

*JCE Guest Editorial*

## **Words Matter, Sometimes More Than We Know**

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We often find ourselves in positions of giving remarks to audiences and, if you are like me, often when another speaker cannot be secured. We all have different approaches to public speaking; some prepare and deliver carefully crafted speeches, and others, like me, speak more extemporaneously. Regardless of our approach, we hope that someone in the audience is inspired by some of our words as we speak to something that is a priority to us, but we are often never sure.

On a day in New Orleans, during a General Session of the American Correctional Association (ACA), I provided remarks that proclaimed my priorities as its president. I challenged those in the audience to consider the terminology we use to describe those individuals under our supervision. "Does it make sense to call someone who has been in our prisons, completed evidence-based programs, has been released into the community, and is on the last day on community supervision an '**offender**,' depicting one of the worst days of that person's life? Or is the term **offender** consistent with our efforts toward successful reentry, including promoting those men and women released to prospective employers?" I am sure there were many other comments I made regarding this subject, but I was speaking from my heart and not my notes, so I cannot be sure.

Just as the pandemic overshadowed most things in our world, my presidential initiative to update the terminology we as corrections professionals regularly use, including what we call those under our supervision, stalled. But most important, thanks to the heart and effort of certain correctional leaders, it did not go away. I very unexpectedly found a committed leader who caused me to realize that what we say matters even when we are not sure people are paying attention.

I have had a wonderful opportunity to participate as a faculty member in Executive Leadership Forums for foreign correctional executives. These programs are funded by the U.S. Department of State and delivered through the Correctional Management Institute at Sam Houston University. As part of this program, we take the class to a Texas prison for a focused site visit to highlight a topic pertinent to the class. Recently, we were scheduled to take a class of Mexican criminal justice leaders to visit a Texas prison, the Wynne Unit, with a focus on programming, specifically education. I was greeted at the entry gate by a strong, committed correctional leader, Kristina Hartman, superintendent of Windham School District—a greeting I will not forget.

As I reached out my hand to introduce myself, Kristina said, “I know who you are and want you to know your words inspired me.” She said she was in the audience in New Orleans during a speech I made about “**How Words Matter**” in our work. She specifically referred to the use of the term *offender* as it relates to those men and women under our custody. I recall during that speech asking why we would think doing so was a good idea and aligned with our effort to restore lives to continue to refer to individuals on the worst day of their lives. I also indicated it was a disservice to our staff, who have provided evidence-based programs, including educational, drug treatment, mental health, and other cognitive programs, to continue to call them **offenders**. And does the term *offender* inspire potential employers to seek out and hire those returning home after a sentence? I recall saying a great deal during that speech, much from my heart and not my written speech. Quite frankly, I did not experience much impact from my words—that was until my greeting from Kristina Hartman at the front gate of the Wynne Unit.

I found a great and courageous leader in Kristina, superintendent of the Windham School District, a recognized school district in the state of Texas. Kristina and her certified staff annually serve 60,000 students who are confined in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. That is a number larger than the entire size of a vast majority of correctional systems.

Kristina’s path to this position fully immersed her in correctional work. An English and political science graduate from Baylor, she interned in probation in Texas before leaving for Florida. In Florida, she served in numerous capacities, including teacher, program monitor, and education supervisor. She sought to expand her professional experience and had a desire to become a prison warden. Her journey led her to the Florida State Prison, where she initially heard that she did not understand security. She would quiet those who

questioned her lack of custodial experience by receiving training to become a hostage negotiator and reviewing use-of-force investigations. She gained these experiences and engaged in other security-related activities with the assistant warden for operations at the high-security Florida State Prison, Donnie Jackson, who became and remains a mentor to this day. After receiving this training and experience, Kristina was quickly promoted to the state correctional system's bureau chief of programs. In our conversations, she reflected on how important that experience was as she constantly evaluates any action in terms of the influence on prison security.

Using the entirety of her experiences, she returned to Texas and accepted the director of instruction position in the Windham School District before being promoted to superintendent. She oversees all education programs, the most comprehensive offering of career and technical educational programs I have seen: academic classes from literacy to high school equivalency and dual-credit partnerships with several colleges. She accepted this role with a fundamental focus on reducing recidivism through a meaningful transition from prison to the community using educational programs that enhance the prison environment in Texas.

