



**Corrections Innovation Day 2024:  
Event Organization, Lessons Learned, and Discussion Theme Summary**

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DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

## Event Organization

First, we outline the goals and organization of *Innovation Day 2024*, a one-day invitation-only conference hosted by the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (PA DOC) and Penn State's Criminal Justice Research Center (CJRC). The event agenda is included in Appendix A.

### Purpose

The primary goals of this event were to:

1. Share insights, tackle challenges, and brainstorm testable solutions to four key issues facing Pennsylvania's correctional system: 1. Recidivism Reduction, 2. PA DOC Staff Wellness, 3. Reducing In-Prison Violence, and 4. Restrictive Housing (Solitary Confinement) Reform
2. Connect correctional professionals and academic researchers to foster lasting partnerships
3. Generate innovative, policy-relevant research ideas

### Structure

To achieve our goals, Innovation Day focused on small-group discussions between PA DOC professionals and correctional researchers concerning the four above issues. The event's structure is outlined below:

- Seventy participants attended four small-group discussion sessions.
- Participants included:
  - PA DOC practitioners from various positions and regions across Pennsylvania. Three representatives from each PA DOC profession and a range of administrators were invited.
  - We invited researchers with expertise in corrections from across the U.S. and Canada with various scholarly backgrounds (economics, criminology/criminal justice, public policy, and sociology).
- Each discussion focused on one of the four key issues and was:
  - Conducted as a focus group to promote collaborative responses and construct shared meanings of each issue.
  - Attended by a note-taker and professional facilitator to guide and record the discussion content
    - To ensure consistency, note takers and facilitators followed rigorous protocols and attended structured training sessions before the event.
- The event included thirty-two discussions: two tables per issue per session, based on the number of confirmed attendees.
- Participants rotated to new tables in each discussion session
- We created table assignments for each session based on these rules:
  - Participants could discuss each issue only once
  - Practitioners outnumbered academics at each table
  - When possible, participants were not seated with the same people more than once.
  - When possible, academics with different backgrounds but similar expertise were seated together
  - When possible, DOC practitioners with different professions were grouped together
- Participants wore badges with their name and professional affiliation to promote connections
  - Participants also had table tents with their name and professional affiliation to assist notetakers with recording their information during discussions
- The event's agenda and current time was displayed on large screens throughout the event to keep participants on task.

## Lessons Learned

Next, we summarize ‘lessons learned’ from planning *Innovation Day 2024*. Each “lesson learned” is listed below. We hope that sharing this information will assist in planning future Innovation Day events.

- Anticipate delays. Schedule Innovation Day events at least 6 months *after* grant funds are awarded to ensure sufficient planning time.
  - Similarly, anticipate delayed RSVPs. Set the RSVP deadline at least 2 months before the event and send invitations at least 1 month prior to the RSVP deadline.
- Utilize professional event planning services and/or a day-of coordinator when possible. With nearly 100 attendees and many moving parts, our Innovation Day required extensive coordination. An event coordinator can assist with time-intensive planning tasks, ensuring PIs can organize and participate in the event without being distracted by logistical concerns or competing obligations.
- If your event includes small group discussions...
  - Use professional facilitation services to ensure conversations remain timely, relevant, and productive.
  - Carefully allocate time for each discussion session.
    - Our event included four 50-minute small group discussions of four separate topics. Participants felt the time went by quickly. Future events should consider allocating at least 1 hour per discussion, providing structured opportunities to continue cut-short discussions, and/or focusing on fewer topics.
  - Carefully consider the balance and backgrounds of practitioners vs. researchers to foster constructive dialogue.
    - Our event’s participants were roughly 65% practitioners and 25% researchers. Thus, each discussion session had approximately twice as many practitioners as academics. We recruited researchers and practitioners from a diverse set of professional, personal, regional, and scholarly backgrounds - then deliberately mixed attendees to maximize exposure to new perspectives. Participants appreciated the variety of perspectives encountered throughout the event.
- Consider nominating criminal-legal system practitioners to attend the event rather than asking for volunteers. Administrators at our agency partner (PA DOC) nominated correctional professionals for invitations to our Innovation Day. Practitioners reported feeling honored by their nominations and making significant efforts to attend. This approach likely contributed to the high rate (91%) of invited PA DOC professionals who attended the event.
- Design the event with the end goals in mind. Our main objective was to brainstorm innovative solutions for key issues in Pennsylvania’s correctional system. Therefore, the event focused on exploring these issues and generating ideas for feasible, testable solutions.
- To ensure a balanced workload and a broader range of ideas and expertise, we recommend forming a planning committee for Innovation Day events instead of relying on a single individual.
- Participants appreciated chances to mingle. During the one-hour lunch and post-event happy hour, we encouraged attendees to reconnect with individuals from their small group discussions and/or meet new people. These opportunities allowed participants to strengthen their connections and continue conversations from small group discussions.

