

2010 Innovations Award Application

The Council of State Governments

ID# (Assigned by CSG): **10-W-19WA**

State: Washington

Assign Program Category: Public Information

1. **Program Name:** Positive Media Strategy
2. **Administering Agency:** Department of Corrections
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8. **Web Site Address:** www.doc.wa.gov
9. **Description:** DOC successfully implemented a strategy to increase the number of positive news articles in local, state and national news organizations. By hosting regular press tours and reporter ride-alongs, visiting newsrooms and being more responsive to media inquiries, DOC has increased public awareness and support of its programs. It has helped improve staff morale, reduced the number of negative articles and improved the agency's public perception. In 2007 there were fewer than 10 positive news articles that were initiated by the agency. Since the strategy was implemented in January 2008 DOC has been the primary subject of at least 320 positive news articles, including in-state and national news organizations.
10. **How long has this program been operational?** Since January 2008
11. **Why was this program created? What problem or issue was it designed to address?** For years DOC was viewed negatively in the news media, which created a negative public perception. DOC was slow and reluctant to respond to media inquiries and did little to educate reporters, editors and producers before high-profile incidents occurred. As a result news coverage was often inaccurate, skeptical and critical, and there was no strategy to generate positive news coverage.
12. **Describe the specific activities and operations of the program in chronological order.**
Since January 2008 the Communications Department has regularly escorted agency administrators and supervisors to newsrooms to extend open invitations to reporters and editorial boards to tour DOC facilities and ride along with community corrections officers. In June 2008 the Communications Department hosted a three-day training session for the agency's 23 designated public information officers. In June 2009 DOC hosted its largest press tour ever for its Sustainable Prisons Project, which resulted in national and international news coverage and recognition. In July 2009 DOC established an auxiliary communications office in Seattle in part to be more accessible to Seattle-based news media. In October 2009 the Communications Department formed a partnership with Washington State Patrol to provide annual hands-on training for public information officers across the state.
13. **Why is the program a new and creative approach or method?** This is the first time DOC has developed a strategy to generate positive news coverage. It's a creative strategy that does not rely on news releases but instead actively invites news organizations to learn about the agency's operations, its programs and its staff. Instead of only inviting news organizations to "feel-good"

events, the agency now regularly hosts press tours and ride-alongs for more serious issues like gang-violence reduction in prisons, supervising dangerous mentally ill offenders in the community and searching for contraband cell phones.

14. **What were the program's start-up costs?** The Communications Department paid 7000 dollars in start up cost. Those cost are detailed in question 15 .
15. **What are the program's annual operational costs?** There is no separate budget for the positive media strategy. Associated costs include travel, about \$2,000 per year, and training for public information officers. In June 2008 it cost about \$5,000 to train all 23 designated public information officers. In October 2009 the Communications Department paid about \$1,100 to send 10 public information officers to training conducted by the Washington State Patrol.
16. **How is this program funded?** The program is funded by DOC's Communications Department.
17. **Did this program require the passage of legislation, executive order or regulations?** No.
18. **What equipment, technology and software are used to operate and administer this program?** Standard office equipment.
19. **To the best of your knowledge, did this program originate in this state?** Other state DOCs use similar tactics, though few, if any, DOCs are this strategic and aggressive when it comes to generating positive news coverage.
20. **Are you aware of similar programs in other states?** No.
21. **Has the program been fully implemented?** Yes, and we continue to use the strategy today.
22. **Briefly evaluate (pro and con) the program's effectiveness in addressing the defined problems or issues. Provide tangible examples.** Not only has the agency seen a record-high number of positive news stories since it implemented the new strategy, news coverage during high-profile incidents is now less skeptical and negative. Reporters and editors are also less aggressive in their coverage after incidents occur. One downside is that it raises reporters' expectations so the agency must work hard to maintain that level of transparency and responsiveness.
23. **How has the program grown or changed since its inception?** It has become easier to invite news organizations to cover positive events and programs as the agency has improved its relationship with news media. DOC also does a better job of identifying newsworthy events, issues and programs that will entice reporters and editors.
24. **What limitations or obstacles might other states expect to encounter if they attempt this program?** State agencies must be willing and able to back up promises to be more transparent and accessible or it will damage their public credibility. Proactive communications initially requires more resources than reactive communications.