She embarked on changing terminology for those 60,000 men and women in the school system in a very deliberate, thoughtful manner. **She declared that "it is not acceptable to refer to men and women in school as offenders, as these individuals are engaging in positive activities to change their lives."** Because of her leadership, the terminology used by staff and teachers of the Windham District is **(1) students**, for men and women who are in school; **(2) residents**, for those in the prison population; and **(3) patrons**, for those using the libraries. Kristina was very clear that this terminology does not limit the enforcement of boundaries and regulations.

How did this change in terminology take place? Following the ACA Conference in New Orleans, Kristina returned to Texas and worked with former warden Charles Bell, who serves as the department director of operational support and directs staff security training for all Windham staff. In concert with Kristina, he developed staff training that discussed **why** changing the terminology and eliminating **offender** was important. The training that was developed emphasized how this change can support the education staff's impact on the lives of those in their classroom. This training is for all new education staff and is being inserted in the annual in-service training that is part of the requirements for ACA accreditation. Furthermore, Windham is working to update all policies and all written communication and language used in the

classroom by the Windham School District personnel to reflect the terminology adopted by Kristina and used in training by Charles.

Kristina was not the only leader in Texas focused on changing terminology. Bryan Collier, executive director of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ), a well-respected and professional correctional leader, was also making changes. The TDCJ had used the term **offender** in all its policies, post orders, and written and verbal communication. Bryan understood the challenge and impact of making a change in what those incarcerated men and women were called in the largest and one of the most historic correctional systems in the country. But being the leader that he is, Brian recognized that using the term **offender** referred to an individual, whereas **inmate** referred to the status of a person. As a result, the TDCJ has now eliminated the use of the term **offender**, replacing it with **inmate**.

There is a growing movement outside of Texas, around our country, to reconsider the traditional language used to refer to those men and women that happen to be in the criminal justice system. In Iowa, under the leadership of Dr. Beth Skinner, the system has universally adopted the term **incarcerated individuals**. The legislature in Maine has taken up the issue of the use of language that stigmatizes those in the criminal justice system. A report from the Office of Revisor of Statutes submitted to the Maine Legislative Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety recommends discontinuing the use of “prisoner, inmate, or convict” and instead using “**resident**.”

While, at this time, there is no consensus on the language used to refer to men and women in our system, there is a growing number of correctional leaders, and now even legislatures, who agree that words matter. Words have an impact on those attempting to turn their lives around and return with dignity to communities and to those family loved ones. Leaders and influencers of the criminal justice system have a fundamental responsibility to lead change that supports successful reentry. That is what leaders do.

As I conclude this guest editorial, I am not advocating specific language for jails and prisons to utilize when referring to people under their custody. I do, however, believe that “**words matter**.” That includes when we speak publicly even when we are not sure people are listening; Kristina taught me that lesson. I also believe that the more we reduce the barriers between those human beings confined in our jails and prisons from those of us who reside in the free world, the greater impact the good work taking place in jails and prisons will have. The words we use can promote or decrease the dignity the men and women we work with feel. The words we use can also influence how

people in our communities feel about the men and women being released from incarceration. As we describe in our vision statements our focus on changing lives, it makes sense to consider how we describe those men and women we have dedicated our professional lives to direct. After all, they are **“men and women”** experiencing a period of their life on this earth—and this too shall pass. Words do matter whether said in a speech, from Kristina in front of the Wynne Unit, or when we walk through our jails and prisons or work with the men and women on our caseloads in the communities. **I do believe words matter; how about you?**

### ***Biographical Sketches***

**GARY MOHR** has enjoyed 48 years in public service as a correctional professional, starting his career in 1974 as an adult basic education teacher. Throughout his career in Ohio, he served in many capacities, including as a teacher, deputy warden, prison warden, director of staff development and training, and regional and deputy director, finishing in Ohio as the director of the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction in the cabinet of John Kasich. Most recently, he was the 106th president of the American Correctional Association and continues to serve as a consultant focused on reforming our correctional system.