Psychologist Elizabeth W. McKune, EdD, never imagined she would end up “behind the fence.” “If you had told me in graduate school I would end up working in a prison, I would have said, ‘Are you crazy?’” says McKune.

It was a chance comment from a student she was supervising at a chronic pain clinic that led McKune to the Kentucky State Reformatory. He mentioned that the prison system was opening a new medical unit and might need a psychologist. They did, and McKune entered the world of corrections in 1999.

Today she is assistant director for psychological services for the Kentucky Department of Corrections. Unlike many psychologists within the correctional system who address individual inmates’ psychological issues, McKune is working to help the system as a whole function better.

Growing influence

McKune’s role has evolved over her years with the Department of Corrections, with the target audience of her interventions growing bigger with each move up.

In her first job in the system, for example, McKune provided health psychology services to inmates in the reformatory’s medical unit and nursing home. She also led support groups designed to help offenders cope with conditions like hepatitis C and chronic pain.

When she launched the chronic pain group, McKune discovered that the materials were inadequate. “The traditional workbooks used examples like being stuck in traffic that just weren’t appropriate for this setting,” she says. She wrote her own workbook and facilitator’s guide, collected data and discovered that the group effectively reduced inmates’ depression, anxiety and somatization. “It’s important to consider the whole person when dealing with medical issues,” she says.

In her next position, McKune developed and coordinated psychological services for adult correctional institutions statewide. She also supervised psychologists in facilities across the state.

Afterward, McKune led the Division of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Organizational Developmental Services. There her focus was strategic planning and goal-setting.

With the state’s budget becoming ever more strained, she welcomed the opportunity to review the division’s programs and employee retention efforts. “The literature shows that employees who feel they’ve made a difference tend to stay where they are,” she says. To help achieve that goal, she guided each unit through the process of developing a vision and a plan for making it a reality.

Then the department created McKune’s current position. Her primary focus is to make sure what the division is doing really works. “Dollars are becoming tighter and tighter,” she says. “Legislators want to know that the dollars they spend are being used effectively.” McKune has led the charge when it comes to determining whether the division’s programs reduce symptoms and recidivism.

So far, she says, the evidence is very promising. Take the division’s re-integration program for severely mentally ill offenders returning to the community. Thanks to the program, the recidivism rate for these offenders has plummeted. Just five percent of the offenders who receive the program’s intensive case management end up back behind bars within two years, compared to the state’s
overall recidivism rate of 35 percent. “And these are offenders who would probably be more vulnerable, because they have more risk factors,” says McKune. The program won a 2009 Lilly Reintegration Award from Eli Lilly and Company.

Opportunities for psychologists

Working in a prison isn’t scary, McKune insists. “I get asked that all the time,” she says. “I have a lot of faith in the staff who work here.” Of course, you do have to pay attention to where you are, watch out for manipulation and avoid revealing personal information, she says, noting that some offenders are predators. “Offenders are like wallpaper,” she says. “They’re always there, listening and looking for opportunities.”

What McKune loves about her job isn’t just the chance to have a big impact but the variety it offers. A recent week included a trip to Frankfort, Kentucky, for system-wide meetings about re-entry, a day with the partners who help ease offenders’ transition back into the community and a visit with staff at a facility where inmates had burned down buildings during a riot.

“Kentucky is incarcerating people at a faster rate than any other state. We have to help these people change their lives to create safer communities for all of us.”

For psychologists doing more traditional work in prisons, there are other benefits. For one thing, many psychologists working in corrections can provide services to anyone who needs them and don’t have the hassle of dealing with third-party payers denying services. Inmates come to sessions because they have to, she explains. “You have a captive audience.”

The opportunities for psychologists are huge. “By 2011 or 2012, corrections is supposed to be the largest employer of psychologists in the country,” says McKune, a past president of the Kentucky Psychological Association.

Psychologists interested in corrections “should be good generalists first,” says McKune, recommending that they then seek more specialized training in health or forensic psychology. McKune herself earned a doctorate of education in counseling and personnel services from the University of Louisville in 1999. Her undergraduate degree was educational and counseling psychology, with an emphasis on business and industrial psychology.

She gained experience in health psychology through stints at pain centers and a gynecological practice and as director of the psychology, neuropsychology and brain injury program at a rehab center. There she supervised interdisciplinary teams of speech, occupational, recreational and physical therapists providing inpatient and outpatient services for brain injury patients.

“Integrated care is my passion,” says McKune, who will serve in 2010 as president-elect of the Brain Injury Alliance of Kentucky. In 2007, she helped the Kentucky Psychological Association develop an integrated care model to help combat the silo model that still dominates the state.

McKune is also helping to prepare the next generation of psychologists as a part-time faculty member at Spalding University’s Professional School of Psychology.

She encourages her students to consider corrections. McKune has developed a practicum rotation in the reformatory’s medical unit. She’s also developing an internship program. Noting that it was a student who got her into corrections in the first place, she now returns the favor: “I have brought a lot of them here,” she says.

McKune welcomes the help. “Kentucky is incarcerating people at a faster rate than any other state,” she says. “We have to help these people change their lives to create safer communities for all of us.”