



INSIDE CORRECTIONS

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OIT Stays Cool Despite Summer Cyber Meltdown

By Mackenzie Fitchett

On a Friday morning in July 2024, one corrupted file led to a computer system outage that spanned the entire country. Yet, because of the diligence and determination of agency staff, the issue was minimized swiftly to keep the Department running.

“I was immensely proud of the OIT team’s response to this unprecedented outage,” said Keith Mercantante, Director of the Office of Information Technology (OIT). “Their exceptional dedication, meticulous attention to detail, and unwavering commitment to resolving the issue quickly and effectively were truly remarkable. Their collective effort and professionalism exemplified the highest standards of problem solving and crisis management.”

CrowdStrike Holdings, Inc., is the nationwide cybersecurity company that sent out a corrupted file with one of their routine system updates. This file caused computers to shut down, leaving them unable to reopen and restart with Windows software.

Continued on page 5



Resiliency Program Officers Promote Health and Wellness

By Mackenzie Fitchett

Five years ago, the Office of the Attorney General created the “Officer Resiliency Directive,” a first-in-the-nation statewide program to support the emotional and psychological well-being of law enforcement officers. Through this directive, Resiliency Program Officers (RPOs) are established to help guide law enforcement officers at their agencies to the assistance and resources they need during times of hardship.

The directive was signed in August 2019, and the first training for Resiliency Program Officers within the New Jersey Department of Corrections (NJDOC) took place the fol-

lowing year. The NJDOC is now home to more than 80 Resiliency Program Officers and eight Master Resiliency Program Officers who assist in coaching new waves of custody staff as they come through the program. Currently, there are multiple RPOs present at every NJDOC facility.

“RPOs are able to disseminate resources for those who are struggling or may need someone to confide in,” said Master Resiliency Program Officer Monica Rivera. “We take a sworn oath of confidentiality with the Attorney General’s Office because we want departmental staff, both custody and civilian, to feel safe coming to us for help.”

Continued on page 9

Inside this edition:

- » **Pride Month**, pg. 2
- » **Class 256 Graduation**, pg. 3
- » **Corrections Officer Day**, pg. 4



(From left to right:) Assistant Commissioner Melinda Haley, Esq., Division of Diversity & Legal Affairs; DEI Coordinator Clarissa Wheat; Chief Investigator Dave D'Amico, Middlesex County DOC; Commissioner Victoria L. Kuhn, Esq.; Correctional Police Officer Ambar Garcia, Northern State Prison; Correctional Police Sergeant Douglas Wynn-Monroe, East Jersey State Prison.

To celebrate **Pride Month**, Central Office Headquarters hosted a Pride Picnic at the end of June. The picnic welcomed speakers, including Commissioner Victoria L. Kuhn, Esq.; Officer Ambar Garcia; and Dave D'Amico, Chief Investigator of Middlesex County Department of Corrections & Youth Services. A flag-raising ceremony was held and a presentation was given by Sergeant Douglas Wynn-Monroe on the LGBT Rain Foundation in Essex County. This non-profit organization helps young adults by providing emergency shelter, transitional housing, and permanent supportive housing services to address the emergent need of LGBTQIA+ individuals experiencing crises leading to homelessness. Other members of the LGBTQIA+ Employee Resource Group who helped plan this event include Lieutenant Michael Blaha, Officer Jayson Reverendo and Senior Investigator Justine DiPaolo.



NJDOC Graduates Class 256 and Congratulates Scott on Retirement

By Mackenzie Fitchett

Graduation for Class 256 was held on August 20 in Patriots Theater at the War Memorial in Trenton. The event hosted family, friends and staff from the Department. Recruits stepped across the stage and into their full-time positions as Correctional Police Officers of the New Jersey Department of Corrections (NJDOC). During the ceremony, the group showed just how far they had come from Day 1 by performing their cadences for graduation attendees.

“It is with great pride that we welcome Class 256 to the New Jersey Department of Corrections as they join a team of dedicated professionals who make a real difference in people’s lives,” said Commissioner Victoria L. Kuhn, Esq. “Their commitment and service to protecting our communities is inspiring, and we are grateful for the determination of the graduates who completed the nation’s most intensive and rigorous training academy.”

