

The Arizona Correctional
Peace Officers Association
Check and Mate Newsletter

No. 4

A bi-weekly newsletter to inform Union members on important grievance results, trends, procedures and important information relevant to a better quality of work life.

In This Issue:

-Dealing with The Irate Convict



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Dealing with The Irate Convict

It was around the month of April, 1996, at about 0515 hours, while feeding the Fox cluster inmates at The Special Management Unit 11 (now called Browning Unit) that I had my first, rather awful encounter, with a truly irate convict. Fox cluster at that time was also referred to as "The Violence Control Unit" because it housed the most obnoxious, most violent and undisciplined creatures on

the face of the earth. Or at least, Arizona.

The convict was sitting on his bunk, as per safety protocol, so that I could place his food tray on the food trap from a safe distance. I then stepped back and told him to "Come fetch it."

The convict jumped from his bunk and exploded in a conniption that reviled Al Pacino at the end of "Scarface" when he was standing at the top of that balcony getting hit with everything but a bazooka.

In between the profanity and outright screaming, he informed me that he wasn't a "F#&^%g dog" to be fetching anything.

I responded with "So, I take it you don't want the tray then?" Before I could blink, the front of his cell exploded in a tidal wave of feces mixed with water that he had flung from his garbage can that was right next to his bunk.

My mouth was open so a good amount went down my throat with no effort on my part.

The convict at this point stopped his rant and asked me "How do you like that?"

I responded with "Not to bad, a little grainy and hot but other than that, not too shabby!"

At this point, the convict resumed his conniption and yelled "Oh! You want more then?" and commenced to throw more feces that he had stored in an empty milk container.

By this time, the control room officer had activated an IMS (later replaced by the ICS system) for staff being thrown on.

The Aftermath

So, what went wrong here?

-First: I was new to the department and was just finding my sea legs.

-second: the convict was an ultra-violent convict with severe mental health issues: I didn't know that.

-third: telling anyone to "fetch" anything is more than likely going to piss them off, especially a deranged person.

-fourth: instead of recognizing my error, I decided to escalate the situation with sarcasm.

-fifth: after swallowing a good amount of putrid liquid, I responded with even more sarcasm.

-sixth: I thought the whole thing to be humorous and frankly, didn't care about his conniption.

Last: I was uneducated as to the manner in which to deal with an irate convict.

Lessons learned

The reason I share this extreme scenario with you is not to tell a war story but because it contains valuable lessons that I later learned from experienced staff members who were veterans from the front lines.

Convicts can become irate. In fact, any human being can become irate if the correct buttons are pushed. But an irate convict can be one of the most dangerous situations you may find yourself in at some point of your career so we might as well discuss it right now.



First things First

An irate person is like a person having a bandage tightly covering their ears and eyes: they can't see or hear a thing!

The only thing perceptible to them is their anger.

The following was learned from veteran staff while growing up at SMU II. It is as relevant now as it was then.

The first thing to learn is:

PREVENTION

That's right: try to keep convicts from becoming irate in the first place.

Observe the following rules and I'm sure you'll agree. I did.

Rule 1- know the inmates you are dealing with by studying them and questioning the CO III's assigned to them.

Rule 2- know how long they've been incarcerated. Newer number inmates

are still getting their sea legs as well and are immature no matter how old they are. Older number inmates are more level headed and can even serve as liaisons for younger inmates in times of distress.

Rule 3- be fair, firm and consistent. There's nothing more dangerous than a staff member that takes things personally and gives preferential treatment to convicts. This behavior is the equivalent of a supervisor giving preferential treatment to certain staff. It creates distension, animosity and divides the shift. You can only imagine what it does to the inmate population. DON'T DO EITHER!

Rule 4- think before you speak to a convict or answer a question. If you know the answer, Godspeed. If you don't, then don't lie. Someone else does if you ask. And most importantly, don't think that what is funny to you, especially cultural jokes that go well where you grew up, are funny to them. What seems funny to you can equate to a straight up insult to the recipient.

Rule 5- Don't get angry and/or worse, respond to a convict when you are.

Words can sting and even kill you. Consider the action of a Bee the next time you are pissed off and want to say what's really on your mind as opposed to the correct thing to say. A Bee will sting you and then die. It appears it either doesn't consider and/or is ignorant of the consequences of such behavior. If you believe your words are coming from an angry place, pretend you're a Bee then. If you sting, you will die.

Is it worth it?

Rule 6- mind your facial expressions and mannerisms when dealing with convicts. The convict population cultivates the "war face" mentality and they take it dead serious.



Rule 7- If you say you are going to do something, then do it. Don't renege. It's a nasty habit and has no place in corrections. It's like Al Pacino said in the film Scarface: ""All I have in this world is my balls and my word, and I don't break them for no one."

Good advice. Be good for your word.

Rule 8- learn to recognize the signs of frustration, and when you do see it, react and report.

There's nothing worse for a supervisor responding to an out of control convict to be told by their subordinates that "I saw this coming! He's been acting like an asshole all morning!"

So very annoying and negligent!
DON'T DO IT!

The Confrontation

At some point though, no matter how good you are or how long you've been doing the job, you will have to deal with the convict who is completely irate and appears to have lost their mind.

