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## MDOC INITIATES NEW WELLNESS UNIT TO HELP STAFF GRAPPLING WITH STRESS

The Michigan Department of Corrections is creating a new employee Wellness Unit, to be spearheaded by the former leader of a wellness program at the Michigan State Police.

The new Wellness Unit was discussed May 7 at a joint hearing of the Senate Oversight Committee and Judiciary & Public Safety Committee. MDOC Director Heidi Washington, as well as the new head of the Wellness Unit, Lynn Gorski, testified on what the unit will entail. Gorski said it best: "Wellness is not a perk (for this occupation). It is a necessity."

Washington said the Wellness Unit would include a peer support program and a staff chaplain program. Traumatic Incident Stress Management (TISM) would also be improved and operate under the Wellness Unit. MDOC is still waiting on the results of a survey they commissioned on employee stress, but creating a wellness program is necessary now because of the highly volatile environment that COs work in every day, Washington said. Last year, MDOC put together an EPIC committee, including five COs, that designed the wellness program.

The peer support program will provide a way for MDOC employees to talk about their problems with trained volunteers who will help clarify issues and explore options on how to fix them. Washington noted that, in some cases, peer support

members will not have to follow the employee handbook rule that requires employees to report work rule violations. The program is confidential unless someone reports, or reports the threat of, child abuse, elder abuse, or a felony. The chaplain program would provide MDOC employees and their families with the support of a chaplain during times of crisis and need. MDOC already has a chaplain program for prisoners but realizes the necessity of having one available for staff as well.

MCO Recording Secretary Cary Johnson and Executive Director Andy Potter testified at the hearing. Johnson described the struggles that frontline staff face from the viewpoint of a CO and spoke about the friends and colleagues that she has lost to suicide in the last four years. Johnson said that short-staffing, mandated overtime, and low morale due to excessive, petty discipline are some reasons why stress is so prevalent among COs. Johnson said these issues may impede MDOC's ability to get officers' buy in for the Wellness Unit, but said she'd encourage COs to give it a chance. She also commended MDOC's work on the Wellness Unit and the decision to hire Gorski. During MCO's stress research, union leaders had met Gorski and were impressed by the wellness work she did for

MSP, she said.

Although it can be hard to see in the moment, we are making progress. Four years ago, no one was talking about corrections PTSD, except MCO leaders and members. Now, MDOC administration acknowledges the problem and is taking steps to address it. The legislature is holding hearings to ask MDOC leaders how they plan to meet staff members' needs. The media is paying attention – there have been half a dozen radio interviews, print articles, and TV news stories just in the last few months, with more in the works. Culture doesn't change overnight – it is often a long and difficult process. We are well on our way. MCO will continue to weigh in on PTSD and resources staff need.

**This story was edited for space.**  
[Read the full version with more on testimony from MCO on our website.](#)

*-Article by Mikaela Bliven.*

### Congratulations to all of the officers recognized last week at the 2019 MDOC Employee Appreciation Banquet!

MCO President Byron Osborn handed out custom awards from MCO to all COs of the year, in addition to awards received from the MDOC. We should recognize our successes and congratulate our brothers and sisters on the front lines for their achievements.

More photos are in our [Facebook group](#) and [Instagram](#).



MDOC CO of the Year Stephen Cooklin (left) with MCO President Byron Osborn.

## SUPPORT THE MCO CRISIS FUND THIS SUMMER

Join us for the downstate or UP Crisis Fund Golf Outing this summer!

**The UP outing will be Friday, Aug. 2 at Pictured Rocks Golf Course in Munising.**

**The downstate outing will be Friday, Aug. 16 at Ledge Meadows Golf Course near Lansing.**

Pricing, signup, and sponsorship

information for both outings is [on the MCO website](#). If you don't golf, please consider sponsoring a tee or a cart.

The crisis fund supports members facing a catastrophe, whether it's an on-the-job injury, house fire, sudden illness, or other disaster. To those who support the fund, we thank you!