The recruits completed 17 weeks of intensive training both in and outside of the classroom at the NJDOC Correctional Staff Training Academy. In the classroom, recruits learned skills from firearms and defensive tactics to criminal law and gender- and trauma-informed policing. The recruits also partici-

pated in more than 50 physical fitness sessions, ending their preparation with two weeks of on-the-job training inside correctional facilities.

“Your career in public safety is one of the most rewarding in law enforcement, knowing that your work is contributing to safer communities and meaningful rehabilitation throughout New Jersey,” Commissioner Kuhn said.

These recruits are now part of the State’s largest law enforcement agency, where more than 4,300 custody staff members are responsible for the protection of more than 13,000 incarcerated persons in nine facilities throughout New Jersey.

During the graduation ceremony, the Department also congratulated Assistant Commissioner David Scott on his retirement. Scott entered the Academy in September 1999 and began his career as a correctional police officer before working his way up to the Assistant Commissioner of the Division of Training, Recruitment and Professional Development. Throughout his time with the Department, Scott led the Special Operations Group and has exemplified honor, integrity and dedication. 



Remembering Fred Baker on Corrections Officer Day

By Patrick Lombardi

On a sweltering late-July morning in 1997, correction officer Fred Baker began his shift at Bayside State Prison (BSP). Officer Baker, a resident of Cape May County, had joined the New Jersey Department of Corrections (NJDOC) a decade earlier. He grew up with a passion for law enforcement, and as a correctional police officer, he valued his duty to assist in safeguarding his home state. Outside of work, when he wasn't with his wife and two young children, Officer Baker dedicated his free time to the local volunteer fire department.

On July 30, 1997, Officer Baker commenced what would become his final shift. At 7:45 a.m., while on duty, he was stabbed once in the back by a man in state custody. Officer Baker was airlifted to a nearby hospital, where his wife worked as a trauma nurse, but he tragically succumbed to his wounds before arrival.

"The Department is proud to honor the legacy of Officer Fred Baker and other law enforcement officers who dedicated their lives to the safety and security of their communities," said NJDOC Commissioner Victoria L. Kuhn, Esq. "During his decade-long career, Officer Baker served this Department and the State of New Jersey with dignity, honor and integrity. His service embodied the steadfast dedication of our correctional police officers, and that level of commitment cannot be overstated."

More than 2,000 law enforcement officers from several surrounding states attended Officer Baker's funeral mass in 1997. Now, nearly three decades later, Officer Baker's legacy still reverberates throughout the Department.

It had been 25 years since the last killing of a state correctional police officer in New Jersey. Officer Baker's death shocked the Department and prompted state and local leaders to advocate for change and for better protection for those who help to protect the Garden State.

By the late 1990s, the NJDOC housed nearly 30,000 incarcerated persons, about double the amount as today, at 14 facilities spanning the length of the state, from Northern State Prison in Newark down to Southern State Correctional Facility in Delmont. Staffing was critically low and presented perilous conditions for both staff and incarcerated persons.

Immediately following Officer Baker's death, then-Governor Christie Whitman ordered the purchase of protective vests for correctional police officers, a standard that still remains within the Department. Today, the NJDOC continues to identify areas for improvement for its correctional staff, both for safety and morale. Thanks to the state's correctional police officers, the Department is better able to serve its staff, volunteers and the State of New Jersey as a whole.



In 2012, a bill was passed in New Jersey to celebrate the diligence and dedication of correctional police officers. Corrections Officer Day, observed annually on July 30 in honor of Officer Baker, recognizes the resolute service correctional police officers render to their fellow citizens daily.

Every July 30, at exactly 7:45 a.m., NJDOC staff, local officials, and friends and family of Officer Baker gather at BSP to honor his memory. A ceremony with correctional staff is held to memorialize his sacrifice and dedication to the Department.



At each Correctional Staff Training Academy (CSTA) graduation ceremony, one recruit is presented with the Fred Baker Memorial Academic Award. This accolade recognizes the recipient for their exemplary achievements in the CSTA's college-level academic courses and their assiduous preparation for a career in law enforcement.

Correctional police officers are responsible for the operation of safe and secure facilities. They are the frontline staff members who are critical in the oversight of thousands of incarcerated persons and play an integral role in our criminal justice system. Their position requires them to be counselors, communi-

cators and experts at crisis intervention in order to maintain professional environments and promote successful community reintegration.