## Discussion Theme Summary and Next Steps

*Innovation Day 2024* featured professionally facilitated small-group discussions between Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (PA DOC) correctional professionals and academic researchers on four key issues: 1. recidivism reduction, 2. staff wellness, 3. reducing in-prison violence, and 4. restrictive housing (solitary confinement) reform. Trained notetakers documented each discussion.

### Method & Findings

On this page we report key themes identified from the small-group discussions held during Innovation Day and outline next steps following the event. Each topic was identified through a thematic analysis of the event's discussion notes, conducted by Penn State's Survey Research Center (SRC), experts in focus group data collection and analysis. SRC provided the Innovation Day committee with a comprehensive report detailing findings from the thematic analysis, which identified numerous discussion themes and subthemes. Due to space constraints, themes are summarized in Table One on page 5 of this document. Detailed descriptions of each theme were provided to the event sponsor (Arnold Ventures), hosts, and attendees in a separate report. Themes are organized by the four Innovation Day discussion subjects (recidivism reduction, staff wellness, reducing in-prison violence, and restrictive housing reform) and three recurring categories from the thematic analysis: 1. Barriers & Issues, 2. Existing Solutions, and 3. Practice & Research Ideas.

### Next Steps and Recommendations

- *Share results with attendees:* We will share all final reports with event attendees. We hope our findings will inform attendees' work and future research.
- *Identify feasible research questions:* Share the event reports with PA DOC leadership and ask them to highlight themes of interest for potential collaboration with academic researchers. We will also organize a debriefing session to brainstorm research questions from our own Innovation Day experiences that may interest PA DOC.
- *Prioritize potential research projects:* Analyze the feedback from PA DOC leadership and the debriefing session to select the most promising research areas.
- *Engage academic partners:* Discussion notetakers recorded the names of researchers who proposed ideas or showed strong interest and expertise in certain topics at the Innovation Day. After identifying priority research questions for PA DOC, we will contact key attendees to explore collaboration opportunities.
- *Draft a Research Agenda:* Create a formal plan outlining the scope, timeline, next steps, and milestones for the identified research projects.
- *Plan an event focused solely on "Recidivism Reduction":* Attendees felt they did not have enough time to fully explore recidivism reduction and requested multiple sessions to discuss the topic, brainstorm strategies, and review past and present PA DOC recidivism reduction efforts.

