Testimony of Michael Dooley
Director of Training Services, Pennsylvania Department of Corrections
Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania

July 16, 2014
Congressional Briefing
Mental Health First Aid for Public Safety
Michael Dooley

Good afternoon.

First, it is an honor and privilege to be part of this panel today to express my agency’s support and appreciation for the National Council and the Mental Health First Aid in Law Enforcement training program. My name is Michael Dooley and I am currently the Director of Training Services at the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections. I currently oversee all training for the Department.

My experience and background in correctional services spans over 36 years working in a variety of functions including jails, prisons, probation, parole, training and administration. In my role, I oversee the training of department’s staff including more than 16,000 state employees. In 2008, I was appoint to the National Institute of Corrections’ technical assistance and training initiative on mental health issues, where I worked on the Justice and Mental Health Collaboration Project (JMHCP). I also manage the department’s Training Academy, as well as specialized training courses in mental health.

My experience with mental health as an issue in corrections and law enforcement goes back early in my career as a probation and parole officer in Vermont in 1980. A young person by the name of Keith showed up in the probation office one day during my first week on the job as a new Probation Officer. He was disheveled and disoriented. He had a history of mental illness and apparently had been living in the woods for several days. Having no available resources in the community to turn to at that time we made arrangements for a voluntary commitment to the State Hospital in Waterbury. Since I lived halfway in the direction of the 3-hour drive, I was volunteered to drive Keith in my personal car to have him admitted. It was a long and very unsettling 3-hour trip, not only for me but probably Keith as well. I have never forgotten that trip and when I reflect back I realize the gross lack of training and skills that I needed to work with Keith and the many more that followed him.

For too long, there has been a disconnect between current practice in our corrections system and our understanding of mental illness. With the increasing prevalence of mental illness and the lack of adequate community responses and resources, a very disproportionate amount of people with mental health needs have ended up in the corrections system. This systemic failure to understand the problem and the lack of adequate community resources continues to track too many persons with mental health needs into the corrections system. Prisons and jails are
inadequate as an effective response and lack the means and tools to deal with the type of problems that mental illness presents.

Like most correctional agencies, The Pennsylvania Department of Corrections has been on a “fast track” to find strategies and solutions to be more responsive to persons with mental illness in our prisons. We currently have 11,764 inmates, or 23.5 percent of the total prison population receiving psychiatric services. Of that number, 3940 are considered seriously mentally ill, almost 8 percent. While we can create new policies, new designations, new protocols, new programs and new units, it is quite apparent that these are all “show” without the central and most critical need, that being staff with the competencies and skills to work with this growing and more complex population.

For an effective training response, Pennsylvania turned to Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) and Crisis Intervention Teams (CIT). Our personnel are in dire need for the skills taught in Mental Health First Aid for their own safety and well-being, as well as the safety and health of those in our custody and care. MHFA also serves as an excellent foundation for staff attending our week-long Crisis Intervention Team training. In fact, we have made MHFA a pre-requisite to attending that training.

I have to put a plug in for Secretary John Wetzel and Deputy Secretary Shirley Moore Smeal. It was late in the fall of last year. I received an email that said, “Mike, can you put a plan together to have all staff trained in MHFA in 2014.” I nearly fell on the floor. We managed to get five staff trained through SAMSHA sponsored program shortly thereafter. When I did the math, it was literally mission “impossible.” Impossible not being in our vocabulary, I frantically worked with the Council staff, and by some miracle managed to get a trainer certification program exclusively for DOC staff scheduled in March of the past year. This also came with the added bonus of having the first rollout of the law enforcement version of the program. At the end of that training program we had 34 staff certified to train Mental Health First Aid to DOC staff on a statewide basis. These trainers are deployed at each of the state’s 26 prisons, community correctional centers, our central administrative office and our training academy.

I am proud to share that we now have “project MHFA” launched and well underway to have all 16,000 staff working in our prisons, community corrections centers and administrative offices trained by the end of March, 2015. We will continue to provide MHFA training to new employees going through our Basic Training program.
Our most recent data shows us right on track at 4060 staff trained, just at 25% through the first quarter from implementing the training project (April – June). Qualitative feedback among staff has been very positive. Staff are reporting that they are:

- learning a whole new language associated with mental illness,
- getting a good foundation for understanding mental illness, including the various signs and symptoms associated with the different mental illness diagnoses,
- getting new tools and techniques to respond to persons developing and/or experiencing a mental health crisis, and
- developing a sense of confidence to effectively respond to those developing or experiencing a mental health crisis.

Mental Health First Aid also shows promise in promoting a much overdue change in our culture for how we work with this population of offenders. The profile of persons entering the system has changed drastically over the past several decades, including a much higher prevalence of mental illness. The effectiveness of MHFA training is grounded in evidence. That, combined with a growing base of research and evidence on effective correctional practice in general, the tools and techniques used in the past are no longer effective and need updated or replaced. MHFA is a set of tools and skills that will have a lasting impact on the corrections profession.

Overall, the Department is very hopeful about the increased capabilities of our staff based on the results we’ve seen so far from these trainings. We are confident that this program will contribute to the safety and well-being of our officers and staff, the inmates in our care and custody, and the community at large where 90 percent of these persons will return. We are committed to having offenders leave our system better than when they came in – and that means enhanced public safety.

Thank you.
Biography

Mr. Dooley oversees the training program for the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections including Basic Training, in-service training and specialized training for over 15,000 employees. Prior to joining PA DOC, Mike worked for Relias Learning where he managed product development for online training products in the corrections market including working closely with key strategic partners (ACA, AJA and APPA) on content development needs for the field.

Mike has over 35 years of correctional experience having worked in prisons and jails, probation, parole, human resources and training, and community/restorative justice programs. Prior to coming onboard with Essential Learning and the Corrections Online Training Collaborative (COTC), Mike worked for fourteen years at the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) as a Correctional Program Manager. While at the NIC, Mike’s focus was in a variety of areas including mental health, restorative justice, leadership and management development, training capacity building, public and media relations, team development and distance learning. He has developed and produced nationally recognized curricula on a variety of correctional topics including crisis intervention techniques for working with mental illness, restorative justice, media relations, team development and organizational development. Mike has managed and delivered numerous national level training and technical assistance events covering many aspects of correctional services.

Prior to joining NIC, Mike spent 18 years with the Vermont Department of Corrections. He began his career as a correctional officer in a state jail, and eventually worked in a variety of capacities including correctional supervision, case management, and as a state probation and parole officer before joining the department’s human resource and training division. Mikes last three years were spent directing a grant from the Bureau of Justice Assistance to accomplish an organizational restructuring of correctional services in Vermont, including the development of several alternative sanctions programs and a very popular community-driven restorative justice program.

Mr. Dooley obtained his Master’s Degree in Education from the University of Vermont in 1992. He graduated from the University of Delaware in 1977 with a Bachelor of Science degree in Criminal Justice.