

Science and Corrections

Virginia Department of Corrections' Administrative Step-Down Plan

By Harold W. Clarke

From Administrative Segregation to the Step-Down Plan

"Slug a cellmate, grab a guard at a Virginia prison, and you will end up here, locked down for 23 hours a day in the solitary confinement wing of Red Onion State Prison, where they have taken the 'corrections' out of the Virginia Department of Corrections," read *The Washington Post* on April 18, 1999. It was less than a year after Virginia built Red Onion, a Supermax prison designed to house the worst of the worst offenders.¹

Fourteen years later, after the initial implementation of the Virginia Department of Corrections' (VADOC) Administrative Step-Down Plan, Rep. Patrick A. Hope, D-Va., and Sen. Adam P. Ebbin, D-Va., took to the opinion section of *The Washington Post* to express the evolving mission of Red Onion in a different light. "A great deal has changed in two years," they wrote. "Last month, we returned to Red Onion and saw firsthand the effects of a dramatic turnaround in philosophy and treatment of prisoners in solitary confinement. Two years ago, many prisoners in segregation had little hope. Now, they can see a path to an existence beyond their own cell."²

In 2011, VADOC identified a critical need to reduce the number of offenders in restrictive housing, also known as administrative segregation, and to address the 70-plus offenders released per year directly from restrictive housing to the community. Typically, offenders are assigned to restrictive housing, also called Security Level S, due to issues such as assaultive and disruptive behaviors, extensive escape histories, or extremely violent and notorious crimes. Offenders in restrictive housing are managed constitutionally but with high-security controls, and they are locked in cells for 23 to 24 hours per day. Before the Administrative Segregation Step-Down Program, VADOC's offenders were released directly from a fully restrained restrictive housing setting to the community, often without receiving any cognitive behavioral therapy. There was nothing in place to give the offenders an adjustment period so they could have positive interactions with others.

During this time, the primary focuses of VADOC were immediate housing and "command and control" measures. Treatment and programming were secondary. Identifying these primary drivers, the department moved to enhance public safety through the Administrative Segregation Step-Down Program, managing the initial risk within the institutional setting to

accelerate reentry skill-building and ensure that those returning to the community would have the tools they need for success and stability. The department's decision to implement this plan was in line with its goal and responsibility to ensure lasting public safety for the citizens of Virginia.

Year	Number of Releases
2010	57
2011	50
2012	58
2013	11
2014	4
2015	3
2016-YTD	2

Culture Shift

Evidence-based practices (EBPs) were studied and utilized by VADOC to implement a sequence of programs whereby offenders "step down" to lesser controls, increased privileges and, eventually, out of restrictive housing to lower security levels. According to Dr. Edward J. Latessa, EBPs in the field of corrections are a collection of practices proven to reduce criminal behavior by focusing on risk reduction of the causes of criminal behavior, in addition to traditional risk control.³

To motivate offenders to change, the department realized they had to change offenders' perception of authority in the facility. To this end, the department created the position of treatment officer. This new position holds the responsibility of assisting prison counselors in providing programming for offenders. The treatment officer retains full security duties — escorting and supervising offenders — with the added role of programming. This position increased the prison's programmatic resources and created an environment to show offenders that uniformed staff members were there to motivate and support positive change.

It was also important to address staff communication skills with offenders to motivate and support change. All staff completed training in effective communication and motivational interviewing to accurately apply the principles of risk control and risk reduction. This training included basic motivational interviewing strategies, such as asking open-ended questions and using summarization to encourage offenders to examine their own thinking. It was also important to the department to establish a positive staff culture by building a robust series of employee incentives and benefits to recognize increasing proficiency in EBPs and communication-based knowledge, skills and attitudes.

The idea of learning teams for staff evolved within the institution as a platform to discuss staff application of communication strategies and progress in leading the culture of the facility. The learning teams are small, intimate groups of staff that are coached by internally trained communications and dialogue coaches. Learning teams utilize the tool of dialogue skills training as a basis to structure discussions and create a learning environment. The content of learning teams focuses on improved interactions with offenders and

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operation of the facility. Essential in dialogue is the ability to suspend judgments when new concepts are introduced, listening for understanding and conversations that harvest the collective thinking of the learning team to promote creative and critical thinking, and an openness to new ways of operating. The learning teams may also be used to debrief situations where improvement is needed, such as after a cell extraction, or to allow staff to have feedback on a topic.

Enhancements of Operational Design

To serve as a check and balance in the evaluation process for offenders participating in the Administrative Segregation Step-Down Process, the continuous monitoring and discussion of offender progression is reviewed by a dual treatment team. This team is comprised of staff of varying levels of rank, years of experience, departments and supervisory detail to ensure the offender behavior is accurately portrayed by staff members who have interacted with an offender. This includes staff consideration of an offender's therapeutic devolvement, mental health stability and safety concerns displayed during advancement.