**Table 1: Summary of Discussion Themes**

	<b>Recidivism Reduction</b>	<b>PA DOC Staff Wellness</b>	<b>In-Prison Violence</b>	<b>Restrictive Housing Reform</b>
<b>Barriers &amp; Issues</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of access to education, services, &amp; resources</li> <li>• Fragmented service systems and lack of good planning or support</li> <li>• Going back to the “same old same old”</li> <li>• Safety and familiarity within prison</li> <li>• Overwhelming pilot programs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poor Working Conditions</li> <li>• Negative Staff Culture</li> <li>• Lack of Compensation and Benefits</li> <li>• Lack of Training, Retention Efforts, and Resources</li> <li>• Lack of Feedback and Anonymity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Debt and drugs</li> <li>• Poor communication and training of staff</li> <li>• Considerations with special populations</li> <li>• Lack of staffing</li> <li>• Feeling that “we can work with the violence but we can’t reduce it”</li> <li>• The environment of prison incites violence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of discretion at many levels</li> <li>• Finding a balance between safety and punishment</li> <li>• Lack of understanding of how the process works</li> <li>• Manipulation of the system</li> <li>• Negative effects of restrictive housing on mental health</li> <li>• Missing education and programming</li> <li>• Lack of staffing and capacity</li> </ul>
<b>Existing Solutions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Getting services ‘lined up’</li> <li>• Virtual reality or mentoring programs</li> <li>• Education and vocational programming</li> <li>• Family group-decision making</li> <li>• “Prison to paycheck”</li> <li>• Re-entry fairs</li> <li>• Temporary quality housing</li> <li>• Technology-focused programming</li> <li>• Incentivizing moving reentrants to a new location</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• State employee assistance programs (SEAP)</li> <li>• Critical incident stress management program (CISM)</li> <li>• COVER</li> <li>• Parole agent mentoring program</li> <li>• Staff wellness committee</li> <li>• Award and recognition ceremonies</li> <li>• Corrections appreciation week</li> <li>• Not helpful: Small incentives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Violence Reduction Initiative (VRI)</li> <li>• Continuing education and programming for inmates</li> <li>• Incentives for inmates</li> <li>• H-code flag for most violence and dangerous individuals</li> <li>• Meals in cells</li> <li>• Identifying risk of violence early</li> <li>• Little Scandinavia</li> <li>• Senior Living Enhancement Project</li> <li>• Cell inspections</li> <li>• Restrictive release list</li> <li>• Positive interactions between inmates and staff</li> <li>• Positive environmental attributes</li> <li>• Certified peer specialists</li> <li>• Pepper spray</li> <li>• Increased technology and surveillance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Changes to restrictive housing rules/policies</li> <li>• Informal resolutions and/or other consequences available besides restrictive housing</li> <li>• Time cut-offs and appeals process</li> <li>• Out of cell hours</li> <li>• Step down processes</li> <li>• Incentives for good behavior</li> <li>• Programming for special populations</li> <li>• Cell mates to reduce suicide rates</li> <li>• Trainings to encourage staff to move to rehabilitative mindset</li> <li>• Programming review committee</li> <li>• Environmental changes</li> </ul>
<b>Practice &amp; Research Ideas - Need for...</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individualized solutions and expanded services</li> <li>• Need for further training of staff</li> <li>• Better measurement and tracking</li> <li>• More research</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Further education, training, and mentorship</li> <li>• Increased compensation or benefits</li> <li>• Cultural shift</li> <li>• Changes in working conditions or resources</li> <li>• More research</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Additional incentives available for good behavior and/or consequences for poor behavior</li> <li>• More education, programming, and access to resources for inmates</li> <li>• More control of the environment</li> <li>• Further education and training for staff</li> <li>• Dignity and respect</li> <li>• Better measurement and tracking</li> <li>• More research</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individualized treatment</li> <li>• Increased staffing and training</li> <li>• Changing conditions of restrictive housing</li> <li>• Good alternatives to restrictive housing</li> <li>• Better cooperation with outside groups</li> <li>• Better measurement and tracking</li> <li>• More research</li> </ul>

## Appendix A: Innovation Day Agenda

### **Pennsylvania Corrections Innovation Day 2024** *“Bridging Correctional Research and Practice in Pennsylvania”*

**July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2024 | Elizabethtown, PA**

Venue: PA DOC Training Academy

Address: 1451 N Market St, Elizabethtown, PA 17022

<b>9:00-10:00am</b>	<b>Check-In</b> Light Refreshments Provided (coffee, tea, pastries, fruit, etc.)
<b>10:00-10:05am</b>	<b>Welcome</b>
<b>10:05-10:30am</b>	<b>Introduction, Event Overview, &amp; Agenda</b> Breakout Discussion Topics: Recidivism Reduction, Staff Wellness, In-Prison Violence Reduction, and Restrictive Housing Reform
<b>10:30-10:40am</b>	<b>--Break--</b>
<b>10:40-11:30am</b>	<b>Breakout Discussion Group 1</b>
<b>11:30-11:40am</b>	<b>--Break--</b>
<b>11:40am-12:30pm</b>	<b>Breakout Discussion Group 2</b>
<b>12:30-1:30pm</b>	<b>Lunch</b>
<b>1:30-2:20pm</b>	<b>Breakout Discussion Group 3</b>
<b>2:20-2:30pm</b>	<b>--Break--</b>
<b>2:30-3:20pm</b>	<b>Breakout Discussion Group 4</b>
<b>3:20-3:30pm</b>	<b>--Break--</b>
<b>3:30-4:00pm</b>	<b>Concluding Remarks</b>
<b>4:30pm+</b>	<b>Happy Hour (Optional)</b> <i>Hub 717 - Inside the Fairfield Inn &amp; Suites Harrisburg Airport Hotel</i>