

ACA's Core Jail Standards Focus on the Basics

By Rod Miller, CRS, Inc. and Connie Clem

The year 2010 brought a breakthrough in U.S. corrections with the introduction of new Core Jail Standards by the American Correctional Association (ACA). Until 2010, county jails could use ACA's Performance Based Standards for Adult Local Detention Facilities ("ALDF standards") to raise practices to a professional level. But jails did not have a national set of "minimum" jail standards that identified the conditions and practices required to operate a constitutional jail.

The new Core Jail Standards have been field tested and revised, and jails around the nation are already using them. At ACA's summer conference in 2011, it was decided that jails will receive accreditation if they meet the new standards, changing an earlier policy that offered certification rather than accreditation.

ACA invited many corrections professionals to help develop the Core Jail Standards. The new standards are a distillation of their combined professional insight and expertise. Each contributor brought a unique perspective to the development process, and the Core Jail Standards have a different meaning to various stakeholders.

This article answers typical questions about how the standards were developed—from the point of view of one participant who was closely involved in the process from the very beginning.

- **What are the Core Jail Standards?**
- **Why do we need jail standards?**
- **Why do we need the new Core Jail Standards?**
- **Who developed the Core Jail Standards?**
- **What makes a standard "core"?**
- **How do the Core Jail Standards compare to national and state standards?**
- **How were the Core Jail Standards field tested?**
- **How are agencies using the Core Jail Standards?**
- **What tools is ACA making available for jails that may seek certification on the Core Jail Standards?**

What are the Core Jail Standards?

The Core Jail Standards are a new set of standards developed and maintained by ACA to address unmet needs in the detention field. They are a smaller offshoot of ACA’s full ALDF standards, which have provided the basis for ACA accreditation for many years.

Traditionally, ACA standards have been developed within a form and structure that responds to three primary criteria:

1. They must be *legally defensible*—providing guidance for jail operations at or above constitutional minimums established by the courts.
2. They must be *flexible*—allowing agencies to use varied ways to achieve compliance with the intent of each standard.
3. They must promote *advanced professional practice*—defining what *should* be done, not just what *must* be done.

The new Core Jail Standards encompass just the first two of these criteria, by focusing on minimum requirements to operate a constitutional jail. The ALDF standards extend further, to the third criterion of advanced practice; they exceed the minimum requirements comprised by most state jail standards and defined in court cases to measure the constitutionality of facilities and operations.

ACA’s ALDF standards have evolved over the past 40 years through four phases of development. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1. Evolution of ACA’s Standards for Adult Local Detention Facilities

ALDF, First Edition (1970s)	Standards are based on the experience of the field, as reflected in the practices of the Federal Bureau of Prisons.
ALDF, Second Edition (1980s)	Standards are updated to incorporate expanded experience gained through agencies’ application of the First Edition.
ALDF, Third Edition (1990s)	Standards are updated based on new research wherever possible.
ALDF, Fourth Edition	Standards are translated into a performance-based template, shifting the focus to outcomes and

(2000s)

effectiveness.

The Core Jail Standards are the first national set of minimum standards for guiding the operation of constitutional jails. They are a distilled version of the essentials in jail management.

The Core Jail Standards are especially useful for:

- Jails located in states that have no state jail standards;
- Jails whose states' standards do not address all of the requirements for operating a constitutional jail; and
- Standards writers who want to have a reliable description of basic minimum requirements for operating a constitutional jail.

Why do we need jail standards?

There are three main reasons why jail standards are an important asset for jail leaders and managers.

1. **Jail standards establish the foundation for sound jail design and operation.** A jail's policies and procedures translate professional standards into daily operations. Training prepares employees to implement these procedures and thereby run a constitutional jail. Ongoing employee supervision ensures consistent implementation of procedures and high levels of performance for the overall agency.
2. **Standards provide the basis for evaluating operations and measuring compliance.** Jail managers agree that jail standards increase professionalism, reduce liability, improve operations, and increase consistency of jail operations.
3. **Jail standards are relevant to jails of all sizes.** While larger jails often have more resources for responding to the challenges they face, smaller facilities must find ways to deal with the same issues. Standards help managers in any size jail to anticipate the problems that may occur and prepare responses in advance.

