



RETAINING JAIL EMPLOYEES— BENIGN NEGLECT BY JAIL LEADERSHIP

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Retaining employees is vocalized as a high priority by jail leaders. Yet, there is an astonishingly poor record among jails actually committing resources to this predicament. No doubt hiring is a priority, and keeping staff who jails work so hard to hire seems an equally worthy endeavor. (McC Campbell, *The Next Jail Epidemic: Staffing*, 2021) Daily, jails are faced with just keeping up with the challenges of facility operations. Advocating that there is a need to actively expend a credible effort to keeping employees often falls between the cracks of the jail’s mission, vision and value statements. Non-competitive salaries, often tough working conditions, absence of work-life balance, confounding organizational structures, and negative internal cultures collide to make it a daunting argument to keep staff. The community and stakeholders are often uninformed and oblivious about the jail’s role and needs of those in the jail’s custody. Retaining employees seems like just treading water; the difficulty compounded by a general lack of understanding or prioritization by jails’ hiring and funding authorities.

(McC Campbell, *Core Competencies and Jail Leadership: Become a Full Partner with Human Resources*, 2016) (Stinchcomb, McC Campbell, & Leip, 2009)

As giving up isn’t an option and waiting for others to act on the jail’s difficulties hasn’t resulted in progress, we advocate that jails shift the paradigm and devote resources to developing and implementing an *employee retention plan*. A retention plan envisions that jail leaders go beyond conventional thinking and questionably successful and unsupportable retention strategies. This planning and implementation process requires the involvement of both employees and the community’s stakeholders. Depending on the agency’s size, this initiative can be resourced by designation of a single responsible person, shared duties, or a team. The secret to success is the agency’s commitment to the value of keeping employees, and accountability for getting it done, implemented, and overseen. This is not a “one and done” process, it must be integrated into the daily life of the organization.

A prerequisite to this new way of thinking and action requires a commitment from leadership and buy-in from employees. Who wants to continue mandatory overtime? How much longer can excessive overtime costs be justified? The safety of staff and those in the jail's care, custody and control are paramount.

Employee Retention Planning

The skills, knowledge and abilities needed to engage in developing, implementing and evaluating a retention plan are all fundamental elements of the jail leader's core competencies. (Stinchcomb, Smith, McCampbell, & Mancini, 2011) Importantly, there is no magic to the elements suggested here, and jails are strongly encouraged to add their own personalities and unique environments to the process. With adopting the values of involving and respecting employees and focusing on safety in the workplace, here are some steps to develop a retention (and leadership development) plan. One other caution before you begin, assure that the work focuses on the root causes of retention challenges, not the symptoms (that staff are resigning). (McCampbell & Earley, 2019)

Establish the process; manage change; respectfully challenge the status quo.

Discuss why the initiative is important and how it will happen, who will be involved, and identify a realistic timetable for developing the plan. Describe how the agency will know if this initiative is a success by establishing measurable outcomes. For example, when this plan is implemented, we will have a drop of "x" % in voluntary resignations; we will use mandatory overtime less than "x" shifts per month. Identify and engage with criminal justice partners who are also experiencing the same retention challenges, rather than seeing them as "competitors". If the jail is having retention problems so are the fire service, first responders, hospitals, and other local law enforcement. Reach out and assess opportunities for joint ventures. Find the common elements such as affordable housing, child care, and elder care needs of current employees. Involve locally elected officials, community business leaders, and stakeholders. (McCampbell, Core Competencies and Jail Leadership: Managing Change, 2015)

Conduct a Community Environmental Scan

Only 3% of jails surveyed indicated that the citizens who they serve are knowledgeable about their jail; 45% reported citizens as somewhat knowledgeable; and 52% reported that citizens were not at all knowledgeable.

(McCampbell S. W., How Transparent and Accountable is Your Jail?, 2021) This data helps explain why jails struggle to gain community support, translatable ultimately into funding. Yet is this another opportunity on which the jail can capitalize? How "livable" is your community for employees? The recent focus on both affordable housing and child care are substantial barriers. In the past, jail leaders may see solutions such as housing, child care, and addressing employees' quality of life outside their responsibilities, but assuming that others will address these matters no longer seems accurate or prudent.

**"IF YOU FAIL
TO PLAN, YOU ARE
PLANNING TO FAIL."**

— Benjamin Franklin

Gather and analyze the data

Know the jail's attrition data by year, length of service of employees in the workplace, characteristics, generation, and job assignments.

