MISSION CRITICAL

NJDOC Critical Incident Negotiation Team continuously hones its skills.

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East Jersey State Prison Officer stops sexual assault in Union City.

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

AN APPLE A DAY
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IT’S ALL RELATIVE
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INSIDE CONVERSATION
Learn more about the work inside the NJDOC.

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Inside Corrections is a monthly publication of the Office of Public Information at the New Jersey Department of Corrections.

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Inside This Issue

2

Inside Word
with Acting Commissioner Marcus O. Hicks, Esq.

3

Mission Critical
NJDOC Critical Incident Negotiation Team continuously hones its skills.

6

It's All Relative
Mid-State Correctional Facility harnesses strength of families to help treat drug addiction.

8

'My Instincts Took Over'
East Jersey State Prison Officer stops sexual assault in Union City.

10

An Apple A Day
Bond between NJDOC Bayside State Prison Sergeant and his curious companion helps sick kids smile.

13

Inside Conversation
Learn more about the work inside the NJDOC.

15

NJDOC Central Office Barbecue Bash
Employees gathered for a barbecue and team building activities.

Inside Word
with Acting Commissioner Hicks

Throughout the last several months, I have had the opportunity to partner with many of you and learn about your work through program activities and visits to your institutions. I would like to thank you for your collaboration in working with my new administration.

After a busy summer, we are forging ahead with many new initiatives within the Department for our employees. As I mentioned last month, we established an Employee Wellness Program for both custody and civilian staff. As an update to this program, I have assembled a devoted committee and they have already met and made strides in identifying key resources that will bolster the physical and mental well-being of our staff. Additionally, in recognition of your hard work and dedication to the Department, we are developing more opportunities for professional development, including expert training by the National Institute of Corrections and increasing the per credit reimbursement amount for our tuition reimbursement program.

I am humbled by your many talents and value your passion, which drives this Department forward.

Sincerely,

Marcus O. Hicks
Acting Commissioner

Employees gathered for a barbecue and team building activities.
“We can be called out not only during a correctional crisis, but to give aid and assistance to a local police department that may not have a critical negotiation team, to the FBI or to other states,” Lowery said. “When the hostage situation unfolded at the prison in Delaware a few years ago, every one of our team members had a backpack and was ready to go.

“What do we require a significant commitment,” she continued. “We have a special group of people.”

Those who are interested in becoming a CINT volunteer go through a three-fold process that includes the submission of a resume, a psychological examination and an interview with team members.

“During the interview, I’ll explain that each person needs to be able to perform every role on the team, from negotiating, to coaching the negotiator, to gathering intelligence about the person in crisis, to lending support in any way possible,” said Senior Correctional Police Officer Traci Iwaszkiewicz of South Woods State Prison, one of just two remaining original members of CINT.

“I’ll say that there might be a time when someone will say to you, ‘We need you to get us cups of coffee.’ If that’s beneath you, then you might not be right for the team. There is no rank or title here. It truly is a team.”

Added Lowery: “We don’t necessarily need more people. What we need are qualified people. We’re fortunate to have a very diverse group, but what matters most is that every single member of this team has been chosen because of his or her integrity and skill.”

In a world in which increasing numbers of people are buckling under financial and emotional constraints, and active shooter incidents — in schools and elsewhere — seemingly occur on a weekly basis, CINT members believe the importance of their presence cannot be overstated.

Training exercises are held at all hours of the day or night, weekdays and weekends, and at various locations, including East Jersey State Prison, Garden State Youth Correctional Facility and the Custody Recruitment Unit. Another frequently used location is the Cassville Volunteer Fire Company in Jackson, where CINT member Vincent Tracy, an officer at East Jersey State Prison, has served as a longtime volunteer firefighter.

“The fire company allows us to use different parts of the building, so we’re able to create all kinds of atmospheres and scenarios,” Tracy said. “There are times when we have to filter out the noise from the firehouse, but that’s actually a positive, because we have to be comfortable working around any elements or distractions we might encounter during a negotiation.”

For example, during a recent outdoor scenario, it began to rain heavily. The exercise continued, since it was understood that the same thing could happen in the midst of an actual incident.