Why do we need the new Core Jail Standards?

In 2004, the working group that developed the fourth edition of ACA's ALDF standards also identified the need for a set of national minimum jail standards. At that time, ACA published only its "professional" standards, including the ALDF and a separate set of standards for small jails. The ALDF standards are an indicator of professional excellence and are worthwhile to meet, but the 2004 ALDF working group acknowledged that it is not necessary for all jails to operate at that level. In the more than 40 years that the ALDF standards have been in existence, only 5% or less of the nation's 3,200 jails have been accredited at any given time.

The working group recommended that ACA discontinue the small jail standards and replace them with minimum standards that could be used by jails of all sizes. The needed standards would incorporate essential elements of the ALDF standards, elements of states' jail standards, and court-defined indicators of constitutional levels of operation.

Several factors illustrate both the need for standards and the difficulty of defining and encouraging a common, national level of jail professionalism and accountability.

- Only 32 states currently have any form of jail standards.
- Many states have only voluntary jail standards.
- In some states that have jail standards, the law does not give any agency enforcement powers or define a process for enforcement.
- Standards vary in scope and content from state to state.
- Some states have reduced their inspection and enforcement efforts in recent years in response to budget pressure.¹

The ALDF working group recognized that practitioners who have been working with the ALDF standards might consider the Core Jail Standards rudimentary. But more than 95% of the nation's jails are not involved with ALDF accreditation—and it is these jails that are the primary audience for the Core Jail Standards.

Who developed the Core Jail Standards?

Dozens of stakeholders donated hundreds of hours of labor to create the Core Jail Standards. Contributors are recognized at the end of this article. They include the 2004 working group already mentioned. A 2008 team later worked very hard to produce an initial version of the Core Jail Standards. The standards were field-tested, and a 2009 working group completed a revised version.

ACA anchored the process, convening committees to draft the Core Jail Standards and providing staff support. To form the working groups, ACA Executive Director Jim Gondles asked the National Sheriffs' Association (NSA) and American Jail Association (AJA) to designate committee members. This ensured that jail administrators from jails of all sizes, and sheriffs from a variety of counties, added their experience and expertise.

The National Institute of Corrections (NIC) funded travel to some meetings. In the home stretch, Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) Director Harley Lappin (now retired) personally chaired work sessions and brought BOP resources to the table. The ACA Standards Committee reviewed two drafts of the core standards before adopting them by a unanimous vote in August 2009.

¹ Florida eliminated state jail standards and enforcement efforts several years ago. In July 2011, the State of Ohio reduced its jail inspection bureau to a single employee.

What makes a standard “core”?

ACA’s performance-based ALDF standards were the starting point for drafting the minimum Core Jail Standards. The ACA Standards Committee required that the new core standards would be drawn from existing ALDF standards in order to reduce confusion in the field and to ensure consistency between the two ACA publications.

The 2008 working group adapted the content of the ALDF standards, distilling them to present the content that describes the operations and conditions that are necessary to operate a constitutional jail.

Each ALDF standard includes five components:

1. **A Performance Standard**—the condition to be achieved and maintained;
2. **Outcome Measures**—quantifiable data for evaluating the extent to which the desired condition has been achieved;
3. **Expected Practices**—specific actions and activities that should be implemented to reach compliance with the performance standard;
4. **Protocols**—written tools that provide direction to staff, such as policies, procedures, post orders, and training curricula; and
5. **Process Indicators**—sources of evidence that the expected practices are being properly and consistently implemented according to the protocols

An “expected practice” is similar to a traditional standard as they appeared before the standards were re-written in the performance-based format. The working group reviewed the “expected practice” language from each ALDF standard for its suitability to be carried over as a core standard—in whole, in part, or in principle.

