

Helping Hidden Heroes—Part 2

Creating a Chaplaincy Solely for Your Jail's Staff

Part 1 in our May/June issue

described how roving, volunteer chaplains *solely* support Cook County's staff. Part 2 covers ways to select chaplains and how to launch this spiritual care for correctional staff.

An Unspoken Need

After an incident at the jail or when personal challenges spill pain into life, staff may not reach out for emotional care; their focus is getting through each day and completing their shift. This is when a roving chaplain can meet a need by visiting tiers, one by one. God has often led me to an officer reeling from an emotional, physical, or other blow—a loved one's death, detainee suicide, or having been spat upon. Talking helps release pain, aid in healing, and bringing hope. If your agency does not have chaplains roving your facility, solely supporting staff, I hope you will go back to read Part 1 before you read any further.

Budget Benefit

When chaplains volunteer to support correctional staff, there is no employment cost to the agency. At our jail, each volunteer chaplain's personal expense is borne by the chaplain's faith organization or the individual chaplain.

Congregations learn from chaplains about the pressures on correctional staff. Knowing that you represent God ("all authorities...are established by God," Romans 13:1), these civilians thank God for you and pray for your safety and success. Impressed by and grateful for your service, our congregants have donated books, notepads, a buffet at National Correctional Officers and Employees Week, and more.

Uniqueness and receptivity

Each jail is unique, so how your chaplaincy staff develops will also be distinctive. When Cook County began its first roving volunteer chaplaincy in 2018, to assess its scope and effectiveness, chaplains reported the date, shift, and number of contacts made in each rove. Staff were receptive: they readily shared personal issues with a chaplain, requested materials to read, and referred the chaplain to fellow officers.

Some Chaplain Criteria

Effective chaplains should be trained, reliable and trustworthy even as they vary in method, age, background, and energy. Some qualities which we found to be essential:

Going solo Chaplains must be comfortable initiating contact with staff. After

receiving an initial walk-through, they must need no escort, since meaningful conversation is facilitated when others aren't near, able to overhear personal matters.

Focused Chaplains for staff must not be distracted by detainees who may interrupt with requests, but civilly respond, "I'm here solely for staff." Chaplains never initiate conversation with, nor give anything to, detainees even if staff mistakenly relay a detainee's request for materials or emotional support. As scripture guides, we care about all ("...love everyone, just as I have loved you." John 15:12), but this chaplaincy's focus is staff, not detainees.



Chaplain Linda Ahrens

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Respectful Each chaplain must promptly obey staff; being "... subject to authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established" Romans 13:1. We must also respect an employee's preference to *not* speak with, or accept materials from, a chaplain.

Available Unlike religious volunteers for detainees, whose attendance is generally restricted to certain hours, days, and tiers, chaplains for staff must rove for longer periods, and go anywhere in the facility.

Accepting Priests, imams, pastors, etc., solely share one religious belief. In contrast, chaplains provide a ministry of presence to staff of any faith and those having no belief in a higher power.

Humble Chaplains must have humility, not talk about themselves, and be sensitive to never interfere with staff duties. They rely upon God to supply for staff what they lack, through peer support and other trusted resources: "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." James 4:8.

Some Ways To Find a Chaplain For Your Agency

1. Inform a religious volunteer who currently supports your detainees, that staff would welcome

spiritual support. Ask the volunteer to consider learning about supporting staff *exclusively*. Credentialed and familiar with your agency, volunteers are logical candidates. (*Four of our volunteer chaplains for Cook County staff previously supported detainees.*)

- 2. Educate that volunteer** on the need to spiritually support staff. (*For an article explaining this—to offer to the volunteer—email LindaAhrens1@yahoo.com.*)
- 3. Contact a local church** for a volunteer interested in spiritually supporting your staff. (*#2's article could also be offered to it.*)
- 4. Suggest correctional staff** ask their faith leaders to provide a volunteer chaplain for staff. (*One of our volunteer chaplain pastors a church attended by six of our COs.*)
- 5. Ask retired staff**, including peer support, who spiritually supported fellow staff during their years of service to consider returning as volunteer chaplains. (*Three COs, retired after 30 years' service at our jail, who experienced the chaplaincy for staff, subsequently joined our volunteer chaplain team!*)
- 6. After they are established, ask your chaplains** to recruit more chaplain candidates.

