de-escalation techniques, conflict resolution and crisis intervention. Executive and supervisory training are necessary for the kind of lasting reform that's needed. Lastly, performance evaluations must be elevated to a prominent role. At DOC, we found that correction officers were not conducting proper cell inspections or searching inmates appropriately.

Solution #5 - Inmate Programming

Design effective inmate educational opportunities and services. Both inmates and officers benefit from these when inmates are given the opportunity to be productive members of society. At DOC, inmates were provided education in gardening, dog training (one of the adolescent housing units trained dogs who were then placed for adoption), and HVAC training (inmates were trained and received certificates in the trades). Another strategy that proved successful was inviting non-profit groups to help with inmate programming. We invited a group to teach our adolescents how to make music beats and a drama club with coaches came in from NYU. An inmate debate team was also established, which went on to beat the Harvard team in a debate.

Solution #6 - Meet Correction Officer Needs

Re-instill pride in the profession. The shield on the NYC DOC patch was upside down, but we flipped and updated it to be more in line with law enforcement organizations--our competitors for talent-- including the NYPD and FDNY. We mandated everyone replace their patch because it was a part of their uniform. I created a newsletter that highlighted and celebrated employees and progress across DOC, and launched a DOC TV initiative.

Additionally, we rebranded the 'job' of a correction officer into that of a career--something officers could take professional pride in and ownership of. We offered officers a promotional path, professional development training, and even redesigned break rooms with modern fixtures, such as flat-screen TVs that streamed DOC news and highlights. We also added top-of-the-line vending machines with fresh and healthy food.

Similar and culturally relevant actions could be enacted in the Virgin Islands.

Solution #7 - Policy

Appoint a non-judicial oversight board to monitor, regulate, and inspect correctional facilities in the U.S. Virgin Islands. The Board would carry out independent oversight and enact regulations to support safer, fairer, and more humane practices in USVI jails and prisons.

Submitted by Dina Simon, principal at Simon & Leroy LLC, is a leading international human resources expert who has helped transform the workforce of companies worldwide. In 2014, Simon was tapped to head the Human Resources division at the NYC Department of Correction, where she was charged with redefining recruitment and

retention. After just one year, she was appointed first deputy commissioner — the first and youngest woman to serve in that role. As the agency's second-in-command, Simon was instrumental in helping to transform the NYC Department of Correction to the organization it is today.

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