“We all carry a ready bag in our vehicle, because you never know where you’ll be or what you’ll be doing when the call comes,” related Diane Patrick, supervisor of Educational Services at East Jersey State Prison and the only remaining original CINT member other than Iwaszkiewicz. “After we got caught in the downpour, we came to the realization that we need rain gear in our ready bag going forward.”

On another occasion, a scenario was written entirely in Spanish, which normally wouldn’t present a serious problem, since the team includes a bilingual negotiator. In this instance, however, the bilingual negotiator was cast as the designated “bad guy.”
The team was forced to download a translator application from the internet to successfully complete the exercise.

“We need to be prepared for every possible eventuality,” Patrick said. “Suppose this was an actual crisis, and our interpreter wasn’t available?”

Iwaszkiewicz is struck by the fact that each time she and her teammates gather, it proves to be a learning experience.

“For as long as I’ve been doing this, that’s one thing that never changes,” she said. “That’s why you have to train on an ongoing basis. The more you practice, the more likely you are to be effective.”

How effective? In the fall of 2017, the team placed first in the annual “Best of the Best” Critical Negotiation Team Competition, sponsored by the Somerset County Crisis Negotiation Team and the FBI Hostage Negotiation Team. A total of seven teams from across the state took part in the competition.

The NJDOC team also won the competition in 2015. However, the more recent first-place finish was particularly meaningful to team members on a personal level, since the trophy presented to the winner was named in memory of Major Edwin Rodriguez, the former CINT team leader. In anticipation of his retirement, Rodriguez bestowed the responsibilities of team leader to Lowery, then shockingly passed away just days later.

Lucy Rodriguez, the major’s widow, was on hand to accept the trophy on behalf of the NJDOC. She was invited to the event by Senior Correctional Police Officer Joseph Giaimo, a CINT member based at Mountainview Youth Correctional Facility.

“It was pretty emotional for me,” Lucy Rodriguez admitted, “but it was a great thrill. I was so happy to see them win. They put so much effort into preparing, and it showed.”

During the competition, each team is faced with the same scenarios. Evaluators, drawn from the sponsoring agencies, move from group to group and base their conclusions on predetermined criteria.

“They do a debrief after each scenario, then there’s a final debrief at the end of the day,” reported Sgt. David Kuperberg of Northern State Prison. “One comment that virtually every evaluator made was that our team was the tightest group, that everybody seamlessly worked together and that there were no egos. We discussed it later and agreed that it all comes from the level and intensity of our training.”

According to Iwaszkiewicz, every member of the team feels the same way about training, and she thinks she knows why.

“We have a shared passion,” she suggested. “We love to help. And, perhaps most importantly, we know we can make a difference.”

Patrick wholeheartedly agreed.

“It’s all voluntary, and we’re not doing this in place of our regular duties, but in addition to our regular duties,” she pointed out. “Yet it’s because we do things the way we do that we’re successful. We’re ready any time, day or night, and I know I can depend on every individual here.”

“This team,” she concluded, “is the real deal.”

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IT’S ALL RELATIVE

Mid-State Correctional Facility Harnesses Strength of Families to Help Treat Drug Addiction

By John Cokos

Timothy Bethea wakes up every morning hoping to be a better man than he was the previous day. He and his wife have been together for more than 20 years and have three children they both adore. Last year, Bethea had to say goodbye to his family to serve a prison sentence for drug-related offenses.

He is not alone. The perils of drug use are an ongoing problem in the United States, and opioid-related deaths have risen so quickly they have been declared a national emergency.

To help combat the problem, the New Jersey Department of Corrections (NJDOC) reopened Mid-State Correctional Facility in Wrightstown last year as a licensed, clinically driven drug treatment center for inmates. The facility offers Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT), which is considered by the National Institute of Mental Health to be an essential element of long-term success. One unique facet of treatment available at Mid-State, often overlooked in the correctional setting, is family support.

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The 43-year-old from Asbury Park is now an inmate at Mid-State Correctional Facility. He admits that every day before his incarceration was a hustle – a hustle to provide a living for his family and a hustle to support his drug addiction.

