

# INSIDE



# CORRECTIONS

Newsletter of the New Jersey Department of Corrections

## *In This Issue*

### **CISM 2.0**

The NJDOC Critical Incident Stress Management Team offers their support services to NJDOC staff.

Pg. 1

### **Meet the Team**

The Department experiences various leadership changes to assist in its mission towards operating safe and humane facilities.

Pg. 3

### **Hero Spotlight**

Senior Correctional Police Officer Mike DiGenni assists in the search and rescue efforts of the Champlain Tower building collapse in Miami, Florida.

Pg. 4

### **NJDOC Increases Commitment to Workforce Wellness**

The Workforce Wellness Task Force launches several new initiatives to help mitigate stressors for staff members.

Pg. 5

### **National Night Out**

NJDOC staff partnered with multiple facilities for National Night Out on August 3rd.

Pg. 7

### **Corrections Officer Day**

On July 30th the Department celebrated Corrections Officer Day with ceremonies at Bayside State Prison and Central Office Headquarters.

Pg. 8



*Thirty-seven volunteers completed the September 2021 CISM Training at COHQ.*

## **CISM 2.0**

### *NJDOC Critical Incident Stress Management Team Offers Holistic Support Services to Staff*

BY LIZ VELEZ

Understanding the need for mental health support given the unique challenges correctional employees face, the New Jersey Department of Corrections' (NJDOC) Critical Incident Stress Management team (CISM) expanded its service offerings to include proactive peer-support that emphasizes and destigmatizes the value of mental health. CISM's proactive resources also consist of a staff recognition component, celebrating staff contributions.

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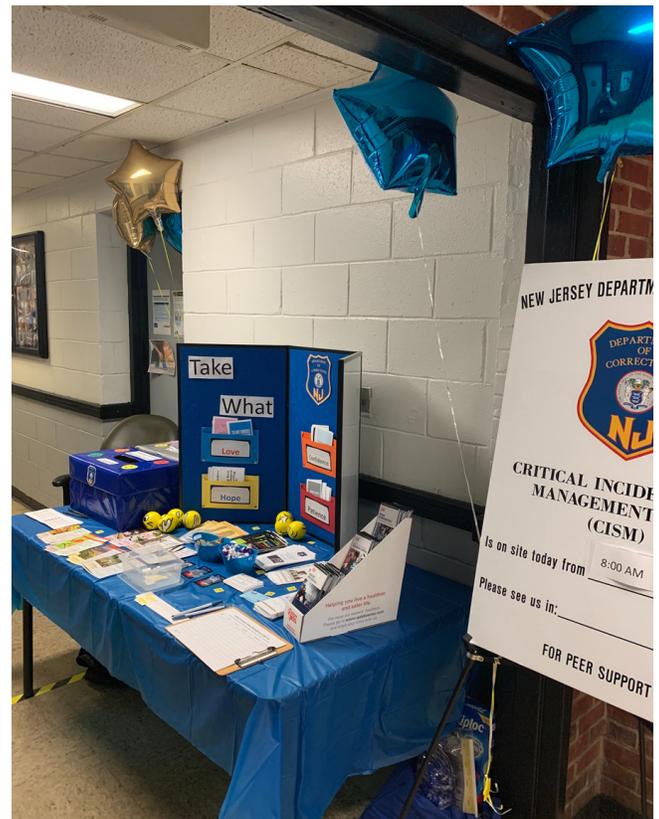
This past July, the high-energy, enthusiastic, and empathetic team toured the 11 prisons to conduct a series of wellness checks and met with staff one-on-one, equipped with words of encouragement, mental health resources, and small tokens of appreciation. In addition to one-on-one wellness checks, participants took a pledge to follow a series of simple steps to help manage stress.

CISM, comprised of a cross-section of volunteer civilian and uniformed staff, is trained and certified by the International Critical Incident Stress Management Foundation. The bi-annual, three-day training covers group crisis intervention, peer support, suicide, death, and training in treating serious injuries. Wearing their grey branded t-shirts, CISM, under the Office of Victim Services, traditionally was deployed to offer support to staff during moments of critical incidents, including grief support following the passing of an NJDOC family member.

