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TDCJ expands mental health response, crisis intervention training

TDCJ continues to review and revise the correctional staff training curriculum to better prepare newly hired staff for work in the prison environment and to help current employees continue performing their duties safely and effectively. In FY 2016, the Correctional Institutions Division's Correctional Training and Staff Development department increased training hours and modified the curriculum to enhance supervision of offenders in emotional crisis or with mental health issues.

In September, the agency increased pre-service and in-service crisis intervention and mental health response training for corrections staff. Pre-service training expanded from 216 to 240 hours with most of the additional training devoted to mental health/crisis intervention. In addition, the time devoted to these topics during on-the-job and annual in-service training also increased. CID Director Bill Stephens described the goal of this intervention and response training initiative, saying, "The increase in training hours and additional emphasis on mental health response training is designed to give corrections staff in the field more of the

knowledge and skills they need to assess a potential mental health issue and take immediate and proper action to effectively and safely deal with the problem in order to prevent a crisis situation."

The agency's crisis response and mental health first aid training curriculum was revised with the input of mental health professionals and TDCJ staff members who have experience working at the agency's psychiatric care units. The expanded training is similar to the same 32-hour training program given to new correctional staff at these mental health facilities. Deputy Director of Management Operations Cody Ginsel described the enhanced training, saying "TDCJ's mental health response training incorporates the experience of agency employees who have spent years supervising offenders at inpatient mental health facilities. That knowledge base was used to enhance an already effective program, and I believe the revised training curriculum would be helpful for anyone who works in corrections."

By incorporating a training program similar to that provided for staff in the agency's

mental health facilities, all employees attending pre- and in-service training will continue learning how to identify the signs of mental illness and suicidal behavior and how to quickly and effectively respond with proper command notification and treatment by a mental health professional, but with an increased focus to better prepare them for dealing with mentally ill offenders. The expanded training program meets the curriculum standards set by the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement.

CID Deputy Director of Prison and Jail Operations Robert Eason noted that agency employees are not immune to mental health issues related to working in a stressful environment, and that staff members are advised during training as to what they can do to help a colleague who shows warning signs. "Corrections professionals have to deal with stressful work environments and mental health issues are not confined to offenders," Eason said. "Identifying and dealing with potential mental health issues among staff is also important." ●