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WALKING CLUB

How the staff of a Mississippi prison fights stress and stays fit in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic

BY ROSCOE BARNES III, PH.D.

It was a busy and frustrating Friday when Branton Lewis exited the correctional facility and headed to his car for a change of clothes. As the supervisor of the education department, he spent his day solving problems, helping instructors and monitoring inmates in GED class. Now he needs a break and a convenient place to unwind. Luckily, he finds what he needs in a new program that allows him to walk around his facility as a form of exercise while still on the clock.

For Lewis, walking has many benefits, and it is something he looks forward to doing when his workday is over. Lewis says he enjoys the time he spends with his colleagues, and has always loved exercising in groups.

“I didn’t have too much time when I got off work,” he said. “So when the opportunity came up to walk at our facility, I jumped on it.”

Lewis walks three to five times a week, and it is not unusual for him to do eight miles on a single day.

“I really like the convenience,” he said. “This gives me a moment to relax my mind and it gives me more energy.”

Perhaps even more importantly, the walk helps with his medical condition, as Lewis is diabetic and walking helps regulate his sugar level.

Walking on shift

Lewis is one of many staff members who participate in the new walking program at Wilkinson County Correctional Facility (WCCF) in Woodville, Miss. At a time when gyms are not available due to COVID-19 — and CDC guidelines are putting a strain on prisons — the WCCF is doing its part to help its workers while striving to meet the wellness standards of ACA.

WCCF is located in southwest Mississippi, just north of the Louisiana state line. It is about 60 miles north of Baton Rouge. The multi-custody facility, which is managed by the Management & Training Corporation (MTC), in partnership with the Mississippi Department of Corrections, has created a fitness program that involves paid time for staff to exercise. The program, the “Witness the Fitness Walking Club,” allows WCCF staff to go outside the facility at 4 p.m. each day and walk around the perimeter as a form of exercise, with two laps around the facility equaling 1.3 miles. Since the start of the program in early August 2020, one of the

staff members has walked up to 16 laps in a single evening. Some have logged a total of 60 laps in a two-week period. Prizes are presented as an incentive for their achievement.

According to Warden Scott Middlebrooks, the program is a hit. He says the staff members are excited and many of them are now walking.

“They are doing it for their health, to lose weight, and to relieve stress,” Middlebrooks said. “This will also help us with our ACA standards.”

WCCF Compliance Coordinator Emma Taplin agrees. She notes the program is a first for the facility.

“It’s commendable that the warden allows staff an hour a day to do this on the company’s time,” she said. “It’s not all about money. It’s about our employees and their health.”

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How it started

The idea for the walking club originated in April 2020 in a discussion between George Castro, deputy warden of programs, and Tracey Arbuthnot, programs director. At the time, businesses and parks throughout Mississippi were shutting down because of the COVID-19 pandemic. WCCF staff could not find any local places to walk.¹

Castro, an Army veteran, knew the value of exercising on a regular basis. He said there was a need for the staff to come together and do something that would be fun and healthy. He suggested they start walking in the afternoon, to which Arbuthnot agreed. She said the activity could

boost morale and build camaraderie. Together, Castro and Arbuthnot set a date in August for the first walk.

When the time came, staff members from both security and administrative departments came out for the walk, which they called a “walk-a-thon.” WCCF provided refreshments that included cold water and other drinks, as well as watermelon. The staff made several laps around the facility, where they laughed, talked and took selfies along the way. According to Castro, the event exceeded their expectations.

Michelle Higginbotham, executive administrative assistant to the warden, was one of the jubilant staff members who participated in the first walk. After witnessing the enthusiasm firsthand, she and Middlebrooks decided a long-term walking program would be good for the staff. Higginbotham sent out an email about future walking.

“We had such a wonderful turn-out last week for the walk-a-thon, that we thought it would be a great idea to start a walking club,” she wrote. “We need your help choosing a fun and catchy name for the club... We will have t-shirts and prizes for everyone that walks a certain amount of laps.”

The winning name for the project came from Cre-Shawnda Thompson, a programs clerk. She called it the “WCCF Witness the Fitness Walking Club.” Thompson also designed t-shirts for the club as well.

After announcing the winning name, Higginbotham provided the staff with information on the new walking club. For example, she informed everyone that the walk would be done at 4 p.m. Monday through Friday. However, each staff would need permission from their respective supervisors. She created a log sheet that participants would use to track their progress. It would be turned in to her on Monday mornings. Periodically, Higginbotham provides the participants with handouts explaining the value of walking. She also provides safety tips and advice for stretching and staying hydrated.

Having fun, improving health

Participants in the club say the walk is a fun way to get in shape. They readily acknowledge the benefits that come from walking “Walking is a good physical activity,”



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Frances Griffin, a human resources assistant said. “It can lead to weight loss, boost your health, and prevent or control other physical conditions.”

“I’m usually in the fitness center exercising,” she added. “But since COVID-19, I haven’t been able to work out in the fitness center. When staff was given the chance to walk, I wanted to take advantage of the opportunity. I love to walk.”

That one hour out of the day makes a big difference, they say.

Griffin began walking in August, and since that time, she says she has managed to keep her weight under control. On average, she walks four days a week. So far, she has even managed to walk a total of 11 laps in one day.

“I try to make five laps in one hour,” she says. “I’m not sure how many laps I have walked all together, but I know it is over 125.”