- How long is the process to recruit and hire?
- How long do employees stay?
- What does attrition cost the jail in not only dollars and cents (e.g. overtime, recruitment efforts, training), but in morale?
- What are the generations in the workplace and what can the agency anticipate in retirements?
- What is the profile of the aging of employees in the organization?
- Will vacancies occur among line staff, supervisors, mid-managers or leadership?
- Who may be the primary "competitors" to jail employment—both private and public sector?
- The cost of turnover is significant and calculable and part of a compelling argument to expend resources on retention.

Involve/Ask Employees

Is there credible data from exit interviews? Are "staying interviews" part of the culture and practice? (Stinchcomb & McCampbell, FutureForce: A Guide to Building the 21st Century Community Corrections Workforce, 2006) What can you learn from employees' grievances? Is an old-fashioned suggestion box

Getting Outside the Box—Affordable Housing and Employee Support Solutions

Find partnership that can bring about sustainable community changes to support the jail (and other first responders') employees. May not seem like "your job" but who will act if not you? Some ideas:

- Partner with hospitals and other 24/7 public safety operations to identify affordable and available child care options, including subsidies.
- Develop sharing mechanisms for child care within the resources of the organization, or with other public safety agencies.
- Enter into contracts with current child care providers in the community with designated spaces for your organization's employees.
- Broadcast the availability of homeowner assistance programs in each state thru federal programs
- Build partnerships to set aside units in newly constructed housing units for first responders

applicable? (McC Campbell, *Listening to Your Employees: Advice from Emerging Leaders*, 2020) Current employees have as much to gain as the organization from working with qualified and well-trained newcomers. Their opinions and involvement are worth a lot. The single best source of new employees are current employees.

Assess Internal Culture

Critically examine the internal culture of the jail. Would you recommend anyone work in the environment? There are pluses and minuses to every internal culture, and it may be different on each shift, in different facilities and in different work areas. Much has been written about examining internal culture, but failing to correctly identify and address it will doom even the most innovative retention strategies. (McC Campbell S. W., *Core Competencies and Jail Leadership: Positive Organizational Culture*, 2018)

Dissect Human Resources Processes—Recruitment, Screening, Hiring, Probationary Year and Retention

The critical and immediacy of jail staffing needs often fail to galvanize human resources practitioners to help. This part of the organization and these individuals are the gatekeepers to important processes of hiring—linked directly to jail safety and success. Some of those in charge of hiring, retention and employee engagement subscribe to the "we've always done it this way" philosophy. (Russo, Woods, Drake,

& Jackson, 2018) Respectfully challenging the status quo to improve processes, while not diminishing the necessary qualification of new employees, is an urgent need. Engaging in root cause analysis may help identify outdated, unnecessary, and counterproductive steps in the process. Critical is use of technology, such as online applications and frequent communication (via social media) with candidates is not an option. Accurate (current, realistic) job descriptions, identifying the means to reach the newest generation of workers (e.g. social media), and an organized, resources, and constantly reviewed recruitment plan is part of keeping employees. Asking recent hires how the process was for them provides insight. Many organizations have employee incentives to recruit new employees, and some provide means to keep the referring employee linked to the success of the new hire through the probationary year. New hires are often abandoned after the first hour of work so assessing how staff are "on-boarded"—that is—formally and informally welcomed into the organization warrants review. Whatever the outcome of these evaluations of the human resources functions, developing an action plan, with measurable steps and accountability is critical to making change happens.

Scrutinize Training

Effective, up-to-date, and generationally relevant training (pre-service, in-service and Field Training Officer/Correctional Training Officer programs) is critical to keeping employees and maintaining a safe environment. With budget cuts, training is sometimes the first thing to be jettisoned, with far-reaching and negative impacts. This is a false economy. A deep look at all training components, even if reform and change may be incremental, is essential. Particular emphasis on the field training officer/correctional training officer component for new employees helps them see just how valued they are. (McC Campbell & McC Campbell, *Center for Innovative Public Policies, Inc.*, 2020) Establishment of a mentorship program can so reap rewards for those mentored as well as the mentors. (Center for Innovative Public Policies, Inc., *American Jail Association*, 2011)

Researching and Networking

The hiring crisis extends to every segment of our communities. Reaching out to businesses and professional organizations in the community and researching the work of other public safety organizations are part of the mission. Stretching research into non-public safety arenas, probing the community, and building partnerships are necessary to a plan that has examined all options. Identifying the opportunities to partner or collaborate with other public safety organizations may present options for greater success.

