



# Best in the Business



## *Emergencies Are No Match for Missouri*

*By Lisa Harlow*

**N**atural disasters, pandemic disease outbreaks, inmate violence, terrorist threats — if any of these tragedies hit a Missouri correctional facility, they'd better be prepared to meet Michelle Kasak. Kasak, a 16-year veteran of the Missouri Department of Corrections (DOC), is the department's emergency preparedness and workplace violence coordinator, and she has a plan for everything.

Kasak first started her career in corrections in October 1994 in the probation and parole office at the Boonville Correctional Center. "Ever since I was small, I remember I always wanted to work in the criminal justice system," she said.

Before she was promoted to her current position in 2007, Kasak was a regional training coordinator and a special projects manager in the Probation and Parole Department. As emergency preparedness and workplace violence coordinator, she is responsible for setting up new emergency training programs for the department and rejuvenating the workplace violence program.

Emergency preparedness is a necessity for corrections. Kasak recently completed training and writing procedures for the agency's crisis negotiation team. As part of her job, she researches emerging trends and recognizes the potential for new and more serious threats. She has updated the agency's training modules and prepared hundreds of emergency plans, policies and procedure manuals.

Kasak ensures that all facilities conduct emergency exercises each year. Emergency operation drills are held regularly at the state's 20 correctional centers, six community supervision centers and two community release

centers. All management and emergency response staff also receive updated National Incident Management System training.

"It is important that everyone works together to ensure that we're better prepared for emergencies. We want to be sure that everyone is safe so things don't get out of control," Kasak said. "We're always finding new ways to be better prepared — fine tuning and refining. I really like working with the staff to make this happen."

"In my 35 plus years working within the DOC, Ms. Kasak is possibly the most competent, creative, professional and committed employee I have ever encountered," said George Lombardi, department director. "She embodies the spirit of the 'Best in the Business' recognition. She truly deserves this for her ongoing personal commitment and contributions to the field of corrections."

Kasak is not only able to recognize and address the potential impact an emergency could have within the agency, but also the effects on the surrounding communities as well. She believes that the state's ability to efficiently and effectively address emergencies is also dependent on developing solid community and government partnerships. She was selected to serve as a member of the Governor's Emergency Operations Center for Missouri, which meets during actual crises and emergencies in the state.

In 2008, during a period of heavy flooding, Kasak spent many nights and weekends coordinating offender labor to help communities along the Mississippi. There was also an ice storm in 2009 that immobilized parts of Missouri, which included the Southeast Correctional Center, a 2,000-



*Michele Kasak*

bed maximum-security facility, and probation and parole offices in the region. While she handled the problems at the agency's facilities, she also found a way to help out the victims in the community. She also helped coordinate deliveries of supplies and equipment to those who were left without power.

After a series of tragedies in the agency, Kasak decided that the department needed to better respond to staff crises. "We have a lot of attempted suicides. Some officers have to perform CPR on an obviously dead person, and this is very traumatic for them," Kasak said. "We get with [the officers] and go to the hospital and stay with them to make sure they're all right."

Kasak created Peer Action Care Teams for staff members who have been traumatized by an incident within the correctional environment or in their personal life. Fellow employees take on a supportive role to help their co-workers in times of need. Kasak devotes many hours to this team to be sure that the members are well-trained to provide one-on-one assistance.

"I believe in what we stand for. I'm proud to work for the department. We need to show our staff that we're supportive and we care about their well-being," said Kasak. "Our staff is most important."

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*Lisa Harlow is a contributing writer for Corrections Today.*