An example of an ALDF standard is given in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Example of Performance-Based Standard: Contraband Control

Performance Standard	2C. Contraband is minimized. It is detected when present in the facility.
Outcome Measures	Incidents of contraband, ÷ ADP and Admits weapons, substances
Expected Practice	Procedures guide searches of facilities and inmates to control contraband.
Protocols	Written policy and procedure. Training curriculum.
Process Indicators	Records and logs. Inmate and staff interviews. Observation.

A 2009 memo² described the process:

We examined each expected practice and tried to find the practice—or portion of a practice—that represented minimum requirements. One of our benchmarks was to ask, “Would a jail find itself in trouble with the courts if it did not comply with X practice?” As we applied this to each ALDF expected practice, we often found one or two sentences of an expected practice that hit the nail on the head. We extracted this language for use in the draft. We often found additional language that exceeded what we found to be a “minimum” requirement. In these cases we extracted the “core” language from the larger ALDF expected practice.

The memo went on to explain the process of extracting the core language from the broader ALDF expected practices.

We felt it was imperative to discard the higher-than-minimum language. We had all worked with practitioners who turned to the ALDF standards as a source of basic guidance but were quickly turned away by the language that exceeds minimum requirements. This is not a criticism of the ACA standards, but rather an acknowledgement that ACA has always promulgated the higher level of “professional” practice in its standards.

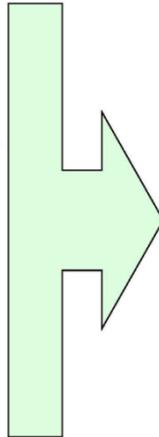
Figures 3 and 4 show how examples of how the Core Jail Standards relate to their ALDF counterparts.

² Memo to Core Jail Standards Committee prior to March 2009 meeting. Rod Miller. February 25, 2009.

Figure 3. Translating ALDF Standards to Core Standards: Control Center

**ALDF 4th Edition, Standard 2A-01:
Security – Control Center**

- Space is provided for a **24-hour secure** control center for **monitoring** and coordinating the facility’s **security, life safety, and communications systems**.
- Staff assigned to a control center has access to a toilet and washbasin.
- There are multiple communication systems between the control center and inmate occupied areas.



Core Jail Standard:

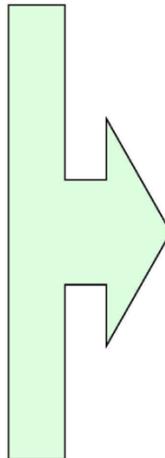
The facility’s security, life safety, and communications systems are monitored continuously from a secure location.

Figure 4. Translating ALDF Standards to Core Standards: Single-celled Housing

**ALDF 4th Edition, Standard 2A-34:
Security – Single-celled Housing**

Single occupancy cells/rooms are available when indicated for the following:

- Maximum and close custody inmates
- Inmates with severe medical disabilities
- Inmates suffering from serious mental illness
- Sexual predators
- Inmates likely to be exploited or victimized by others
- Inmates who have other special needs for single-occupancy housing.



Core Jail Standard:

Inmates not suitable for housing in multiple occupancy cells are housed in single occupancy cells.

Reaching a consensus on what was “core” required tapping into the substantial experience evident around the table every time a committee met. Three other types of resources were always at the table:

