

Certification Spotlight

Setting an Example for Women in Corrections Through Certification

By Shawn Hawes and Joyce Coleman



Warden Karen Bryant joined the Philadelphia Prison System (PPS) in 1990 as a correctional officer trainee. PPS is the fifth largest urban jail system in the country. It operates six major correctional facilities — the Alternative and Special Detention Facility (ASD), the Curran-Fromhold Correctional Facility, the Detention Center, the House of Correction, Philadelphia Industrial Correctional Center and the Riverside Correctional Facility (RCF), all located on State Road in Northeast Philadelphia — as well as several smaller satellite facilities in various locations of the city. Bryant has spent her career serving the city of Philadelphia and its correctional facilities.

During the past 21 years, Bryant has climbed through the ranks and was ultimately appointed as warden to the prison's ASD facility on April 13, 2011. Bryant received encouragement through her participation in various professional associations such as the National Association of Blacks in Criminal Justice and the America Correctional Association. Bryant's first assignment as a correctional officer was at the Philadelphia Industrial Correctional Center (PICC). Fueled by support from senior staff members, Bryant took advantage of professional examinations and opportunities for advancement. In 1993 she became part of the transition team that facilitated the opening of the Curran-Fromhold Correctional Facility (CFCF). In 1995, Bryant was promoted to sergeant and was transferred to Holmesburg Prison where she remained until its decommissioning in 1996. During the course of her career at PPS, Bryant has been

assigned to five of the six facilities within the prison system, and worked as an adjunct instructor at the Training Academy where she focused on teaching ethics and professionalism to trainees, contracted staff and promoted staff. She has also taught survival skills for those involved in hostage situations.

Bryant, a certified correctional executive, received her certification through the Corrections Certification Program at ACA's 2011 Winter Conference in San Antonio. Bryant's rise through PPS was achieved through the mentoring and direction from some of the pioneer female supervisors in the system, the PPS training program, and her own desire for learning. Women in corrections face many prejudices as they enter the field, but Bryant does not allow herself to be deterred. Bryant said:

Debates and dialogues continue about whether the glass ceiling still exists. Can you imagine a woman openly being accused of getting a job just to find a boyfriend? Can you envision women being told they should be content with sharpening pencils and making coffee? In these times, such comments seem old-fashioned, if not potential ethical landmines. Nonetheless, the visibility of leaders and professionals who are women is less of an exception and more of an expected — and accepted norm. But in the field of corrections, pioneering women have weathered incredible odds and faced no shortage of interesting situations in their career.¹

In 2004, while assigned to the RCF, the prison system's facility for women and adjudicated female minors, Bryant

was the deployment coordinator. In this role she was responsible for resolving staff concerns through mediation and other avenues, as well as monitoring the facility's budget for the Warden's Office, where she also served as the facility's training officer. During this time, Bryant developed programs for the incarcerated female juveniles and sponsored a Girl Scout troop out of the facility that works toward building self-esteem and a healthy, positive self-image. The troop consists of children of incarcerated mothers who use troop visits as an opportunity to remain active in their children's lives while confined. Girl Scouts teaches and instills basic principles of honesty, fairness, courage, compassion, character, sisterhood, confidence, and citizenship through various activities including community service, learning first aid, and earning badges by acquiring other practical skills. The girls at RCF participated in all Girl Scout activities except camping.

Working with youths encouraged Bryant to pursue a bachelor's degree from Drexel University where she majored in criminal justice. Bryant also earned a Master of Science from Capella University. In 2007, Bryant was promoted to deputy warden of administration at PICC, where she implemented other youth-based programs such as Thinking for a Change (T4C) to PPS. T4C was developed by the National Institute for Corrections and is an evidence-based, cognitive change program that teaches offenders social skill development, problem-solving skills and cognitive restructuring.

In April 2011, Bryant was promoted to warden of the Alternative and Special Detention (ASD) Unit. ASD houses minimum- and community-custody male inmates at its main site on the PPS campus and men and women who are sentenced to weekends or enrolled in the work release program on six off-site facilities. ASD staff develop job leads to establish employment opportunities for inmates in a variety of positions including food service, telemarketing, customer services and dry cleaning. These services allow inmates to gain valuable work experience and help ease their transition back into the community. The work release program also generates revenue for the city of Philadelphia as the inmates involved are required to contribute 16 percent of their gross pay toward their room and board. Psychological, social and substance abuse treatment services; literacy instruction; and day and evening GED-preparation classes are provided by PPS. Through a contract with the Greater Philadelphia Urban Affairs Coalition, the Cambria Employment Project provides services including orientation and assessment, vocational training and education aimed at development of job-readiness skills, parenting, spirituality and creative arts programming, as well as discharge planning and aftercare.²

Bryant works hard to set an example to staff by often advising them to take advantage of the degree programs and professional development programs that are available for those looking to further their careers. She believes that certification is the best way for staff to exhibit knowledge of corrections as a professional field.

She has organized a group of staff at all levels of rank and prepared them for testing in October 2011. Bryant hopes to create a regular schedule of training classes to prepare the staff for ACA certification. Bryant explained:

The staff behind the walls [of correctional facilities] lack public recognition, which causes them to 'lose heart' and feel that their positions are not as important in the public eye as other law enforcement agencies. Anytime there is an opportunity for the correctional staff to be recognized, we should make the effort. The PPS staff has a wealth of knowledge, and this certification is confirmation that they are members of a large professional organization that encourages and accomplishes tasks in a professional manner. Correctional work remains the unsung component of law enforcement; therefore we must honor our own.

PPS Commissioner Louis Giorla agrees with Bryant regarding the importance of education and certification. Giorla said:

Operating correctional facilities has become an increasingly complicated job. Regardless of position or rank, custody personnel must be thoroughly abreast of the best practices, professional standards and above all, legal mandates ... The corrections field is constantly evolving; we are duly obligated to protect our community, provide staff with the best and safest methods of offender management, and ensure the welfare of the offenders we supervise. There is no better tool for our staff than ongoing education. There is no better measure of their progress than independent certification.

PPS is sponsoring employees seeking professional certification and

Bryant is acting as the PPS liaison to the ACA certification program. "When the commissioner began to talk about this [the certification process] to me, it was more on the level of furthering my educational pursuits, but it turned out to be valuable," Bryant said. "It allowed me to see that PPS was on par with the rest of the correctional institutions in the country — state and federal systems included."

"This is a job that you learn hands-on until you get to management, and then you have to learn to not only lead, but also plan and develop, and that's where the education comes in," Bryant said. "Management is a skill that is learned, managing is different than leading. A good manager knows her resources (where to find them and how to use them), recognizes her strengths and weaknesses, and builds a good team when bringing all of those elements together."

ENDNOTES

¹ Edwards, K. Danielle. 2008. Breaking boundaries, changing the game: Women in corrections at CCA. *Inside CCA*. Retrieved June 28, 2011, from www.insidecca.com/inside-cca/women-in-corrections-at-cca/.

² See the Philadelphia Prisons Systems' website. Retrieved June 28, 2011 from <http://www.phila.gov/prisons/cmr.html>.

Shawn Hawes is a public relations specialist for Philadelphia Prison Systems (PPS). Joyce Coleman is program manager for PPS TV.

Correction

On page 20 of the October issue in Scott Barrett's Certification Spotlight article, Naval Brig Norfolk was accidentally changed to Naval Brig Chesapeake throughout. The Norfolk, Va., facility closed just after the Chesapeake, Va., facility opened in August 2011.

Reprinted with permission of the American Correctional Association, *Corrections Today*. All rights reserved.