"Though we remain true to our origins of grief support, we are moving away from the stigma of death associated with our team to one that offers holistic proactive and reactive support," said Dr. Dawn McRae, Coordinator, Gender-Responsive Programming and CISM Leader. "We are equipped to serve as ambassadors for the

Department, engaging one-on-one with colleagues to see how they are truly doing and how we can be of help while normalizing discussions around mental health support and hopefully boosting morale in the process."

With the overwhelmingly positive employee response from the July tour, the CISM team intends to host quarterly institutional visits. Employees who need support or have additional questions can email [CISM@doc.nj.gov](mailto:CISM@doc.nj.gov) for more information.



***CISM's table is set up with valuable wellness-based resources for staff working in the prison facilities.***





**Executive staff pictured left to right:** Acting Commissioner Victoria L. Kuhn, Esq., Deputy Commissioner Tracey Shimonis-Kaminski, Assistant Commissioners Willie Bonds, Aaron Erven, Donna Gies, Melinda Haley, Esq. Helena Tomé, Elizabeth Whitlock, Dr. Darcella Sessomes, and Section Chief Tammie Smith.

# MEET THE TEAM

BY LIZ VELEZ

Following the departure of former Commissioner Marcus Hicks, Esq., the New Jersey Department of Corrections experienced various leadership changes intended to push the Department forward in its commitment to operating safe and humane facilities. Chief of Staff Victoria L. Kuhn, Esq., has taken the helm of the Department as Acting Commissioner, bringing more than 24 years of experience as an attorney with the State of New Jersey with a career that started as an Assistant Prosecutor before transitioning to the Office of the Attorney General – Division of Law. At the Office of the Attorney General, she addressed law enforcement and corrections matters, including federal and state court developing the protocol regarding sexually violent predators. As the Interim Acting Commissioner, Kuhn

aims to provide leadership and overall direction on departmental programs, activities, and policies that support the staff and offender population's safety and development, including addressing long-standing issues impacting the women of Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women (EMCFW).

She's joined by Deputy Commissioner Tracey Shimonis-Kaminski, who serves as the second in command overseeing the holistic operations of 11 NJDOC facilities with 20 years of operational experience.

Other recent appointments include:

- Assistant Commissioner of Operations Willie Bonds who assists in the oversight of the Department’s operational efforts;
- Assistant Commissioner Aaron Erven, who oversees the Division of Training, Recruitment, and Professional Development;

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- Assistant Commissioner Donna Gies who oversees the Department's fiduciary activities as the leader of Administration;
- Assistant Commissioner Melinda Haley, who manages Diversity and Legal Affairs;
- Assistant Commissioner of Women's Services Helena Tomé who serves as a liaison for the female population;
- Assistant Commissioner of Human Resources and Labor Relations Elizabeth Whitlock.

These individuals join Assistant Commissioner Dr. Darcella Sessomes who oversees the Division of Programs and Community Services, which includes the delivery of evidence-based programs and services that support rehabilitation and reentry.

Completing the Department's leadership team is the newly installed Section Chief of the Health Services Unit, Tammie Smith, who manages the Department's partnership with medical provider, Rutgers University Correctional Healthcare.

Together, this team represents the second-largest state agency with a vested interest in ensuring the Department's mission of operating safe and humane facilities while remaining steadfast in a commitment to the safety and holistic rehabilitation of those in the state's custody.



## HERO SPOTLIGHT

The efforts of the NJDOC extend across state lines. Senior Correctional Police Officer Mike DiGenni, who is a member of the Department's Special Operations Group, deployed to Miami, FL to assist in the search and rescue efforts of the Champlain Tower building collapse. Being a member of the NJDOC is not an easy job. It takes heart, grit and a steadfast commitment to being a public servant. Thank you for all that you do Officer DiGenni.