7. Perhaps I can connect your agency with a chaplain candidate in your county (*contact me at LindaAhrens1@yahoo.com*).

To encourage candidates, you might share that resources will be made available to assist them, such as roving tips and sources offering free and discounted materials which they could offer to correctional staff (*details available from LindaAhrens1@yahoo.com*).

Evaluating Chaplain Candidates

A chaplain's personality, availability, mobility, and other factors must suit your agency. Below is the process we use.

Step 1—Volunteer job description & application form

Even if a candidate is known (e.g., a retired/former jail employee or current religious volunteer to detainees), each receives an application form to complete and a description of the role, including commitment to perform a consistent schedule, maintain confidentiality, report attendance, and end any former support to detainees. (*For a template, email LindaAhrens1@yahoo.com.*)

Step 2—Interview The candidate is interviewed by staff who manage the chaplain program.

Step 3—Rovings A staff member escorts a first candidate through the facility. Thereafter, every candidate also roves with each current chaplain, to see different chaplain styles, having God-given “talents that differ” (Romans 12:6). For example, at our jail, one chaplain also offers marriage counseling, a second offers lessons for those wanting to study spiritual topics, and another offers topical materials.

Step 4—Evaluation The above roves let escorting staff/chaplains assess a candidate and relay recommendations to administration. Roves also enable a candidate to confirm that this ministry fits him or her—e.g., some could not walk as much as is needed, so declined the chaplaincy.

Step 5—Assignment Each approved chaplain is assigned areas, days, and shifts which typically differ from other chaplains, to facilitate coverage. Chaplains who previously supported detainees are initially assigned elsewhere.

Step 6—Introductions Each chaplain creates and demonstrates to the manager an “elevator speech” to use with staff, typically including their name, of being a volunteer chaplain *solely* for staff, and that conversations are kept private—not even shared with other chaplains.

Agency Commitment

For an agency to determine if it should appoint volunteer chaplains for staff, it will assess what is needed to start and maintain such activity. The following are actions taken by Cook County’s Department of Corrections to support volunteer chaplains serving its staff:

Management A staff member is assigned to locate and interview chaplain candidates, arrange rovings, and provide IDs and assignments to new chaplains. This manager arranges resources (e.g., a desk or areas for chaplain personal materials), monitors chaplain attendance and holds quarterly meetings for mutual sharing and planning. The manager introduces new chaplains to staff, keeps chaplains aware of policies or changes impacting rovings, and corrects any missteps.

Publicity The manager coordinates announcements to staff, introducing the chaplaincy. This was done by email to all staff, including a chaplain headshot, then followed by videoed chaplain messages to staff.

Physical support Chaplains may park in the employee lot, and receive an ID allowing 24/7 access to a desk, photocopier, computer, phone, and a spot to store handouts, personal belongings, and snacks.

Updates County emails are offered to chaplains. Those utilizing one receive emails sent to staff, such as death notifications of staff and their family members, enabling chaplain contact with the bereaved.

Perhaps Your Agency Already Has Chaplains Dedicated To Staff.

If so, please let me know and what works, to share with others. Otherwise, I hope that the steps and resources mentioned above encourage your agency to start a chaplaincy for your staff’s well-being. As God’s word says, “I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well” (3 John 1:2).

God loves you and every staff member and “nothing...will be able to separate you from the love of God” (Romans 8:39). I believe that God has the right volunteer chaplains for your agency in His divine pipeline, and pray that steel doors swing open to welcome His love in the form of these chaplains, “because He cares for you,” (1st Peter 5:7).

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