The department recognized the need to relieve staff stress and the pressure of working solely with restrictive housing offenders by creating a general population housing unit at the prison. To that end, the department exchanged 170 restrictive housing offenders from

Red Onion with maximum-security general population offenders from the neighboring Wallens Ridge State Prison. The department modified the approval process for restrictive housing to include review by the warden and regional operations chief. This approval process was a shift aimed at changing the perception of behaviors that would meet the requirements for offenders to be placed within a long-term restrictive housing setting.

To create an outside oversight process, a semi-annual external review team was developed, comprised of executive staff outside of the step-down process and encompassing members such as the regional operations chief, regional administrator, chief of classification, reentry and programs director, statewide EBP manager, director of mental health services, director of psychiatric services and chief physician. The review team addresses concerns with the following areas of focus:

- Is the offender currently appropriately assigned to restrictive housing?
- Does the offender meet the criteria for the path to which they are assigned?
- Has the dual-treatment team made appropriate decisions to advance the offender through the step-down process?

A new Security Level 6 was introduced to serve as a proving ground for the offenders who were progressing out of long-term

restrictive housing into a Security Level 5 General Population. Security Level 6 is considered general population; it is operated with high security and introduces offenders to limited out-of-cell activity time and unrestrained movement in showers and recreation.

Operational Design and Interactive Journaling®

Programming is delivered in different phases, allowing staff to observe offender progress as privileges and responsibilities are incrementally increased in each phase. Each phase becomes a proving ground to move to the next. Security enhancements, such as therapeutic modules and programming chairs, are used during the delivery of cognitive-based interactive journaling. The program uses the Challenge Series® created by The Change Companies®. As the offenders progress through the designated pathway for moving into a Security Level 5 population setting, they increase interaction both with other offenders and with staff.

The orientation stages of the Administrative Segregation Step-Down Program begin with a pathway decision by the dual-treatment team, with each offender assigned to a track of either intensive management (IM) or special management (SM). The IM track is for offenders who have demonstrated during incarceration the potential for extreme and deadly violence against staff or other offenders and whose intent for such violence may remain, despite a pattern of compliance. Offenders in this group may have serious escape histories or have extremely heinous or notorious criminal offenses. Offenders in the IM track will receive programming and earn privileges but may never progress out of restrictive housing due to the risk they pose. Some IM offenders may progress to

a step-down pod in Security Level 6, which is highly controlled but provides for additional privileges.

The SM track is for offenders who are assigned to restrictive housing due to violent acts. However, their repeated disruptive behaviors, assaults and fights were without the intent to kill. They may also be offenders who intentionally commit disciplinary violations to remain in segregation due to fear of general population. These offenders in the SM track may progress further in the step-down process and ultimately be returned to a general population at a lower security level.

The dual-treatment team continually explores the reasons for each offender's maladaptive behavior, and through participation in the step-down process, motivations may be revealed. Upon progression to a Security Level 6 status, alternate solutions are developed for those offenders exhibiting characteristics such as being easily bullied and manipulated by other offenders; those who are developmentally disabled, young or with mild mental health issues; and those who have a pattern of intentionally committing numerous minor disciplinary violations to ensure they are retained in restrictive housing rather than returned to general population. The secure allied management (SAM) pod and secure integrated pod (SIP) have been developed to be responsive to these offenders' needs and abilities to develop prosocial skills at a slower pace, often requiring smaller group settings. This focus on de-escalation techniques, monitoring of stable medication compliancy and ability to create an environment conducive to encouraging the offenders' ability to interact with others requires significant mental health staff and other staff involvement.⁴

The account of offender C. Peek, a restrictive housing offender currently participating in the Administrative Segregation Step-Down Program within the SM track, serves as a testament

to the advancements made when the creation of a platform for accountability coincides with self-determination:

"During my time spent at Red Onion State Prison in its current Challenge Series program, I have been able to get a clear outline as to what it is I need to do in order to be able to return to general population. Rather than sitting indefinitely in a long-term segregation, this has allowed me to get and maintain my own goals regarding behavior and recognizing situations that could lead to problems so that I can work through them. I would say that [seeing] the program guidelines gives me stability and encourages me to follow through to completion. In a prison setting such as this, keeping your word and following through to completion means a lot, especially when it wasn't once available. Also, being able to discuss the issues relevant to the class in a group setting gives a positive opportunity to learn/share other problem solving skills with fellow prisoners and staff. It is my hope that I can take whatever skills I gain from this program to other prisons as I speak to some of the many younger prisoners with the hope of helping them avoid getting involved in some of the lifestyles and mindsets that led to me to where I have been."