*The furnished wellness room inside Southern State Correctional Facility.*

# THE NJDOC INCREASES COMMITMENT TO WORKFORCE WELLNESS

BY LAUREN LAGGY

There's a growing body of research demonstrating the link between employment in law enforcement and rising rates of suicides. To proactively provide the New Jersey Department of Corrections (NJDOC) staff with holistic health resources to manage the unique stressors in corrections, the Department established a Workforce Wellness Task Force comprised of uniformed and non-uniformed volunteer staff representing all facilities.

The Task Force follows the National Wellness Institute's six main pillars of health, with resources that center around occupational development, physical activity, social, intellectual, spiritual, and emotional well-being, preventative

treatment, and recovery. Task Force members represent the NJDOC correctional facilities and the Central Office Headquarters, tailoring conversations, events, and resources based on their individual location needs in line with the six pillars of health.

"The NJDOC's employees are the Department's most valuable resource," said Erin Nardelli, Director of Operations and Workforce Wellness Task Force Lead. "Those who work in the correctional job field face unique mental health challenges that few understand. As a Department, we are happy to offer various tools to mitigate stressors, assist with building





resiliency, and create a better atmosphere for all employees, especially those who work within our prison facilities."

Since June 2021, the Task Force launched a series of innovative initiatives, including a confidential hotline in partnership with Rutgers University staffed by corrections-trained individuals. The 4BlueNJ hotline provides peer support to New Jersey correctional employees, both retired, current, and their families.

Shortly after the launch of 4BlueNJ, the Task Force set its sights on establishing a safe space for custody and civilian staff to reset mentally and refocus following on-the-job incidents. Outfitted with meditative music and other resources, wellness rooms provide an overall calm space for individuals to collect themselves after incidents and effectively carry out their job. Individuals have the opportunity to utilize this space off the clock as well. So far, wellness rooms have been launched across five institutions with the goal of creating these types of spaces across all facilities.

Understanding individuals' wellness needs vary, the Task Force aims to create a series of resources to meet the personalized needs of staff. For example, the Task Force assisted in developing a lactation room at the Department's Central Office Headquarters, implemented a



*The staff wellness room located inside Northern State Correctional Facility.*

therapy dog program for prison staff, hosted staff walking programs, weight loss challenges, and facilitated events such as food truck visits at various facilities. They also established a partnership with faith-based leaders to develop the Police Chaplaincy program, which responds and assists the staff and their families with advice, comfort, counsel, and referrals as needed.

Now more than ever, employees are encouraged to utilize the Workforce Wellness Task Force resources. If you have an idea for the Workforce Wellness Task Force send them to: [Erin.Nardelli@doc.nj.gov](mailto:Erin.Nardelli@doc.nj.gov).

Employees or family members looking for mental health resources are encouraged to dial 4BlueNJ (1.888.425.8365).





# NATIONAL NIGHT OUT

On August 3rd, the NJDOC partnered with 16 municipalities across the state for National Night Out, a national community-building campaign that promotes police-community partnerships. Some activities from this year's events included arts/crafts, games, bouncy houses, music, food, and a K9 demonstration presented by the NJDOC's K9 Unit.



*NJDOC staff provided resources at the Hamilton National Night Out.*



*Kids had the opportunity to try on some of the NJDOC Officers' gear.*



*NJDOC Officers joined in on games and activities with members of the community.*



*Members of the NJDOC Special Operations Group (SOG) K-9 Unit invited kids to join in on their K-9 demonstration at the Bordentown National Night Out.*





# CORRECTIONS OFFICER DAY

On July 30th, the NJDOC honored Officer Fred Baker's sacrifice and legacy, remembered all those lost in the line of duty, and recognized the accomplishments of staff who go above and beyond to ensure the safety of the Garden State, with Corrections Officers Day.



*Officers participate in the Fred Baker Memorial Ceremony held outside of Bayside State Prison.*



*Staff gathers outside of Bayside State Prison to watch the Fred Baker Memorial ceremony.*



*At Central Office Headquarters, Acting Commissioner Victoria L. Kuhn, Esq., awards Officers who went above and beyond their call of duty.*