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TDCJ Chaplains impact the agency's mission

By Tom Mechler, TDCJ Vice Chairman

The TDCJ Chaplaincy Program plays an important role in fulfilling the agency's mission. Through pastoral care and programming that facilitates spiritual transformation, chaplaincy staff dedicates itself to helping offenders through rehabilitation and reentry.

Under the purview of the Rehabilitation Programs Division, agency chaplains assist the rehabilitation process at the unit level and in the regional parole offices. These chaplains ensure multifaith and multicultural pastoral care is available to offenders, their families, and to the agency's staff. They also ensure quality programming is provided to assist offenders in their institutional or reentry adjustment. They minister, provide guidance and encourage offenders to pursue their faith, establish life-changing goals, and to reconcile and strengthen family relationships.

Within the Correctional Institutions Division (CID), there are six regional chaplains, and

more than 100 unit-level chaplains of multiple faiths, many of whom are assisted by certified volunteer chaplain assistants (CVCAs). There are also five area Muslim chaplains providing oversight to Muslim services, and TDCJ contracts for ministry services with Native American and Jewish chaplains. Unit chaplaincy programs include religious services, visitation/hospitality house ministries, hospice care ministry, and family bonding and marriage seminars. Spiritual growth, rehabilitation and life skills programs are also provided. They minister to death row offenders and their families during incarceration and throughout the execution process, and facilitate the process for donor-driven projects, such as the construction of unit chapels or multipurpose buildings.

Unit chaplains also research and assist in implementing professional standards. In addition, they provide technical support to the staff, and specialized training to staff and community organizations. These chaplains coordinate and oversee the activities of re-

ligious volunteer programs and actively recruit volunteers to help provide additional services to the offenders. Unit chaplains also help direct the activities of the community volunteers who operate the offender faith-based dorms. These dorms offer support and accountability, along with a faith-based curriculum and mentoring program.

The Chaplaincy Program includes five chaplains within the Parole Division, one located in each of the division's regional offices. These chaplains perform routine ministerial clergy work, and assist the offenders, their families and parole division staff. Their primary role is resource networking with community organizations to develop community-based resources, pastoral counseling, crisis intervention support, and faith-based education programs. They are also responsible for recruiting volunteers and mentors to assist in the offender's reentry process. In order to meet the denominational needs of parolees, parole chaplains provide information regarding religious educational programs,

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counseling programs, worship services and ministries within the community.

In both CID and Parole divisions, TDCJ chaplains cultivate a high standard of accountability by encouraging offenders to take ownership of their responsibilities. Many times, this sense of ownership leads to improved feelings of self-worth and pride, as well as constructive changes in the offender's behavior. The chaplains also focus on family support, providing assistance to help the offenders reconnect and strengthen those bonds, while assisting the family in understanding the challenges the offender could face when reentering society.

As noted, TDCJ chaplains also provide pastoral care to the agency's staff and their families. This care is given during an emergency or in a crisis situation, or when guidance is needed on a moral or spiritual matter.

By offering spiritual assistance, the work of TDCJ chaplains makes an important positive impact on all elements of the agency's mission – they help promote positive change and reintegration, they assist victims of crime, and they provide for public safety by helping to reduce recidivism. ●