Tom Stokes
President – National Juvenile Detention Association (NJDA)
1996-1998

Tom Stokes spent his entire career in juvenile justice working in one facility in New Jersey. Here’s how that story went. He was doing a paper on juvenile justice while attending the community college and working towards an Associate’s degree in criminal justice. While he was conducting interviews with the administration and staff at the local juvenile detention facility, the Superintendent of the facility offered him a part time job there. Mr. Stokes accepted the job, not knowing how it would work out. He spent the next 27 years working up the ranks and finally became the administrator there. He remained in this position until his retirement.

In 1977, Mr. Stokes was awarded the “line staff worker of the year” award from the NJDA. After attending the conference, which he thinks was in Oklahoma, he was overwhelmed with the camaraderie among detention workers from across the country. Mr. Stokes thought this organization was something he wanted to be part of, learn from, and use to enhance his career. Mr. Stokes stated that he was impressed that a national organization recognized the importance of the line staff workers. He believed, and often said, that adequately trained quality staff was the backbone of a detention facility.

During his presidency, Mr. Stokes always sought to address the needs of the membership. Issues in the field always seemed to be changing and meeting those changes was an ongoing challenge. Since the NJDA is a line staff driven organization, his goal was to do the best we could to meet their needs.

Nationally, Mr. Stokes stated that he thought quality staff training was the single most critical issue. Although there was, and still is, a wide range of issues, the NJDA always seemed to address what the membership was looking for. Knowing that not everyone was looking for training in the same areas, the NJDA provided various training from the most qualified professionals in the business. As with any President, providing quality training in the ever-
changing issues of juvenile detention was, and hopefully remains, the most significant contributor on the Association can make.

Dealing with the behaviors of gang members and youth with mental/physical health issues in the facilities was and continues to be a major issue. During my term as President, gangs were mostly associated with large urban facilities like L.A., Chicago, and the like. Now it seems gangs are an issue in even the most rural facilities. Suicide and the effects of drugs remain an issue, however, as the drugs change and become stronger and more difficult to detect, the physical and mental health issues associated with them also have become more difficult to detect and address in the facilities. Mr. Stokes thinks that the NJDA/NPJS has remained ahead of these issues.

Mr. Stokes believes the NJDA needs to keep up with the ever-changing needs of the line staff. New issues, new ways to address them, and maintaining a focus on the line staff needs is critical. After all, the line staff workers are the first to see these issues and need the tools and training to address them, whatever they may be.

A final thought from Mr. Stokes - One of the most enjoyable aspects of attending NJDA conferences was the learning that occurred outside the classroom. Talking with detention workers from across the country during breaks, at meals and at the end of the day was most beneficial. You could learn about different issues, different ways to address similar issues, and issues you have not thought of. This informal education was as helpful as the structured classes. And let’s not forget the importance of the NJDA committees whose contributions from committee members from across the country provided balance to the issues they address and present to the Executive Board for action. I only wish there was a way that facility budgets would allow more line staff workers to attend more NJDA/NPJS conferences.