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A Correctional Type of Day

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A Correctional Type of Day

About Author

Vince Wiggins is a retired librarian for the State of New Mexico Corrections Department. He has worked in both the General and Legal Libraries over a period of 21 years.

Library work can be rather satisfying. Through helping patrons, a librarian can have a positive or unfortunately a negative effect. Our demeanor, receptiveness and attitude can have an impact that often we will never know. What is true for librarians, both public and educational, can be even more profound for corrections librarians.

I have recently retired after 21 years as a librarian, both general and legal, in the New Mexico Corrections Department. While it is not everybody's dream job, it can be rewarding. I would like to take you on a little journey through one of my workdays from the time I entered the facility until I left it.

First, a short description of the facility I worked in. It contains three different Units with different levels or types of inmates – Minimum or Honor with low custody; Minimum Restrict or low custody, which because of the crime or time left to serve, are in a more restrictive Unit; the Intake or Medium to Maximum Unit. The Intake Unit is where all inmates come for classification after sentencing and has everything from bad check writers and DUI (Driving under the Influence) violators to rapists, armed robbers and murderers. The Intake Unit also contains Mental Health, Segregation and Medical Units. The average number of inmates is about 1200. There are four general libraries and one legal library serving these Units. The Intake Unit is transient in nature with inmates there for a 60 to 90 day maximum. The other Units tend to be more stable in population.

With the background set, now it is time to start the day. It begins before seven a.m. with entering the Administration Building by clearing the metal detector. Clearing the detector can be an adventure all by itself. It is set more sensitive than courthouses or airports. Depending on the settings, weather, static electricity in the air, and whatever imp that lives inside machines, I can either go straight through or practice a modified striptease with any possible type of metal setting it off before I'm allowed to enter.

After clearing the detector, it is off to check mail and pick up the library keys from the Master Control with an exchange of key tag for the keys. Now off to pass B Control, which controls access to the back of the prison. I turn my ID to the officer here and gain access to the Compound. My first stop now is either the Security Office or the Yard Sergeant to find what is going on, i.e., problems, lockdowns, events and planned disruptions.

Now I enter the Education Building where the Library is located. If I am the first one in the building, I do a check of inside doors to make sure doors are secure and there are no surprises. If I find a problem, I report it to Security and an officer comes in to do a security check and make sure it is safe for staff. One day I found the building was flooded because a sprinkler head had broken off and roughly half of the building, including the electrical room and classrooms, had up to an inch water. While maintenance staff turned off the water and electricity and the water cleared off, all activities were on hold.

After the security check, and depending on what the officer has told me, I either open the library, prepare for my inmate workers to come in and begin planning activities or I do office work that I do not need inmates. At this point, 30 to 45 minutes of the workday are done.

By this time, a building officer is present. If not, we cannot have inmates in the building. Now assuming everything is working smoothly, my workers come in between seven thirty a.m. and eight a.m.

The first activity of the day is preparing for the book run. At this library, inmates do not have direct access. They request books from an up-to-date list in their Units, list the books on a request form and mail it in. The library workers and I fill in the requests and prepare a list of inmates who have books. Lists of the inmates receiving books that day go to the Units and the inmates come to the library to turn in their old books and pick up the new ones. It takes 30 minutes to an hour for each Unit and we do three Units a day. We do four days of book runs. The remaining time is to shelve returned books and fill new requests for the next run. The one day a week there is no book run scheduled is spent cleaning the library and serves as a catchall day to cover Units who were unable to come due to activities preventing their access.

A second activity involves book delivery to Segregation and Medical Units. The inmates request books the same way population inmates do. The major difference is the segregation inmates have books delivered to their Units. These deliveries can be time-consuming, depending on the number of book requests and if an inmate needs to talk. Again, inmates turn in old their books and receive for new ones they sign for at the time. Most of the time, the inmates are respectful and appreciative. Occasionally an inmate becomes belligerent with a fair degree of cursing, threats, and rarely, fortunately, urine or feces flies. It is rare that an inmate is upset with the library or librarian, but we become the recipient of anger or frustration aimed at other inmates, officers, the administration, or news from home. Afterward, the upset inmate generally either writes an apology note or apologizes face to face on the next delivery.

At times, inmates just need or want to talk. It can range from problems, to information, to just want to converse with someone who is not an inmate or security. Inmates are good sources on how the facility is doing. Listening can help prevent fights, stabbings (aka shankings for prison show fans), bullying or other types of disturbances.

During the day, there is an hour to hour and a half break while security does count and feeds the inmates. This is time to eat and catch up on paperwork, go to meetings, or get confidential work done to which the inmates are not supposed to have access.

On lockdown days, there is more time to catch up with office work without interruption. For lockdowns under three days, there is office work. For

longer lockdowns, the Units receive book service as above. With luck, inmate workers can come and help prepare books.

At three p.m., the day ends. I lock the library, clear B Control, turn in keys, drop off mail, exit the Administration building and go home.

Of all the jobs and tasks, a major one to remember in corrections is that we are there to support security. Library books are a tremendous distraction for the inmates and help them occupy their minds.

Not everyone can work in a correctional setting. The routine changes from day to day and sometimes from moment to moment. It is a good career with potential to have a positive affect on individuals.