In the years since Officer Baker's passing, Departmental staff erected a fallen officers' memorial on the grounds of the NJDOC's Central Office. This space displays the names of state correctional police officers in New Jersey who gave their lives in the line of duty. During the annual Corrections Officer Day ceremony at Central Office Headquarters, which follows Officer Baker's at BSP, each of their names is read aloud.

As part of the ceremony, NJDOC correctional police officers are awarded for dedication, honor and valor. At this year's event, officers from across the department were recognized for a variety of reasons, including exceptional mentorship and leadership skills as well as engaging in life-saving incidents.

Corrections Officer Day is a daily reminder of the selfless contributions of this agency's correctional police staff of all ranks and posts. It is a day of solemn remembrance of an officer whose passing altered the [structure] of corrections in the state, and it is a day to celebrate those who continue to serve with honor and protect with pride. 

CrowdStrike, *continued from page 1*

"Our computers were bricked," said Major James Forbes. "We were unable to use the computers for counts, shift logs, moves in iTag. We had to rely on someone else, in another part of the jail, who had a working computer."

When the Department was alerted to this issue, they got right to work on a solution.

"Recognizing the urgency, we quickly coordinated with Homeland Security, NJOIT and the majority of the involved State agencies to evaluate the severity of the problem and the resultant system outage," said Mercantante.

Late Friday night, Mercantante met with Major Forbes at Jones Farm, and they manually fixed each computer with a USB flashdrive.

"The solution required a meticulous process," said Mercantante. "We had to physically visit each affected workstation, boot the systems from a USB drive, and manually removed the file causing the failures."

Throughout the weekend, Dir. Mercantante, along with Major Forbes, Major Brian LaBonne and others went to each facility and manually restored computers to working order. Eventually, the team devised a way to fix the computers remotely.

"I was immensely proud of the OIT team's response to this unprecedented outage," said Mercantante. "Their exceptional dedication, meticulous attention to detail, and unwavering commitment to resolving the issue quickly and effectively were truly remarkable." 

Corrections Officer Day Award Recipients

MEDAL OF VALOR

Officer Xavier Figueroa, East Jersey State Prison

MERITORIOUS SERVICE AWARD

Lieutenant Kevin McGowan, Special Operations Group

DISTINGUISHED SERVICE AWARD

Officer David Noto, East Jersey State Prison
Officer Robert Troche, Garden State Correctional Facility

COMMISSIONER'S ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

Sergeant Justin Pinto, Northern State Prison
Officer Wilfred Arroyo, Northern State Prison
Officer Trevor Jones-Stephen, Northern State Prison
Officer Isaac Olden, Northern State Prison
Officer Michael Ragazzo, Northern State Prison

MERVIN GANESH OR MILITARY SERVICE AWARD

Officer Hector Arias, East Jersey State Prison
Officer Ambar Garcia, Northern State Prison
Officer Corey Nichols, Bayside State Prison
Officer Brett Russell, Bayside State Prison

CUSTODY STAFF MEMBER OF THE YEAR AWARD

Deputy Chief Investigator Quiana Whitmore, Special Investigation Division
Lieutenant Steven Jonaitis, Central Office Headquarters

OUTSTANDING LEADERSHIP AWARD

Lieutenant Fredrick Crowell, Northern State Prison
Lieutenant Edward Laffey, Mid-State Correctional Facility
Lieutenant Brian Lowden, Northern State Prison
Lieutenant Carmine Mirra, Adult Diagnostic and Treatment Center
Lieutenant Thomas O'Keefe, East Jersey State Prison
Lieutenant Ryan Pepper, Special Operations Group

OUTSTANDING LEADERSHIP AWARD CONT.