An inmate throwing a tantrum always reminds me of the story "Rumpelstiltskin" I read when I was growing up in Brooklyn. If you're not familiar with this famous fairy tale by the Brothers Grimm, do yourself a favor and go read it. You'll find the connection more than funny and will always have that image in your head the next time you see a convict throwing a genuine fit.



Again, a few rules learned while working at both SMU's at Eyman complex in Florence from veteran staff are in order:

Rule 1- Create some space between you and Rumpelstiltskin while he's stumping his feet and having that conniption. I'm not a believer of running away when an inmate gets irate but at the same time, there's no need nor is it necessary to square off face to face to prove a point.

Rule 2- Before getting trigger happy and initiating an ICS, attempt to inform the convict that he needs to settle down so you can discuss the issue and avoid involving other staff and the possibility of penalties to include disciplinary and being put in detention. I say trigger happy jokingly of course but there are a lot of staff that immediately initiate an ICS as if this situation is rare in prison. It's not. Convicts have been throwing tantrums since "Papillon" so correctional professionals have to learn to deal with it the good old

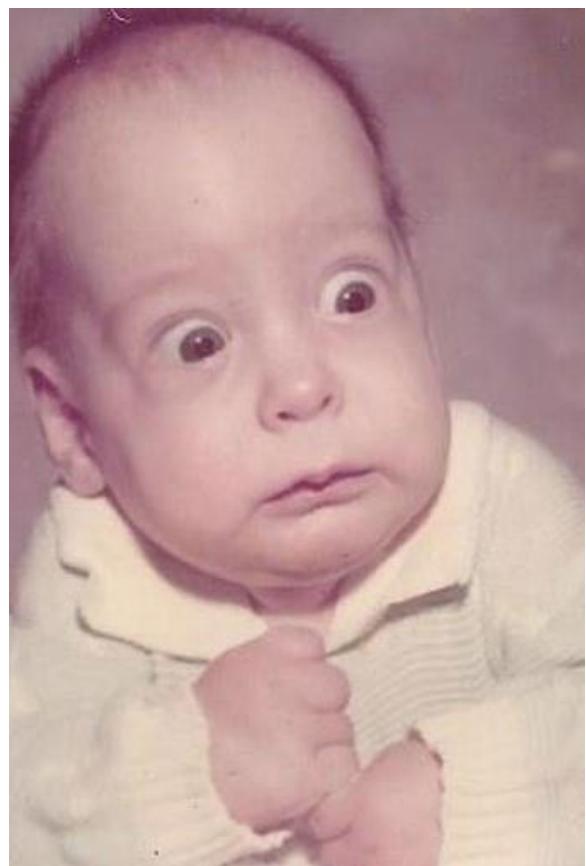
fashion way: by talking. Talking and reasoning with inmates is a basic tool for correctional staff that should be cultivated and not replaced with the unnecessary ICS that oftentimes follows any little encounter.

Rule 3- If the convict starts to respond to reasoning, consider that he has given so give back. Demonstrate courtesy and discuss a resolution.

Rule 4- If the convict doesn't respond to reasoning then follow protocol and initiate an ICS to get your team involved. The ICS doesn't necessarily mean that the poop has hit the fan and war has now been declared. An ICS brings additional resources to you, that's all. It still doesn't replace talking and reasoning.

Rule 5- With all said and done, treat all irate convicts as hostile and dangerous when they are throwing a tantrum. It doesn't matter whether

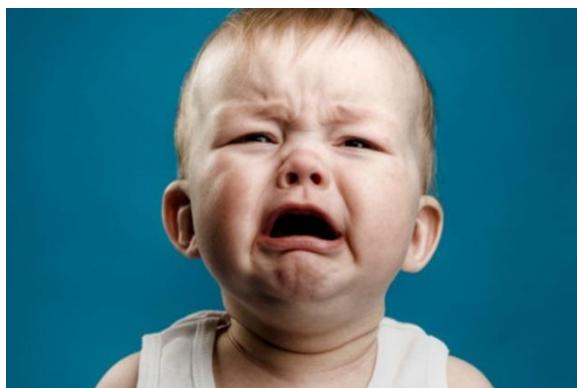
they're male, female or other. The trick is to stay calm and reasonable looking "externally" while maintaining a code Red mentality "internally." Practice your "War face" so that you don't look like this:



Or this:



Or even worse, like this



when dealing with inmates no matter what the situation is.

All joking aside, maintain your head and composure even when the convict

can't. It will speak volumes to the other convicts watching and you'll gain in respect and professionalism.

Rule 6- Once the convict has calmed down, be involved in what happens next. Oftentimes following an ICS, staff will let the supervisory staff take over without their input. If you were involved from the beginning then be involved till the end. Your reputation is on the line and you still have to maintain rapport with the convict so be a stand-up officer and make a recommendation even if it is overridden by those above you.

Rule 7- If you are a responding supervisor, see rule 6 above and include your staff in courses of action to take in the aftermath. Staff will respect and love you for it.

In the end, only experience can prepare you for any prison encounter to include the dreaded tantrum and

different custody levels, units, and genders can provide that experience.

Remember that being prepared and well-schooled is half the battle.

Speak to those who have been there and done that.

Remember that working in penitentiaries has its challenges but most can be overcome by being fair, firm and consistent and maintaining good communication skills.

Yours in Solidarity,

Carlos Garcia

Executive Grievance

Coordinator

Deeds not words!