His drug addiction, Bethea feels, is the one constant that landed him in prison three times before.

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Shortly after reopening the facility, the NJDOC, through its partnership with the Gateway Foundation, introduced an educational program known as Family Therapy, which integrates inmates’ families into the drug treatment process.

“Families are a vital piece and you have to incorporate them if you don’t want the [offender] to come back,” said Christine C. Alfano, Substance Use Disorder Director for the Gateway Foundation.

During the program, family members of inmates enrolled in the class are invited to participate in a group setting where they all interact through education to heal. They listen to each other and begin to understand that other families have issues surrounding drug use similar to their own.

The comprehensive curriculum is comprised of four week-long sections identified as Triggers and Craving; Road Map to Recovery; Narcotics Anonymous, Alcoholics Anonymous and other support for the family; and understanding MAT.

According to Alfano, families are often unsympathetic to addiction issues because of the criminal aspect. Although inmates are eager to participate in Family Therapy, getting a commitment from the family is not always immediate.

“Family members are often still emotionally hurt, and some haven’t seen the inmate in years, so they may be skeptical that change is even possible,” added Jennifer Penninpede, NJDOC Program Development Specialist at Mid-State, “but feedback from families who have participated has been great so far.”

During a recent family visit, Bethea recalled a life-changing moment.

“My daughter grabbed my face with both hands and said, ‘Daddy, I want you home,’” Bethea recalled. “I think that moment is when it hit me, and my thinking began to change.”

While Bethea’s lifestyle at home was tumultuous, his wife rarely questioned his actions, because she didn’t want him to leave. Although she was growing weary of his husband’s troubled life, she listened when he asked for her support.

Realizing this was the first time the primary focus of Bethea’s incarceration would be treating his drug addiction, his wife was willing to participate with him in the facility’s first Family Therapy class.

“This program helped me realize that I was like a cancer to her,” Bethea said, “but it also helped her realize that by being indifferent to my behavior, she was enabling me. The best part about it, though, is I don’t have to lie anymore. Our conversation is different. We’re able to discuss things we were both afraid to in the past.”

The program continues to evolve based on welcomed feedback from inmates and their families. Sections have been added and modified to maximize the program’s efficacy. Additionally, inmates and their families are permitted to reenroll in the class to take advantage of new segments or simply as a refresher.

Lynda Coraluzzi, a counselor with the Gateway Foundation and Family Program facilitator at Mid-State, said families have to realize the process of treating a drug addiction can be complex and challenging for everyone involved, and that relapse is possible along the path to recovery.

“It is important to establish what the [inmates] and families are willing to help each other with from the beginning,” Coraluzzi explained. “Then we can help families understand what the disease of addiction really is, how the animal works and that we can’t just throw them away.”

Family support, along with focused treatment, gives inmates a greater chance of overcoming their substance abuse.

“This is my fourth [prison sentence],” Bethea explained, “but it’s the first time I have the right tools and support to change.”

MY INSTINCTS TOOK OVER

East Jersey State Prison Officer Stops Sexual Assault in Union City

By Matt Schuman

One minute, Joshua Ruiz was focused on trying to find a parking space on a Union City street as the clock crept toward 2 a.m. on a chilly December evening. The next minute, his focus abruptly – and dramatically – shifted to halting a rape.

What happened next earned Ruiz, a Senior Correctional Police Officer at East Jersey State Prison, widespread praise and recognition, although that clearly was not his intention.

“I just wanted to stop what was happening,” he explained.

As a direct result of his actions, Ruiz received the Correctional Medal of Honor Award from the National Medal of Honor Foundation. He will receive that award at the foundation’s banquet on October 13 in Oklahoma City.

He also received the prestigious Medal of Valor from the New Jersey Department of Corrections during the Departmental Service Awards ceremony, held July 30 at the Central Office headquarters. In addition, Ruiz was honored at the Hudson County Valor Awards luncheon in April.

The evening of the incident, however, all he was thinking about was coming to the aid of the victim of a sexual assault.

“I saw something going on,” Ruiz remembered.
Then I heard a girl screaming in Spanish, ‘Help me. He’s raping me.’ The adrenaline immediately kicked in.”