Lieutenant Steven Wojcik, Special Operations Group
Sergeant Sean Caldwell, New Jersey State Prison
Lieutenant Edward Mariconda, Mid-State Correctional Facility
Lieutenant Anthony Vargas, Northern State Prison
Sergeant Kaitlyn Curtiss, Correctional Staff Training Academy
Officer Fannie Braker, Edna Mahan Correctional Facility
Officer Keaton Howard, East Jersey State Prison
Officer Richard Kalbach, Special Operations Group
Officer Devon Krawiec, Bayside State Prison
Officer Churchill Nwachuku, New Jersey State Prison
Officer Christopher Orrok, Garden State Correctional Facility
Officer Craig Praul, South Woods State Prison
Officer Juan Ramos, Central Medical Unit
Officer Keri Stocker, Central Transportation Unit
Officer Luiz Vieira, Adult Diagnostic Treatment Center

EXCELLENCE IN MENTORSHIP AWARD

Officer Pedro Alvarado, Adult Diagnostic and Treatment Center
Officer Charles Snider, Mid-State Correctional Facility
Officer Adam Veltre, Garden State Correctional Facility
Officer James Zeban, New Jersey State Prison

LIFE SAVING AWARD

Lieutenant Maria Lenz, South Woods State Prison
Sergeant Luis Campos, South Woods State Prison
Sergeant Nicholas Goswick, South Woods State Prison
Officer Felicita Miranda, South Woods State Prison
Officer John Morris, South Woods State Prison
Officer Mary Amato, Correctional Staff Training Academy
Officer Robert McCann, Bayside State Prison
Officer Timothy McLaughlin, Bayside State Prison
Officer Juan Ogando-Rivera, Bayside State Prison
Officer William Nitschmann, Mid-State Correctional Facility

CONGRATULATIONS TO THE AWARDEES!



During the summer, several facilities, including Garden State Correctional Facility (pictured at top), Northern State Prison (center), and Edna Mahan Correctional Facility, held officer appreciation events. Administration from each institution provided home-cooked meals and organized games and collaborative activities as a thank you to their dedicated custody staff members, who play vital roles in maintaining safety and order within the Department and our State.

Resiliency Officers, *continued from page 1*

The road to becoming an RPO consists of training in public speaking, how to assist individuals with a range of challenges, and professionally employing empathy and compassion. After passing the original training course, the RPOs are given a refresher once a year to learn about new resources that have become available. Each RPO who passes the training also receives handheld resource cards that show direct lines to organizations like Cop-2Cop and the Employee Advisory Service.

The Correctional Staff Training Academy incorporated a 16-hour training course on officer resiliency and incorporated into their curriculum beginning with Class 249.

“All recruits in the Correctional Staff Training Academy go through the NJ Attorney General’s resiliency training class,” said Lieutenant George Holman, Department Lead for the Resiliency Program Officers. “This class helps break the stigma that it is not a weakness to ask for help when they are ‘spiraling down.’ Rather than ‘spiraling down,’ officers are provided techniques and services that help them to ‘spiral up’ and manage day-to-day challenges.”

Since this class was implemented, the NJDOC has trained more than 5,000 correctional police officers on

the importance of mental health and how they can help themselves and others during times of need.

“The course is important because, for an officer to be effective at their job and productive off duty, they must understand how mental health can both negatively and positively affect their lives,” said Lt. Holman. “The course lets our staff know that if they are having issues mentally, they are not alone. Mental health issues are very common in law enforcement, and we let them know that there are multiple options for them to pursue in order to get help when they feel they need it.”

To get in touch with an RPO within the Department, individuals can reach out to the shift commander of their institutions. While the NJDOC provides invaluable mental health services through this program, officers in need are encouraged to seek assistance in any manner they feel comfortable. Other law enforcement agencies outside the Department also have RPOs whose lines are always open. By calling another agency, our officers are able to ask for an external RPO representative through that agency and add an extra level of confidentiality.

For more information about this program, visit njoag.gov/programs/officer-resiliency. 

PREPARATION IS POWER!



Our Special Operations Group’s Chemical Ordinance Biological and Radiological Aid Unit (COBRA) took a trip to Bridgeton High School in June to participate in the Cumberland County Radiological Emergency Response Plan exercise (pictured left). The purpose of the exercise was to help prepare the southern New Jersey area in the event that a nuclear disaster occurs.

In July, members of the New Jersey Department of Corrections participated in a three-day active-shooter training. This was a collaborative effort between the Department, Homeland Security, State Police, Department of Health, and Department of Community Affairs. Officers who participated in the training are now enlisted to train other law enforcement agencies across the State.



