

In the Eye of the Corona:

Professionalism during the COVID-19 Pandemic

by Rev. Dr. Corey Minatani, M.Divinity

During my days as an infantry Soldier in the U.S. Army, we had a motto: "Train as you fight." In other words, we as Soldiers would train as if we were actually in combat (e.g. physical, mental, spiritual). In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the world is witnessing how various levels of government are handling the crisis. Obviously, opinions will vary as to how well our government reacts to the Corona virus attack. I would submit, depending upon the population the particular government sector serves to maintain complete normalcy, success can be agreed. While the world is separated, shut-in, anxious and fearful, life for inmates here at Washington State Penitentiary in Walla Walla, Washington runs at near normalcy for the population. Why? Anecdotally speaking, it may be because correctional officers daily deal with chaos and change. Maybe, like the Army, they as "train as they fight." For example, regular inmate activities, up to and including work schedules, run as usual with slight changes recommended by medical professionals. The government of Washington has teamed up with phone vendors to create opportunities for increased phone time for inmates to check up on loved ones; these additional calls also are at no cost to the inmate. Lastly, the organization and enhanced professionalism of the correctional officers, medical staff, educational staff, and administrative staff have been exceptional; this professionalism has resulted in reduced anxiety and stress upon all inmates, thus reducing violence and increasing organization.

and efficiency. This essay will detail what Washington State is doing right by correctly reacting to the unknowns of the COVID-19 pandemic.

One of the best performance indicators to evaluate staff is by looking at the population serviced; if the service is keeping things as normal as possible for the population in question, the staff is considered doing very well. Here at Washington State Penitentiary, one may examine five sectors toward data collection: meals, education, yard, dayrooms, and jobs. The staff here at the penitentiary have been able to keep hot and nutritious meal service to the inmates; this includes adjusting for religious observances for Jewish Passover and Muslim Ramadan. Walla Walla Community College delivered homework packets and laptops so that students could finish work towards their Associates in Business degree and Digital Design programs. Adhering to Social Distancing recommendations, inmates receive yard and dayroom use based upon an organized schedule. In addition, many jobs are still operating, as the penitentiary is a near-self-sustaining organization. All in All, the inmate population are allowed all the rights and privileges they normally receive due to the expert training of the staff and commitment to duty; the expertise is validated by the simple observation that normal services are offered with little to no interruption. As opposed to the outside world, the inmates here have less stress, anxiety, and frustration.

Another success indicator for grading organizations and their staff is the ability to establish and maintain communication; in military organizations, communication operations are top priority. Here at the penitentiary, inmates receive regular and constant reminders via email, kiosk, memos, and staff concerning COVID-19 concerns and applications to reduce infection. For example, the staff released various memos on masks, health updates, medical services, and changes to schedule; the idea being more information is best. Phone vendors have teamed up with state government to offer two five-minute calls, free-of-charge, allowing inmates to keep in contact with loved ones during this uncertain time. In addition, access to news media and email provide alternate options for inmates to contact loved ones when they cannot call during scheduled times to observe social distancing. Thus, disseminating critical information, opening and maintaining lines of communication, and access to outside media for inmates, indicates a well-run organization and staff that can adjust and react quickly to necessary changes.

In order to establish what constitutes as exceptional professionalism in the line of duty, I would argue, how staff operates in times of stress, determines the issue. A major indicator is command and control; the staff here at penitentiary demonstrate great calmness in the midst of chaos which creates order. All things considered, inmates seem to comply in an understanding manner, exhibit reduced stress and anxiety from the inmates, and organization by all staff, to include correctional officers, seem to be at higher levels. Medical

treatment has been exceptionally professional and caring. For example, the medical staff takes the time to diagnose various symptomology, and patiently answer inmates questions and concerns. Institutional staff have been observed logging extra hours in overtime covering all areas to keep standard operations running smoothly. Additionally, correctional staff extend great courtesy and respect to inmates during to COVID-19 pandemic; however, during my time here at the penitentiary, this level of professionalism is present divorced from the crisis as well. The point being, there are so many things the staff is doing well that it would be difficult to list. Professionalism and duty seem to be a part of the organizational culture at Washington State Penitentiary; whether due to leadership, training, or employee attributes, these people are to be commended.

In this essay, I've tried to relay the exceptional professionalism in the line of duty done at Washington State Penitentiary, located in Walla Walla, Washington; this professionalism has resulted in a virtually seamless operation during the most chaotic time in our world history to the present inmates. I attributed this to three factors: Maintenance of normal operations, increased contact with the outside world, exceptional professionalism and dissemination of critical information by correctional, educational, and medical staff. I wish to thank Governor Jay Inslee, D.O.C., D.O.C. staff, and Walla Walla Community College for keeping all of us safe, sane, and healthy during the COVID-19 pandemic. God Bless.