

## **Steve Jett**

**President – National Juvenile Detention Association (NJDA)  
2008-2012**



*Steve Jett doing what he loves*

Steve Jett started his career with Canyon County Sheriff Office in 1988. In 1992, he moved over to the juvenile detention center. A year later he was promoted to the position of Director of the Southwest Idaho Juvenile Detention Center (SIJDC) in Caldwell, Idaho, a position that he still holds today. Mr. Jett has been involved on the state and national level in the National Juvenile Detention Association and the America Correction Association. In 2008, he was elected president of NJDA and served two terms until 2012. Mr. Jett is a member of the Idaho Board of Juvenile Corrections which is a governor appointed position. In addition, he is an auditor of juvenile facilities for the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA).

Mr. Jett felt impelled to get involved with the National Juvenile Detention Association, just after the opening of the detention center. In 1992, the NJDA conference was being held in Boise Idaho just thirty miles from his facility. Mr. Jett and several others went to that conference and met a few people and joined the organization. In 2004 one of the leadership asked Mr. Jett to run for office as a regional president, which he did. At that time, the organization also offered an online leadership course called the Leadership Challenge through the Center for Research and Professional Development at Michigan State University. This course was very helpful and Mr. Jett stated that he still uses the principles of that course in the way he runs the detention center.

While serving as president of the NJDA, his single most important goal towards advancing the Mission and Purpose of the Association, was to help the Association to have more of a presence in the west. Under Mr. Jett's leadership the Association held a conference in Las Vegas. In addition, Mr. Jett had another opportunity; the American Correction Association (ACA) was trying to rewrite their standards for the Juvenile Detention Centers wherein they asked NJDA to put together a committee. The committee included seven subcommittees which submitted a draft that Jett thought was pretty good. This opportunity helped NJDA receive a lot of notoriety in the ACA. The

NJDA/NPJS has several hundred members but the American Correction Association has twenty some thousand members.

As President of the NJDA the most critical issues and contribution on the national level that required the greatest attention from the organization was the work on standards: the ACA standards and the Department of Justice's PREA standards. During this time, the Department of Justice asked for comments three or four different times. As the head of the PREA workgroup, Mr. Jett group submitted the first draft of comments that was about thirty-four pages. The final draft was published and NJDA was credited for some of the work that the organization did.

Since Mr. Jett's presidency he continues to be active in the organization. The most noteworthy advancements that have been made in juvenile detention is putting out training for PREA, since PREA standards were published we had six conferences and at each conference there was a PREA track wherein each attendee was able to attend all the classes and obtain fifteen hours of PREA instruction. This helped nationwide with juvenile detention and juvenile corrections centers to be in compliance with PREA standards.

One of most critical things the NPJS/NJDA has to do is to identify and secure steady funding. Past issues NPJS has had to deal with is loss of grant funding from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. This forced the organization to rely on membership funding, conference revenue and contracts. As a result, the organization has existed, maybe even become more efficient, forcing membership to step up, but has been unable to expand.

Mr. Jett says that the National Juvenile Detention Association has had a tremendous effect in the way he runs his detention center. When he first took over as the detention director they had quite a few problems. Being involved in NJDA, he was able to reach out to other administrators, other practitioners and experts in the field to get some advice on how to do it. He really did not know. Jett had a little bit of a detention background but adult detention and Juvenile detention is quite different. The National Juvenile Detention Association got him involved with people that knew how to do things right. As a result, Jett says he would put his detention center up against any detention center in the United States. Since he has audited a few detention centers, he still maintains that his detention center is one of the best. The reason is because of the contacts that were made with NJDA and the help that other NJDA members have given him; the NJDA is an absolutely tremendous resource. Mr. Jett says the things he changed in the detention center are that they did not have a system in which the kids had to earn privileges. When kids came in they were given all the privileges that we had. Other issues were kids getting jumped into gangs; we had quite a few fights in the facility. Mr. Jett sent some of his officers to other facilities to see what they were doing and then they rewrote their behavior management system. They instituted a level system wherein the kids can earn more privileges. As a result, the detention center's critical incident rate dropped tremendously. Over the years, Mr. Jett stated that he has been able to refine the behavior management system. In the Leadership Challenge course of NJDA, one of the principles of that course was to challenge the process and enable others to act. Mr. Jett always asks his people to tell him if they see something they want to question, or ask why we are doing it, or please find out if there is a better way to do it? It is kind of like the Japanese model of management asking the low guy on the assembly line for his input because he is the one working in the trenches. In order to enable others to act Mr. Jett would allow his staff to try things even if he was not present. Jett wants them to change things to see if it works. A year ago, staff asked Mr. Jett for a small amount of money out of the budget to buy popcorn; he asked them what it was for and they informed him it was for movie night. The staff had been buying the popcorn out of their own pockets rewarding the kids who had gone through school the whole week without any write ups then they got a movie night with popcorn and soda pop. The incident rate dropped even lower, resulting in very few incidents. Another idea that the staff came up with is the book club in which the kids read a book and write a report by the end of the week. The staff read and graded the kids' work and the winner gets to pick out a candy bar from the employee's snack bar. These are examples of some of the things staff came up with; Mr. Jett lets them act and do the job. He does not like to micromanage because it is way too much work. All these examples exemplify the influence of the NJDA, whether it was the Leadership Challenge course or talking with other people and getting their ideas. Jett's juvenile detention center's average population is about thirty-two. They had a total of fourteen incidents for the year of 2017, compared to another facility whose average population is sixty and they had sixty incidents per month. Mr. Jett directly contributes their success to the influence of the National Juvenile Detention Association.

In speaking with Mr. Jett, the interviewer had some additional questions – it went like this:

Question: Have you noticed a positive change in any of the kids who entered and left your facility?

Mr. Jett: Yes, absolutely; there was a study about three maybe four years ago by the Council of Juvenile Correction Agencies that showed if a kid had a positive experience in a facility there is a less chance that kid recidivates, or gets into trouble again. I really think that it is true; we have a pretty low rate of readmission. It is less than a fifty percent rate; the adults have about a seventy-five percent rate. My staff does things with the kids, they bring in pets. I have taught the kids of Jamestown and Gettysburg; two weeks ago, I panned for gold with the kids. We do all kinds of things to expose the kids to new things; we have afterschool classes on healthy relationships, how to stop smoking and reducing the risk of teen pregnancies. We are trying everything we can to make them better when they leave than when they came in. We have a lot of good comments from kids, their parents and probation officers.

Question: Since you have been doing this type of work, have you had any of the kids return to thank you?

Steve: Yes, we had one not too long ago that I ran into who said he was doing good. Another one who had some pretty serious theft crimes whose father said he was doing good. It happens. One of the things in this business is we keep seeing our failures; they keep coming back and coming back. We do not always run into the kids that are doing good. We have had kids come back and bring baby pictures and some bring babies and say this is my family now. I run into kids in the store once in a while. I was in the Portland, Oregon airport and a kid came running up to me and told me how he was working in construction and doing well; he asked if some of my staff was still there? We have quite a bit.