

## Helping Hidden Heroes

**Hello, wonderful corrections professionals.** I'm delighted to serve as the chaplain for the American Jail Association. And thank you, President Sieger, for the honor!

As you know, President Sieger's platform includes discussion on staff support and health. Where do I fit in? My daily privilege is supporting the staff of a county jail by providing a safe, listening ear for them.

### Meeting in Jail

Perhaps your jail already has volunteer chaplains exclusively dedicated to staff who stroll the corridors to check on them. If not, I hope you'll read my story.

Eight years ago, I started delivering spiritual support to the detained individuals in our county's jail. After two years, I became aware of the challenges faced by staff and asked administration if I might offer spiritual support to the officers. My request came in God's timing. Just 18 months earlier, jail leadership had created an "Empower" staff wellness program (detailed in the September/October 2019 edition of *American Jails* by Director Theresa Olson) to provide support for employees.

In light of this, Director Olson suggested that I become a roving chaplain to staff. Instead of sitting at a desk waiting for staff to come to me, I would walk tier to tier, greeting staff, and respectfully offering a caring heart and encouragement. As a result, I'm in my fifth year as a volunteer chaplain traveling throughout the jail and connecting with our 4,000 hard-working sworn and civilian staff.

God opened the door in a place comprised of steel barriers. As I Corinthians 16:9 states in the Bible: "A wide door for effective work has opened to me." This creative approach of a roaming, volunteer chaplaincy encourages staff in a variety of ways.

When I began as a chaplain in 2018, I had no idea how staff would receive me—a civilian walking through the jail to inquire about their work and lives. Yet, they were immediately welcoming and ready to share personal matters.

As we know from scripture, problems come in life: "In this world you will have troubles. But take heart; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Spiritual care offers a healthy way to deal with life's challenges. When staff share their fears and frustration, their emotional release helps them to become psychologically and physically stronger.

### The God Prescription

One-third of the largest book in the Bible, Psalms, contains laments (i.e., complaints and pleas to God). He gave us so many examples to make it clear not only that it's okay to complain to Him, but it's actually very *good* for us to express our pain, anger, confusion, and fear to Him.

In doing so, we transform our feelings into thoughts toward Him. By changing our emotions to thoughts, we immediately become less stressed. As we think factually about God, emotions recede and hopeful thoughts—of solutions and the future—can enter.



Chaplain Linda Ahrens

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## Is a Roving Chaplain Effective?

Walking through the jail, I saw an officer who'd shared his struggle with procrastination three months earlier. At that time, he'd eagerly accepted my little pamphlet, *Overcoming Procrastination*.

I asked him how it was going and if the pamphlet helped him. He replied, "I haven't gotten around to reading it yet."

So, chaplains don't always see that we're effective—we just try!

Lamenting also reminds us that we're not alone in our pain, but that God cares and is right there with us and ready to listen. As His representative, I (and the other chaplains who joined our chaplain team) work to help staff with this cathartic process by utilizing the simple

act of listening. Often, after an officer shares details of a situation (during which I say nothing), he will then say: "Thanks, that really helped!" God brings healing to the spirit that is poured out.

## Recognition

With a chaplain dedicated *solely* to them, staff know that they are valued and of priority. Chaplains who serve both populations of inmates and staff invariably spend more time with the detained, simply because of the numbers (e.g., one officer over a tier of 15 inmates). By keeping my focus on staff, it simplifies the ministry.

However, when inmates invariably interrupt, asking me for a Bible or something else, I thank them for asking, and suggest they request the item from a social worker, and turn back to the staff member, who

knows that I'm there because God led me to them—that they are my priority, and I love them!

God loves each of you serving in law enforcement. You represent Him and His plan for law and order: "All authorities which exist have been established by God" (Romans 13:1). It's no surprise then that He sends in chaplains to support you in your vital duty. He cares.

## Connecting with No Stigma

I walk through the facility sequentially to each on-duty staff. At first, I'd often get lost within our 96-acre compound. I "went out, not knowing where I am going..." (Hebrews 11:8). And seeking guidance each time, I'd meet an officer I'd not met before; God wastes no opportunity and can turn any dilemma into something productive!

My arrival at their post means that tired staff do not need to travel elsewhere to have a conversation. They often express appreciation for my visits, and it's not unusual to hear the words "you came at just the right time!" (My appointments and timing are guided by Him. As written in Ecclesiastes 3:11: "God makes everything beautiful in His time.")





For a variety of reasons, staff may hesitate to seek counseling support when distressed. However, that's the strength of a roving chaplain; my stopping at each post means that there's no stigma. It is "normal" for anyone to be seen talking to the chaplain! They know that my goal is to "encourage and build up each other..." (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

Most importantly, everything they share with me remains confidential (except if a staff member gives reason to believe they may harm themselves or others). My position as a volunteer also sends the message that it's safe for staff to share their concerns, particularly those who prefer talking to someone outside the employment structure.

### Community Awareness

I continue to learn about corrections and the situations staff handle every day. As a result, I'm educating friends and hundreds of others about you and the demands of your profession. My fellow civilians are stunned to learn about the

risks, injuries, and too-short lifespan of corrections staff.

In response, members of my church visited the jail simply to thank our correctional officers for their dedication and service. They wanted to express their sincere and individual appreciation to correctional staff—the heroes hidden behind walls.

My prayer is that every jail will have a roving volunteer chaplain, supporting staff.

I hope that you feel our love for you, as we thank God for the work you do, and as we continue to pray for your health and well-being.

**CHAPLAIN LINDA AHRENS**  
Chaplain  
American Jail Association

**Note:** The opinions expressed in the article are my own as a volunteer chaplain and do not reflect views of any other entity.

American Correctional Association

American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME)

Association of Women Executives in Corrections (AWEC)

Bill Glass Behind the Walls

Catholic Charities

Colorado Jail Association

Companions Journeying Together

Correction Captains' Association, Inc.

Freedom Forever Ministries

Good News Jail & Prison Ministry

IAHV Prison Program/Formally Prison Smart

Michigan Sheriffs' Coordinating & Training Council

Middle Atlantic States Correctional Association (MASCA)

Missouri Sheriffs' Association

National Commission on Correctional Health Care

New Jersey County Jail Wardens Association

North Carolina Jail Administrators' Association

Policy Research, Inc.

The Rape Crisis Center

San Joaquin County Correctional Officers Association

South Carolina Jail Administrators' Association

Story Chain

University Enterprises Corporation

Virginia Association of Regional Jails

Wisconsin Jail Association