1. The ALDF Standards, 4th Edition;
2. Mandatory minimum jail standards from several states; and

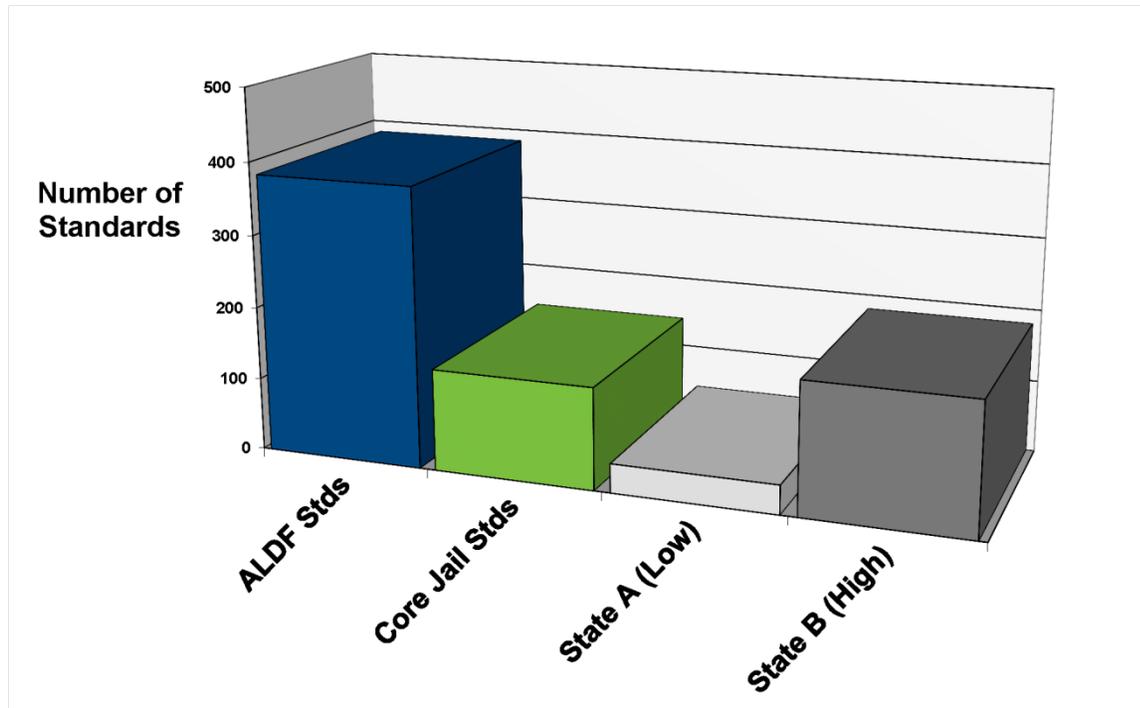
3. Caselaw, primarily from The Detention and Corrections Caselaw Catalog,³ summarizing more than 8,000 federal court decisions that address issues in detention and corrections.

How do the Core Jail Standards compare to national and state standards?

By definition, the Core Jail Standards are a subset of ACA’s broader professional ALDF standards. The core standards are not only shorter in form, they also address a narrower range of issues. There are only 138 expected practices in the Core Jail Standards, as compared with almost 400 expected practices in the current ALDF standards.

State standards vary widely in breadth and scope. Figure 5 illustrates the scope of the Core Jail Standards, the ALDF standards, and the range of state standards. This comparison uses two hypothetical state examples, one a state with basic standards (low scope) and the other with more ambitious standards (high scope).

Figure 5. Scope of ALDF, Core, and Selected State Jail Standards



States jail standards take different approaches with regard to:

- Scope of the standards (aspects of jail management and operation that are addressed);

³ Published by CRS, Inc., Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. The 20th and 21st editions were available in 2008 and 2009; the 22nd edition was released in 2010. Information at <http://www.correction.org>.

- Level of detail provided in the standards;
- Provisions for inspection; and
- Duty and authority to enforce compliance.

For example, Figure 6 compares the scope of the first draft of the Core Jail Standards to Michigan’s minimum standards for jails. With a total of 32 provisions, the Michigan jail standards are considered to have a very narrow scope. Several functional areas are not addressed at all by the Michigan standards.

Figure 6. Comparison of First Draft of the Core Jail Standards to Michigan Minimum Standards for Jails

Functional Area	Number of Core Standards	Number of Michigan Counterparts	Percent of Core Standards Addressed by Michigan Standards
Safety	20	14	70.0%
Security	37	5	13.5%
Order	1	0	0.0%
Care	40	12	30.0%
Program and Activity	12	0	0.0%
Justice	15	1	6.7%
Administration and Management	10	0	0.0%
Total	135	32	23.7%

By contrast, the jail standards developed for use in Tennessee by the Tennessee Corrections Institute address a broader range of issues, providing 86 standards. Figure 7 shows how the issues addressed in Tennessee’s standards compare with the field test draft of the Core Jail Standards. (Different versions of the Core Jail Standards were used for these comparisons, with a different total number of standards.)