The 26-year-old Ruiz immediately exited his vehicle, and as he approached the screaming woman and her male attacker, he saw that their pants were below their waists. He also noticed that both individuals appeared to be intoxicated. As Ruiz displayed his badge and identified himself as a law enforcement officer, the man stepped away from the woman and began pulling up his pants.

“I ordered him to get on the ground, and he started telling me they were just having fun and that I shouldn’t worry about it,” said Ruiz, a member of Basic Course for State Correction Officers, Class 237, who has been at East Jersey for two years.

When Ruiz realized that the assailant clearly had no intention of getting on the ground, he pushed the man against a wall and attempted to handcuff him. At the same time, he asked a swelling group of onlookers to call the police.

Ruiz was able to handcuff the attacker’s left wrist with minimum difficulty, but he encountered significant resistance when attempting to secure the other wrist. Still, he managed to wrestle the man to the ground and successfully secured both hands in handcuffs.

The victim, who was hysterical, attempted to attack the assailant, and Ruiz had to separate her from him. Ruiz then recovered his cell phone and his wallet; both items had been jostled from his pocket during the struggle. Since he didn’t know if any of the bystanders had called the police during the fracas, he did so himself.

“I used to work as a police dispatcher in Union City, so I knew where to place the call,” he related. “Fortunately, the police arrived quickly. They placed the man in their vehicle and called an ambulance for the woman. I gave a statement to the police and notified the prison of what had transpired.” By the time he finally got home, it was about 5:30 in the morning.

Ruiz later learned from a Union City detective that the woman had left a nearby bar shortly before the assault, and that her attacker had been in the same bar, although they weren’t together. He also learned that a medical evaluation confirmed that the woman had indeed been raped.

“I certainly wasn’t trying to be a hero or anything like that,” Ruiz said, thinking back to his encounter with the two. “When you work in law enforcement, it’s a lifestyle. Your job doesn’t always end when your shift is over.”

A Letter of Commendation he received from East Jersey after the incident read, in part, “Your professionalism, dedication to duty, attentiveness and acting within the scope of a law enforcement officer is to be commended and serves as a fine example to your peers and superiors alike.”

“I heard a girl screaming in Spanish, ‘Help me. He’s raping me.’ The adrenaline immediately kicked in.”

The horse was named Joe N Trouble – Joey, for short – a quarter horse who was born in South Dakota. That was 30 years ago.

An altogether different story began to unfold in 2009 along Route 47 in Maurice River Township, a couple miles south of Southern State Correctional Facility, where Wernik was working at the time.

“Our goal is to brighten a child’s day,” he continued. “In doing so, hopefully we brighten the day for the child’s parents as well.” And it all started with Wernik feeding an apple to a horse.

The horse was named Joe N Trouble – Joey, for short – a quarter horse who was born in South Dakota. That was 30 years ago.

By Matt Schuman

Sergeant Kevin Wernik of Bayside State Prison and a bunch of his colleagues from the New Jersey Department of Corrections (NJDOC) have delivered teddy bears to youthful patients in St. Christopher’s Hospital for Children just in time for the holiday season, prepared and served meals at the Ronald McDonald House and participated in the American Cancer Society’s Relay for Life.

“I think about who we are as a Department,” said Wernik, an NJDOC employee since 1998. “There are so many good people, family people, people who want to help. The men and women who take part in these events volunteer their time, do whatever needs to be done and don’t ask for anything in return.”

“AN APPLE A DAY

Bond Between NJDOC Sergeant and His Curious Companion Helps Sick Kids Smile

By Matt Schuman

Bayside State Prison Sergeant Kevin Wernik and Joey have forged a close relationship.

Our goal is to brighten a child’s day,” he continued. “In doing so, hopefully we brighten the day for the child’s parents as well.” And it all started with Wernik feeding an apple to a horse.

The horse was named Joe N Trouble – Joey, for short – a quarter horse who was born in South Dakota. That was 30 years ago.

An altogether different story began to unfold in 2009 along Route 47 in Maurice River Township, a couple miles south of Southern State Correctional Facility, where Wernik was working at the time.
During the commute to the prison each afternoon, Wernik’s attention would be diverted as he drove past a small pasture framed by a fence.