Success in Measurements, a School and National Recognition

Due to the overwhelming advancements made at Red Onion, the increase of Security Level 5 offenders presented the opportunity and necessity to construct a safe learning environment. The Red Onion State Prison Division of Corrections Education for Population Offenders was opened on July 26, 2013. Since the opening of the

school, 16 offenders have graduated from the program. Academic enrollment at Red Onion has increased by 20 percent since the school was built. The library circulates approximately 1,300 books per month. The numbers of books circulated increased 34 percent from 2013 through fiscal year 2015.

The number of restrictive housing offenders totaled 511 in 2011 at both Red Onion and Wallens Ridge. Since the application of the Administrative Segregation Step-Down Program, that number has dropped drastically. At the time this article was submitted, 154 restrictive housing offenders were housed at Wallens Ridge and Red Onion. More than 350 offenders who were once in restrictive housing have successfully moved into a Level 6 or Level 5 general population setting through the program. From 2011 through 2015, there was a 71-percent reduction in offender grievances at Red Onion, a 76-percent reduction in informal complaints at the prison and a 65-percent reduction in incident reports. To date, only 16 offenders who have completed the Administrative Segregation Step-Down Program have returned to a restrictive housing status from a Security Level 5 population setting due to disciplinary issues at Red Onion.

Since the implementation of the Administrative Segregation Step-Down Program, the VADOC has been recognized nationally. In 2013, the department was awarded the State Transformation in Action Recognition (STAR) award by the Southern Legislative Conference for its diligent work toward reducing administrative segregation. Red Onion and Wallens Ridge were recognized for their reduction of restrictive housing through the use of cognitive programming and the building of offenders' prosocial behaviors. On March 3, 2014, Hope and Ebbin recognized VADOC for extensive restrictive housing reduc-

tion and outstanding leadership and dedication to public safety in Senate Joint Resolution No. 184.⁵

Virginia's efforts to help offenders in the state's highest security prisons move out of long-term restrictive housing have also been recognized by the U.S. Department of Justice. The department's "Report and Recommendations Concerning the Use of Restrictive Housing" highlights VADOC's Administrative Segregation Step-Down Program at Red Onion and Wallens Ridge, one of only five states' programs lauded in the report.

Offender J. Raymond, who entered Red Onion as a long-term restrictive housing offender and worked toward his goals while holding to the process of the step-down operations and expectations, discusses this:

"I came to Red Onion State Prison in 2013 as a Security Level S offender in long-term segregation. At first, I was aggravated and mad at the world because of the situation I was in. I soon began doing the Challenge Series, and with the help of the treatment officers and keeping an open mind, I slowly began to realize that I put myself in segregation, and if I wanted to live outside of a segregation unit, then I would have to change my life and the ways of seeing and thinking. Once I began to enter into a step-down program and truly took the program seriously, I began to notice a change in my attitude and outlook on things. I [give] credit to the program and the staff here at Red Onion State Prison. I have now been charge-free for two years, and that is a long time for me."

Looking Forward

VADOC plans to build on the success of the Administrative Segregation Step-Down Program, applying aspects of the program

toward reducing restrictive housing at lower security level prisons statewide. This plan requires an examination of why offenders are placed in restrictive housing. The success of cognitive-behavioral interactive journaling has prompted a move to establish this tool for all offenders in restrictive housing, creating a unified approach to decreasing risk and increasing safety, enhancing the likelihood of offender success in general population, and reducing the need to utilize long-term restrictive housing.

ENDNOTES

¹ Timberg, C. April 18, 1999. At Va.'s toughest prison, tight controls. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/local/daily/april99/supermax18.htm.

² Hope, P., and A. Ebbin. Sept. 6, 2013. Virginia turns away from solitary confinement. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/virginia-turns-away-from-solitary-confinement/2013/09/06/376e0502-14d7-11e3-880b-7503237cc69d_story.html.

³ Southern Legislative Conference. 2013. Virginia DOC Administrative Segregation Step-Down Program "Partnering science with corrections." Retrieved from www.slcatlanta.org/STAR/2013documents/VA_Step_Down.pdf.

⁴ Latessa, E.J. 2008. Improving the effectiveness of correctional programs through research. PowerPoint presented to the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, February in Columbus, Ohio.

⁵ Commonwealth of Virginia General Assembly. March 3, 2014. Senate Joint Resolution No. 184: Commending the Virginia Department of Corrections. Retrieved from <https://lis.virginia.gov/cgi-bin/legp604.exe?141+ful+SJ184+pdf>.



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