



VIRGINIA STEP DOWN PROGRAM FOR ADMINISTRATIVE SEGREGATION

Over the past 20 years, prison systems across the nation have increasingly relied on administrative segregation as a housing and management status for offenders deemed a risk to the safety of other incarcerated offenders or prison staff. Typically offenders are assigned to administrative segregation due to assaultive and disruptive behaviors at lower security level prisons, escape histories, or extremely violent and notorious crimes. Offenders in administrative segregation are managed constitutionally but with high security controls, and are locked in cells for 23 to 24 hours per day.

Some offenders remain in administrative segregation for years. While the safety of all prisons remains an important objective, 15 years after the advent of supermax prisons, corrections professionals are recognizing challenges created by long-term administrative segregation, including:

- » Administrative segregation units have by their very nature become a perpetual assignment for some offenders. The units are a catch-22 for prison administrators who cannot risk safety and security by relaxing controls for offenders without evidence of change;
- » Because supermax prisons have highly stressful work environments, staff can quickly burn out and increase their use of sick leave;
- » The longer offenders remain in administrative segregation, the more

likely they deteriorate in their ability to interact with others;

- » An adversarial “we-they” mindset of supermax prisons can escalate tensions and incidents; and
- » Administrative segregation units are more expensive to operate than general population prisons due to staffing needs, facility design and added security controls.

In early 2011, in an effort to resolve this correctional dilemma, the Virginia Department of Corrections (DOC) implemented its *Step Down Program for Administrative Segregation*. This initiative is a unique, creative and effective approach to providing a safe and secure way for offenders in administrative segregation to earn their return to the general population.

The approach taken by the Virginia DOC primarily follows the body of science called evidence-based practices. Evidence-based practices (EBP) are a collection of practices proven to reduce criminal behavior by focusing on risk reduction in addition to traditional risk control. The original research on EBP was conducted on offenders on probation in a community corrections setting. The Virginia DOC is the first state correctional agency to apply the principles and practices of the EBP research to an administrative segregation supermax prison population.

Realizing the goals of this program required a change in the overall culture of the supermax Red Onion State Prison (ROSP). As a first step, the DOC recognized the need to relieve staff stress and

the pressure of working solely with segregation offenders by creating a small general population housing unit at the prison. Thus, the Virginia DOC exchanged 170 administrative segregation offenders from ROSP with maximum security general population offenders from neighboring Wallens Ridge State prison.

The *Step Down Program for Administrative Segregation* has been very effective in addressing correctional challenges and problems. The offenders who have completed the program have not returned to administrative segregation. Further, the program has:

- » Significantly reduced the number of offenders in administrative segregation by 53 percent;
- » Increased safety by reducing prison incidents by 56 percent;
- » Reduced staff stress and improved morale as evidenced by a decrease in use of sick leave;
- » Increased offender morale and effective staff communication, as evidenced by 23 percent lower grievances; and
- » Increased offender program participation from zero in administrative segregation to 460.