Griffin’s perspective is shared by other staff, including Higginbotham, who walks one day a week.

“I started walking because of the benefits walking provides to my body,” Higginbotham said. Since she started in August, she claims to have lost a few pounds and found an effective way to relieve stress.

Additionally, she notes, the one hour given by the facility gives her time to clear her head and decompress between work and going home.

Ruby Dixon, a warehouse manager, says the walk is an energizer.

“I always feel better afterwards,” she said. “It makes me feel good about my accomplishments. So I keep setting goals, striving to walk farther each week.”

All of the staff say they are grateful to the warden for allowing them to exercise on “company time.” That one hour out of the day makes a big difference, they say.

Although some of the staff like walking alone while listening to music, others like to walk with a fellow co-worker. Angela Coleman, a substance abuse counselor, and her colleague, Keyla Williams, a reentry coordinator, say they enjoy the company and camaraderie that come with walking together. They typically push each other to their limit.

Other benefits of walking

Not surprisingly, the benefits of walking are well known. According to The Arthritis Foundation, walking helps to improve sleep, circulation and breathing. It also helps the heart rate, among other things. In an article titled, “12 Benefits of Walking,” the Arthritis Foundation notes, “A University of Tennessee study found that women who walked had less body fat than those who didn’t walk. It also lowers the risk of blood clots, since the calf acts as a venous pump, contracting and pumping blood from the feet and legs back to the heart, reducing the load on the heart. In addition to being an easy aerobic exercise, walking is good for you in many other ways.”²

Sgt. Clarissa Sanders-Credit, another participant in WCCF’s walking club, is happy about the positive changes that she has experienced. When she learned of the club, she joined immediately in order to have a healthier lifestyle.

“Now I’m obtaining my weight loss and I like fellowship with co-workers,” Sanders-Credit said. “I also sleep better and I wake up feeling energized.”

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) reports walking “may lower your risk of high blood pressure, heart disease, and diabetes.” In addition to having a positive, healthy impact on bones and muscles, walking can help people to “maintain a healthy weight” and lift their mood.³

Sanders-Credit can attest to these benefits, particularly in regard to her weight loss and blood pressure. “I have hypertension and my blood pressure has been a lot better since walking,” She said

Walking is especially meaningful to Sherry Rowe, who works as an administrative remedy program clerk. As a cancer survivor, she says walking is essential.

“I know it is good for my health and this is something I used to do before COVID-19 started and I couldn’t go back to the park where I used to walk,” she said.

Rowe walks about four days a week, and thanks to this exercise, she is now sleeping better. She has also lost a few inches and a few pounds. Rowe, who walks at a fast pace, describes the exercise as a “peaceful opportunity to enjoy the weather while walking stress free and listening to my gospel music.”

Background image: istock/arh-sib@rambler.ru



Meeting ACA standards

In addition to the health benefits, the walking program has the added benefit of helping the facility meet the wellness standard of the ACA, according to Taplin.

Citing the Adult Correctional Institutions standard, Taplin notes the ACA standard requires “all staff to have access to on-going health and wellness education, and programs and activities.” Written guidelines must be in place to aid staff in their participation and engagement. The designated fitness program may exist inside or outside the facility.⁴

“The goal is to get everybody into shape so they will come to work and take fewer days off because of poor health,” Taplin said. “Walking is an effective way to get in shape and maintain a healthy lifestyle.”

According to Taplin, a proper wellness program should include education on the benefits of exercise, stress management, weight management, and information on how

to access health care, among other topics. Such a program would include incentives that may encourage staff engagement. Thankfully, Taplin adds, the Witness the Fitness Walking Club meets the ACA requirement.

Additionally, she points out, WCCF has incentives for staff members who suffer from diabetes, as well as those who want to stop smoking. The facility also has incentives for annual wellness checks.

“The goal is to get everybody into shape so they will come to work and take fewer days off because of poor health,” Taplin said. “Walking is an effective way to get in shape and maintain a healthy lifestyle.”

Conclusion

The Witness the Fitness Walking Club remains popular at WCCF because of the health benefits that it provides the participants. WCCF staff say they are grateful to Warden Middlebrooks and the MTC for the opportunity to walk each day. While they appreciate the incentives that are made available, they are especially pleased to see a growing number of new participants, who come from both the security and administrative departments.

The club began in the sweltering heat of the summer of 2020, but staff say they will continue walking in the fall and in the winter, so long as it is safe. Now that they are seeing the positive results of their efforts, they appear to be encouraged. They consider walking to be a good investment. Because of such benefits as weight loss, stress relief, better stamina, and peace of mind, the staff say they are blessed and there is nothing that can stop them now.

NOTES:

¹ “Governor Tate Reeves Issues a Statewide Shelter-In-Place to Protect Public Health.” Available online: <https://www.sos.ms.gov/Pages/Governor-Tate-Reeves-Issues-a-Statewide-Shelter-In-Place-to-Protect-Public-Health.aspx>

² The Arthritis Foundation. “12 Benefits of Walking.” Available online: <https://www.arthritis.org/health-wellness/healthy-living/physical-activity/walking/12-benefits-of-walking>

³ *NIH News in Health*. “The Benefits of Walking” <https://newsinhealth.nih.gov/2016/03/benefits-walking>

⁴ “Staff Wellness.” *Adult Correctional Institutions*, Fifth Edition (page 29)

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