Action Planning and Incorporating into the Culture

The end result of all this work described above is an *action plan* that gets the process moving. A credible action plan must, at a minimum:

- Set measurable objectives;
- Assign the work to individuals for accountability;
- Establish achievable timelines;
- Identify those who will help, including employees and community stakeholders;
- Define the outcome of the work, the documentation that assures the work is completed or on-going; and
- Determine if the work is completed, or if a revised action update is needed.

This should be a transparent process, with frequent updates and outcomes broadcasted through the organization and the community. The process should also allow for mid-course corrections as new information emerges, or new opportunities present themselves.

Incorporate improvements and changes in approach to retaining employees into the culture by allowing all to see that this is not just a “project” of short duration, but the way the organization will function into the future.

Improvement of Employee Retention in the Davidson County Sheriff's Office: Sheriff Daron Hall, “Never waste a crisis.”

In 2019 the Davidson County Sheriff's Office prioritized keeping employee by creating the position of Officer Retention Specialist. Major job responsibilities included, but were not limited to:

- Increased employee engagement;
- Mentoring newly hired correctional officers;
- Addressing concerns of long-term staff;
- Meeting with officer regarding retention concerns;
- Assisting with employees whose work performance needs improvement; and
- Preparing a plan to retain correctional staff.
- As the position has evolved, the Sheriff's Office reports that responsibilities have included, and outcomes are:
- Expedite the hiring process by examining the time between applications, the hiring decision, the first day worked and reducing the hurdle for the applicant.
- Use of a conditional offer letter to an applicant much earlier in hiring process.
- Implementation of job shadowing program to bring employees in the door.
- Review if hiring standards to assure these match the agency's actual needs? For example, is a physical

agility test aligned with the current facilities, not a jail that is no longer in use?

- If applicants are moving from outside the area to accept a position, ensure they know where to look for housing; how to find local schools; and, how to find jobs for their spouse or partner.
- Increase in-house staff to support a new officer through expansion of our peer supporter program.
- More involvement with other law enforcement agencies for counseling staff.
- Created a mentorship program.

If you're not sure a new strategy will yield the desired result, try a test group as a sample and run in comparison to your regular process. Review the results and see what worked (and what didn't).

You may not have a retention problem. You may have a recruitment problem. Make sure you are advertising in new ways to reach new pools of candidates. Look for ways to reach younger applicants. Ask your new hires why they chose you. Additional recommendations are to examine what are actually explicit requirements for your organization hiring requirements as opposed “that's what we've always done.” Challenge the status quo.

Resources

It is clear to jail leaders that resources are required to improve retention even before a retention plan is completed—and not to just address salaries and benefits. Funding is needed to:

1. Conduct a staffing analysis that identifies required positions that, in effect, enhance and support retention of employees. (Miller & Wetzel, 2012) These positions include, but are not limited to, supervisors, FTO/CTOs, trainers, retention specialists, and managers responsible to develop, implement and evaluate employee retention plans. While a funding authority may disagree, or not fund all required positions jail leaders have an obligation to identify and justify the staffing required.
2. Fund the retention planning process, including supporting outreach to community stakeholders, and research into viable options.
3. Improve critical support functions such as human resources, training, and the worksite environment. These overhauls may include technology, training, and other added resources.
4. Address internal agency culture. Resources to guide improvements to culture such as employee development, regularly scheduled relevant training, opportunities for advancement, workplace upgrades to improve employee satisfaction and safety, and initiatives that place listening to employees first.

5. Adjust, increase salaries and fringe benefits based on an objective analysis of the local marketplace. An uncomfortable situation for jail leaders—claiming that increased salaries and benefits will stem retention; then explaining how it doesn't. Simultaneous improvements to the workplace environment, improving quality of supervision, increasing meaningful training opportunities, and focusing on inclusion are just as critical. Doing one without the other is a plan set to fail.
6. Find a way to keep this initiative in front of the funding authority, local elected officials, and community organizations and stakeholders. Their involvement, inclusion of their suggestions and ideas, and contributions are prerequisites to success. A jail cannot do it alone.

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Endnote

For more detail on strategic planning for recruitment, retention and leadership development see: Stinchcomb, McC Campbell, Leip, *The Future is Now: Recruiting, Retaining, and Developing the 21st Century Jail Workforce*, U.S. Dept. of Justice, National Institute of Corrections, 2009, <http://www.cipp.org/uploads/3/7/5/7/37578255/developingthe21stcenturyjailworkforce05302011.pdf>

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