“I’d see this horse,” Wernik related. “He was the only horse there. I guess the fact that he was alone pulled me in a little bit, because I’d been going through some things in my life. One day, I decided I was going to take him an apple. Then I began taking him apples every night after work, and he’d wait for me by the side of the fence. He knew the pattern.

“That’s how the bond formed.”

The bond continued to develop for more than a year. Then, one day, Joey was gone.

“There I was, with my apple,” Wernik remembered. “It was dark, so I’m using the flashlight on my phone, looking for him, but he wasn’t there.”

By then, Wernik knew the horse’s name. It was provided by a neighborhood dog groomer whose clients included both Wernik and Joey’s owners, the next day, when Wernik knocked on the door of a residence whose property included the pasture, the NJDOC sergeant knew exactly how to phrase his question.

“When the guy answered the door, I asked him what happened to Joey,” he said. “He wanted to know how I knew Joey, so I filled him in. He told me he realized something was going on, because of the way Joey stood by the fence every night.”

Wernik learned that Joey’s owners no longer could afford to take care of him, so the horse was returned to his previous owner. Without hesitation, Wernik located that owner and, for a $500 fee, adopted Joey.

He was undaunted by the fact that, at the time, he was introduced to an aspect of life that he never would have known without Joey,” he said, adding that he never did learn how to ride his companion.

“I wouldn’t even know how to put a saddle on him,” Wernik confessed, chuckling.

One of his first lessons as a horse owner was that horses produce manure at an astounding rate. In retrospect, that simple realization changed Wernik’s life.

“The first barn Joey and I were at, there was manure everywhere,” he explained. “One of my all-time favorite movies is ‘Forrest Gump.’ So one day I jokingly asked someone at the barn what Forrest Gump would do with all that manure? He looked at me with a totally straight face and said, ‘sell it.’ He told me people would use it for their gardens, that kind of thing.”

The suggestion prompted Wernik to summon his inner Forrest Gump.

He located a wooden pallet, painted it, stacked bags of manure on it, added a small money box and put it along the road by the farm. The bags were on sale for $2 apiece.

From the outset, business was brisk.

“It’s the honor system,” said Wernik, who has sold nearly 5,000 bags since launching the endeavor in 2012.

“I’d say at least 90 percent of the time, the money in the box is completely accurate, which is amazing.”

After just a few months, Wernik checked his earnings, which were stored in an empty water jug, and found that he’d sold more than $470 worth of manure.

Following his father’s recommendation, he donated the money to a variety of charities, among them Special Olympics and Autism Speaks.

Each time the water jug would fill with proceeds, the process would repeat itself, and a new set of charities would be selected. In all, Wernik stated, more than 40 charities received donations that generally ranged from $50 to $100.

The process dramatically changed after a phone call during which Wernik was trying to negotiate a deal to buy custom-made Joey dolls. Due to higher-than-anticipated costs, no deal was made, but during the conversation, Wernik was told about an affordable alternative: the purchase of teddy bears.

Utilizing funds from manure sales, Wernik began ordering stuffed bears and sending them to area hospitals, where they were distributed to children. “Then a coworker suggested that we should call around to see if we could go to a hospital and deliver the bears ourselves,” Wernik said.

So it came to be that each December, Wernik and a handful of others from the NJDOC give out teddy bears in Philadelphia’s St. Christopher Hospital for Children.

“We bring 175 bears,” he said, “and that covers every child in the hospital.

“The project has come to be known as the Big Bear Hug, because when you give a child a bear, the first thing he or she does is hug it.

“The reaction of the kids just grabs a hold of you,” Wernik added. “It’s so moving to see how much that bear means. We go to the hospital with these big, strong guys, and it gets them. It just gets them.”

In 2017, Wernik and company also brought meals to the Ronald McDonald House. The outing was so well received that plans are in place to make it an annual event.