Figure 7: Comparison of Field Test Draft Core Jail Standards to Tennessee Jail Standards

Functional Area	Number of Core Standards	Number of Tennessee Counterparts	Percent of Core Standards Addressed by Tennessee Standards
Safety	18	14	77.8%
Security	35	23	65.7%
Order	1	1	100.0%
Care	39	20	51.3%
Program and Activity	11	9	81.8%
Justice	16	11	68.8%
Administration and Management	11	8	72.7%
Total	131	86	65.7%

How were the Core Jail Standards field tested?

The first draft of the Core Jail Standards was field tested in 2008 in the U.S. Army disciplinary barracks at Fort Knox, Kentucky, leading to the facility’s accreditation. In May 2009, ACA asked Mackinac County, Michigan, to field test the final draft to provide insights to the ACA Standards Committee for its meeting in early August. Although the short time frame was daunting, Sheriff Scott Strait agreed to take on the challenge.

NIC assisted by sending former Hillsborough County, Florida, jail director David Parrish to Mackinac County to review the county’s preparations and identify deficiencies. His insights proved invaluable, and his encouragement gave Mackinac officials the confidence to finish the process. The county also received additional assistance from the NIC Information Center, the U.S. Army (which provided sample policies and procedures), and other sources.

By late July 2009, the county’s preparations were complete. ACA sent David Haasenritter, the head of the U.S. Army’s jail system, to conduct a formal audit. Mark Flowers, ACA’s standards and accreditation director, also participated in the audit.

Haasenritter opened the audit by warning Sheriff Strait and Jail Administrator Tim Ahlborn that even though it was only a field test, the audit would be taken seriously. According to Sheriff Strait, “He made

sure that we had done everything right. At the end of the two-day audit, it was clear that Mackinac County had made the grade.”

The Mackinac County jail formally received accreditation from ACA at the association’s annual conference in Nashville on August 10, 2009. At the accreditation hearing the day before, the five-member Commission on Accreditation panel had praised the county and thanked its representatives for advancing the profession by testing the standards on short notice.

The Core Jail Standards had been adopted the preceding Friday by the ACA Standards Committee. During testimony to the committee before its vote to adopt the standards, Sheriff Strait told members that he had been “looking for a road map” that would help him operate a safe, secure, and constitutional jail. Now that road map had arrived.

How are agencies using the Core Jail Standards?

The new standards apply to jails of all sizes. During their development, many larger jails had expressed a strong interest in the new standards and asked that ACA set no size limits for the application of the standards.

ACA officials decided to make the Core Jail Standards available to the field at no cost, with the hope that this would make them accessible to the counties that most needed the guidance they provide. (See note at the end of this article on how to obtain a copy of the Core Jail Standards.)

ACA also has developed a new, lower-cost audit process for accreditation using the Core Jail Standards. Costs to agencies are typically around \$6,000 plus travel expenses for the auditors.

Any jail can use the Core Jail Standards for self- and peer audits of their jail facilities and operations. A self-audit form is also available for agency use.

Agencies are using the new standards in a variety of ways.

- Because state jail standards do not address all of the areas that pose liability, Michigan sheriffs and jail managers are developing a self- and peer-audit system that uses the core jail standards. The Michigan Sheriffs Association is exploring strategies for organizing a system of peer audits that would offer sheriffs and jail managers the opportunity to have their facilities and operations evaluated by an independent group of practitioners. NIC has provided technical assistance to the effort, which is being led by Sheriff Mike Lovelace in Marquette County.
- Tennessee officials were using the Core Jail Standards as a reference in a 2011 revision of the state’s jail standards.
- The Bureau of Indian Affairs has used the core standards as the foundation for jail guidelines that are being finalized in 2011 and will be applied in tribal jails

