Safe Inside

How Safe Inside Project partners with State DOCs

Goal 1: Improved data

Vision: State DOC leaders maintain a dashboard that makes it possible to monitor, understand, and troubleshoot key trends in the DOC workforce and working and living conditions both across the entire system and at individual facilities. DOC leaders use such a system to provide regular updates to the governor's office, the state budget agency, the legislature, and other stakeholders regarding DOC efforts to improve recruitment and retention.

Challenge: Developing such a dashboard requires access to data that are spread across multiple data systems, some of which may be administered by a separate state agency or private vendor. Preparing and analyzing this information can strain research departments, particularly those that: are short-staffed; are consumed with generating reports already required by agency leadership and the legislature; or have little to no experience analyzing workforce trends, such as retention. When DOC leaders do receive information, it is often not presented in a way that makes it easy to draw conclusions from and includes measures that are not commonly understood.

How Safe Inside Project helps: We review how the DOC collects data and analyzes trends across the system and individual prisons regarding the DOC workforce and working and living conditions. We also assess how that information is communicated to DOC leadership and other stakeholders. We identify strengths and gaps in the current approach, provide a resource kit, which the DOC leadership team can use to implement improvements, and offer training and technical assistance with the application of that resource kit. When feasible, we conduct analyses to provide DOC leadership with new and improved information on workforce trends.

Goal 2: Smarter hiring and onboarding

Vision: State DOC leaders have defined what constitutes a successful officer, identified the qualities and characteristics of such employees, have developed an approach to

recruitment that attracts people who exhibit these qualities and characteristics, have established criteria that enables them to efficiently and effectively evaluate applicants, and train and onboard new hires in a way that sets them up for success on the job.

Challenge: Under intense pressure from severe staffing shortages, many agencies hire as many officers as possible, settling for employees who previously would not have made the cut. Advertising and other recruitment strategies are outdated. They often highlight aspects of the job that are inconsistent with what the job entails and/or what agency priorities are in 2027. In addition, they don't align with what younger people are seeking from their next job. At the same time, lengthy screening and hiring processes, often taking several months, can cause agencies to lose strong candidates who may accept other offers in the meantime. Once on the job, staff often receive training and onboarding that does not align with what they experience on the job. As a result, talented staff often resign soon after they start while other staff who make it through the onboarding process can present management challenges.

How Safe Inside Project helps: We work with state DOC leadership teams to conduct a step-by-step analysis of how their agency advertises job openings, evaluates candidates, and trains and onboards new hires. We pair state DOC officials with their counterparts in other states to learn about innovative approaches other states are employing. We assist the state DOC leadership team in designing a plan to improve its approach to hiring.

Goal 3: More efficient use of limited staff resources

Vision: State DOC leaders work with front line staff to identify policies and practices that contribute to inefficient/ineffective use of limited staff resources and test and evaluate new ways of deploying staff.

Challenge: Modifying existing policy creates concerns about departing from long-standing practice and general pushback from staff when morale is already low. Worries about legal liability or challenges from unions are also impediments to change. Staff and their supervisors feel so stretched that their focus is on getting through their shifts, leaving no time to explore new approaches.

How Safe Inside Project helps: We highlight approaches different state DOCs are taking to reexamine operational procedures, draw on the incarcerated population to provide services and other supports, and leverage technology to reduce or support manual tasks. We facilitate discussions among DOC leadership teams to determine where these examples resonate with them and what steps they would be interested in taking to explore the adoption of these approaches to their agencies.

Goal 4: Better interface between central office and facilities

Vision: The state DOC director and their senior management team, and the leadership teams in individual prisons are in regular communication, using real-time data from each prison to highlight successful innovation, provide accountability, and troubleshoot problems. Discussions between central office and prisons are candid and constructive and facilitate peer-to-peer support among leadership teams in individual prisons. This culture of excellence increases staff retention and improves working and living conditions.

Challenge: Wardens/superintendents and their management teams feel besieged with paperwork required by central office, where there is regular turnover and shifting priorities among executive leadership. Whereas state agency DOC executives describe themselves as eager to promote innovation and transparency, leaders at the facility level describe the central office as out of touch; they feel like candor and creativity are punished, not rewarded.

How Safe Inside Project helps: We connect DOC leaders with former DOC executives who have decades of experience leading departments of corrections in different states. These experts review how meetings among the DOC director, his/her management team, and leadership of individual prisons are currently structured, what data are used to inform those meetings, and what follow up results.

About Safe Inside

Safe Inside is a national initiative that combines research and operational insight to improve working and living conditions in state correctional systems. Safe Inside focuses on trends in the corrections workforce, and what those mean for public safety, state spending, and the health and well being of people who work and live behind the walls. *Safe Inside* is conducted in partnership with the Correctional Leaders Association. It was made possible through funding support provided by the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance. Additional assistance is provided by Arnold Ventures.

To learn more, visit safeinsideproject.org