“Sometimes you think, ‘How are we going to do this?’ but somehow it comes together,” he said. “With the Ronald McDonald House, for example, we were bringing all this food, and there were so many details to iron out. Yet, it turned out incredibly well. Afterwards, we looked at each other, and we were practically speechless. Then, right after we left, it started pouring, and when the rain stopped, there was this huge rainbow. It was one of those priceless moments.”

It was just one of many priceless moments that never would have come about if the corrections professional hadn’t fed an apple to a horse.

“I see Joey every day, sometimes more than once,” said Wernik, leaning on a fence at the Sea Horse Farm in Cape May, Joey’s current home. “Joey has changed my life. Before, I’d go to work, go home, grab a meal, whatever. Now, I have a sense of purpose.”

Surprisingly, none of the money raised from the sale of manure or any other charity endeavors goes toward Joey’s upkeep. Wernik pays those expenses himself.

“I’m proud of that,” he declared. “From the beginning, I wanted every dollar to be used for something positive. I felt that if I took any of it for expenses, I’d ruin the whole thing.

‘And I still feel that way.”

“FROM THE BEGINNING, I WANTED EVERY DOLLAR TO BE USED FOR SOMETHING POSITIVE.”

-- из Страны коррекций
INSIDE CONVERSATION

U.S. Senator Cory Booker Visits Albert C. Wagner

U.S. Senator Cory Booker recently visited Albert C. Wagner Youth Correctional Facility to speak with inmates in the NJ-STEP program.

NJ-STEP, or the New Jersey Scholarship and Transformative Education in Prisons Consortium, is a way for the incarcerated to gain college credits while in prison and leads to successful reentry back into the community.

Project P.R.I.D.E Speaks at The College of New Jersey

NJDOC inmates participating in Project P.R.I.D.E., visited The College of New Jersey (TCNJ) this summer to speak to high school students enrolled in a summer program for students interested in becoming educators. Four inmates, two from Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women and two from Garden State Youth Correctional Facility, shared their experiences with drugs and the events surrounding their incarcerations.

As the inmates revealed during their discussion, each was not incarcerated based on drug convictions, but crimes where drug use was the catalyst to a series of unscrupulous events involving burglaries, assaults, weapons and homicide. P.R.I.D.E, which stands for Promoting Responsibility in Drug Education, is an NJDOC initiative aimed at discouraging New Jersey youth from becoming involved with drugs.

With the 2018 school year beginning, NJDOC will be visiting a number of schools throughout the state.

NJDOC Officers Participate in National Night Out

NJDOC Correctional Police Officers from the Custody Recruitment Unit and Special Operations Group celebrated the 35th National Night Out at nine different locations throughout the state.

We collaborated with local police departments to engage and educate the community about the work of the Department and recruited future Correctional Police Officers to the force.

From K9 demonstrations to playing basketball with children from the neighborhood, our officers had a great night in the community.

Medication-Assisted Treatment in the Spotlight

With heightened awareness around the widespread opioid crisis across the country, the NJDOC’s use of Medication-Assisted Treatment for inmates with Substance Use Disorders has been at the forefront of the conversation.

Acting Commissioner Hicks and Dr. Herbert Kaldany, NJDOC Director of Psychiatry Addictions, and Mental Health, joined New Jersey Department of Health Commissioner Shereef Elhanhal and officials from Atlantic County at the John Brooks Recovery Center to discuss the benefits and efficacy of Medication-Assisted Treatment for inmates. The NJDOC offers all forms of FDA-approved Medication-Assisted Treatment options to the inmate population including, methadone, buprenorphine, and naltrexone.

Acting Commissioner Hicks also addressed Medication-Assisted Treatment on WNYC’s “The Takeaway” radio show on August 20 and gave a comprehensive overview of what the NJDOC is doing to combat the opioid epidemic from behind the wall.

“Our aim is to rehabilitate the entire person. We have to address mental health issues, we have to address substance use issues, and we have to address medical issues. At the end of the day, our goal is to protect the public, and enhance public safety, by reducing recidivism.”
NJDOC BARBECUE BASH

Employees from Central Office Headquarters gathered for a barbecue and team building activities on August 29. Games included tug-of-war, wiffle ball, and corn hole, and over a dozen employees submitted baked goods into the dessert competition.