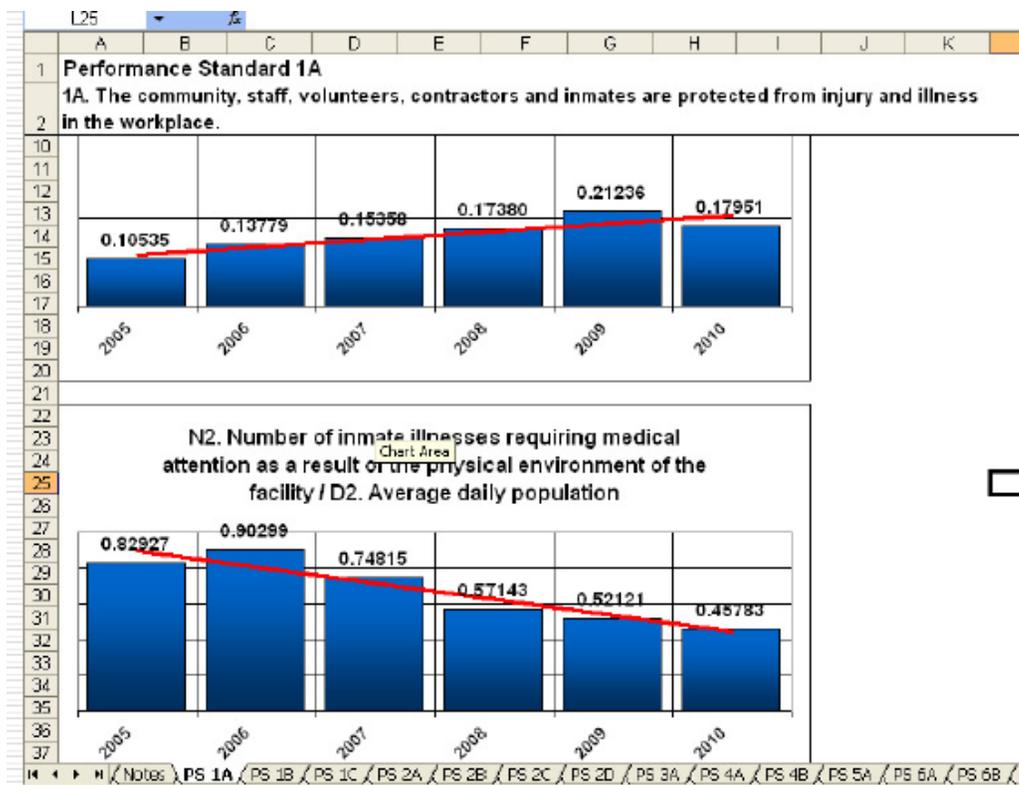
- Several other state governments have indicated that the core standards will be helpful as they to review and update their jail standards.

What tools is ACA making available for jails that may seek certification on the Core Jail Standards?

ACA is developing several new tools to help managers implement and comply with the Core Jail Standards.

- Outcome measures are being defined for each of the standards that will include a detailed explanation of each term and element.
- An Excel-based program will make it easier to deploy outcome measures and to use them to identify trends (see Figure 8).
- A compilation of federal court decisions that underpin the Core Jail Standards will help jail managers understand and communicate the related legal issues.
- A “how to” manual will explain the standards and provide guidance for agencies that want to move toward compliance.

Figure 8. Sample of Excel-Based Program for Outcome Measures



Conclusion

The jail profession has responded with interest to the Core Jail Standards. In 2010, NIC sent the Core Jail Standards to every city and county jail. The standards have found practical uses at the local level, providing jail managers with needed guidance. By late 2011, several jails had received certification or accreditation on the Core Jail Standards, and many more have begun working with ACA to prepare for accreditation reviews.

The Core Jail Standards are a good idea whose time has come. They represent a new paradigm for ACA, which continues to provide professional standards to all of the disciplines that comprise the field of corrections. While the ACA professional standards continue to evolve, for the first time, there's something that has been proven helpful and accessible to all agencies. This will be of great benefit to jail leaders, jail workers, and jail residents throughout the country. We salute the working groups, the supporting agencies and organizations, and the pioneering jail jurisdictions that have been early adopters.

