

# Correctional officers receive timely ‘thank you’ from TBM

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BEAUMONT—Texas Baptist Men volunteers delivered a timely “thank you” to correctional officers at the Mark W. Stiles Unit.

TBM crews served meals to officers at the Stiles Unit on the ninth day of a lockdown following a foiled escape attempt. Hours before volunteers served the first shift, a correctional officer was rushed to the hospital after being assaulted.

As a result, 50 extra officers were called in to the Stiles Unit, a few miles southeast of Beaumont, said Jim Young, coordinator of restorative justice ministries for TBM.

“Thank you for all you do,” volunteers repeatedly told officers and other prison employees as they served them chicken fajita salad and peach cobbler.



Texas Baptist Men volunteers

delivered devotional booklets and “thank you” notes drawn by children at area churches to correctional officers at the Stiles Unit near Beaumont. (Photo / Ken Camp)

The TBM cooking crew began work before 5 a.m. to prepare the meals for the first group of officers who arrived to eat at the 11 a.m. shift change. Volunteers from churches in the Golden Triangle Baptist Network joined TBM in serving the officers.

In an atmosphere of heightened security and increased tension, tangible expressions of appreciation provide officers much-needed encouragement, said Young, former chaplaincy program administrator for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice.

The TBM volunteers gave officers at the Stiles Unit a meal, devotional books, candy bars and hand-drawn “thank you” notes from children in area churches as part of National Correctional Officers Week. Another TBM team served at the Barry B. Telford Unit near New Boston, and other volunteers worked at the John Middleton Unit in Abilene.

## **‘Just to know somebody cares’**

“If somebody had brought in a meal like this when I served, it would have meant the world—just to know somebody cares,” said Bryan Arender, a TBM volunteer from Cottonwood Creek Baptist Church in Allen who worked 14 years as a correctional officer.



Bryan Arender, a Texas Baptist Men volunteer and former correctional officer, visits with officers at the Stiles Unit southeast of Beaumont. (Photo / Ken Camp)

Early in his career, working in the correctional system was “just a job—just a paycheck,” he said.

“Then I realized I could do so much more. It became a calling,” he said.

In recent years, Arender has focused on delivering Bibles—and words of encouragement—to administrators and officers in correctional facilities.

“This is my passion,” he said.

About 25,000 correctional officers work in more than 100 Texas Department of Criminal Justice facilities around the state, overseeing about 140,000 offenders.

## **Few on the outside understand**

The Stiles Unit faces frequent turnover in its workforce, said Officer Steve Bennett, who has worked as a correctional officer since 2006.



Officer Steve Bennett (right), who works at the Stiles Unit near Beaumont, visits with Texas Baptist Men volunteer Joe Crutchfield from First Baptist Church in Lewisville. (Photo / Ken Camp)

“The refineries offer five times what we make here. When the oil companies or the railroad or the port authority are hiring, it’s hard to keep people working here,” Bennett said.

Correctional officers face danger, stress and pressure few people outside the correctional system understand, he added.

“If anybody wants to know what we do every day, let ‘em follow Bennett around for one day,” he said.

“How often do we hear ‘thank you’ from anybody? From each other, we hear it a lot. From people on the outside who come in, rarely. From the general public, never.”

**‘Hard beyond belief on the families’**



Scot Hanks, a Texas Baptist Men volunteer from North Orange Baptist Church, began work early preparing meals for correctional officers at the Stiles Unit near Beaumont. (Photo / Ken Camp)

A [national study](#) of about 4,000 correctional officers and staff in 2012 revealed a 27 percent post-traumatic stress rate among them and a depression rate of 26 percent. Specifically among security personnel, the rate of PTSD and depression is 34 percent, significantly higher than the general population and all other first responders. Correctional officer also are at least 20 percent more likely to get a divorce than the general population.

“It is hard beyond belief on the families,” Bennett said. “You have to have an awesome plan in place. You have to have an awesome spouse. Then you might make it.”



Texas Baptist Men volunteers serve correctional officers at the Stiles Unit near Beaumont. (Photo / Ken Camp)

David Hamel works as a mental health officer at the Stiles Unit. Officers who are most confident in their self-identity are most likely to seek and receive the help they need, he said.

Those who feel most vulnerable are least likely to acknowledge that vulnerability and seek assistance, because they worry it could be exploited, said Hamel, a licensed professional counselor.

He noted he saw quite a few officers when he was in private practice, but many are reluctant to visit a mental health professional on staff.

“Here they feel like they have to stay guarded,” he said, noting a pervasive fear of the “prison grapevine”—the news and gossip that travels quickly among officers, staff and offenders.

“It’s a place where Satan likes to dance and play,” he said.