Resources

ACA has given permission for the author to share the Core Jail Standards with jails in an electronic format. A self-audit tool is also available. To request either of these files, contact Rod Miller at rod@correction.org.

About the Author

Rod Miller is the founder of Community Resource Services, Inc., a non-profit organization established in 1972 that provides services to clients at the local, regional, state, and national levels. Rod has authored many texts on such topics as staffing analysis, vulnerability assessment, jail planning and design, standards and jail inmate work programs. CRS, Inc., publishes the *Detention and Corrections Caselaw Catalog* and the *Detention and Corrections Caselaw Quarterly*. Rod can be reached at (717) 338-9100 or rod@correction.org. See www.correction.org for more details.

Appendix A. Participants in the Core Standards Development Process

	2000 ALDF Working Group	2008 Working Group	2009 Working Group
David Parrish, Hillsborough County, Florida	✓	Chair	Vice Chair
Harley Lappin, Director, Federal Bureau of Prisons			Chair
Sandra Bedea-Mueller, Ocean County Department of Corrections, New Jersey	✓		
Mark Fitzgibbons, Beaufort County Department of Corrections, South Carolina	✓		
Jerry Frey, Hampden County Sheriff's Dept., Massachusetts	✓		
Steve Ingley, Executive Director, AJA	✓		
Owen Quarnberg, Utah Sheriffs' Association	✓		
Tom Rosazza, Colorado Springs, Colorado	✓		
Blake Taylor, South Carolina Department of Corrections	✓		
Hal Wilbur, Broward County Dept. of Corrections, Florida	✓		
John Bittick, Sheriff, Monroe County, Georgia		✓	
Stanley Glanz, Sheriff, Tulsa County, Oklahoma		✓	✓
David Goad, Sheriff, Alleghany County, Maryland		✓	

Robert Hall, Grand Traverse County Sheriff's Office, Michigan		✓	
Sid Hamberlin, Bonneville County Sheriff's Office, Idaho		✓	
Margo Hurse, Jackson County Detention Center, Missouri		✓	
Ted Kamatchus, Sheriff, Marshall County, Iowa		✓	
Mike Pinson, Arlington County Sheriff's Office, Virginia		✓	
Gwyn Smith-Ingley, Executive Director, AJA		✓	✓
Everette Van Hoesen, Sheriff, Kay County, Oklahoma		✓	
Jeffrey Beard, Secretary, Pennsylvania Dept. of Corrections			✓
Ron Budzinski FAIA, Peoria, Illinois			✓
David Haasenritter, Army Review Board Agency			✓
Jim Hart, Hamilton County, Tennessee and University of Tennessee technical assistance team			✓
Jamie Haight, Federal Bureau of Prisons, Washington, D.C.			✓
Virginia Hutchinson, Chief, NIC Jails Division, Washington, D.C.			✓
John May M.D., Armor Correctional Health Services, Florida			✓

David Ward, Frederick County Sheriff's Office, Maryland			✓
Rod Miller, CRS, Inc., Gettysburg, Pennsylvania	✓	✓	✓
Jim Gondles, Executive Director, ACA	✓	✓	✓
Mark Flowers, Director of Standards and Accreditation. ACA		✓	✓
Jeff Washington, Deputy Executive Director, ACA	✓	✓	✓
Bob Verdeyen, Former Director of Standards and Accreditation, ACA	✓		

Document available at:

http://community.nicic.gov/blogs/national_jail_exchange/archive/2011/12/27/aca-s-core-jail-standards-focus-on-the-basics.aspx

The National Jail Exchange is an ongoing electronic journal focusing on providing information to jails practitioners and is sponsored by the National Institute of Corrections (NIC). The contents of the articles, the points of view expressed by the authors, and comments posted in reaction to the articles do not necessarily reflect the official views or policies of the National Institute of Corrections.

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