

WEST VIRGINIA CORRECTIONS INMATES TRANSITION THROUGH JOBS WITH WVDOH

When it comes to highways, rehabilitation is a term we hear a lot in the summer. The long winter months take their toll on our roads, and the ten districts of the West Virginia Division of Highways (WVDOH) send out crews to repair that damage. But look closer and you will see another form of rehabilitation happening along our highways, as prison inmates wearing orange vests over beige or orange jumpsuits are working in a variety of functions. The rehabilitation of both roads and individuals dovetails in the efforts focused in the inmate worker program.

Prison inmates from correctional facilities located around the state go to work as part of the road crew for WVDOH in all 55 counties. The most visible function these inmates perform is litter pickup along Interstates. However, litter collection is but one of the jobs prison inmates carry out. They also patch roads, trim grass and weeds, cut trees, build concrete pads and even operate chainsaws. The basic limitations placed on the inmates are that they can't drive any vehicle nor can they operate equipment.

WVDOH's District 9 in Lewisburg employs inmates from the stringent environment of prison life at the Denmar Correctional Center. The oversight of the inmates is strict and requires a guard to accompany the workers on the job. In addition, worker's orders are deliberately sporadic so that no routine can allow for inmates to be met by others outside the prison with contraband. Fortunately, in the history of the work release program, no prisoner has ever tried to escape while working for WVDOH.

On the other side of the state, WVDOH's District 2, in Huntington, uses inmates from a work release center, which is a transitional facility for those leaving prison, designed to bring inmates back into the normal routines of a working life. The inmates develop their jobs skills and viability for when they are fully released and seeking jobs as they start their lives anew.

In the state capital region, WVDOH's District 1 employs a cross-section of prison inmates from a variety of environments to create eight work crews. Inmates from the Charleston Work Release center, like those in Huntington, make up two of the crews and inmates from the state's only women's prison, Lakin Correctional Center in Mason County, constitute two more. The remaining four work crews come from the Slayton Work Camp, a 48-bed minimum security unit that is part of the Mt. Olive Correctional Complex in Fayette County.

The West Virginia Division of Corrections reports that overall 200 individuals from twelve different institutions around the state participate in the inmate program: Eight correctional centers, which pay the inmates the prison work rate of \$1.50 per hour; and four work release centers located in urban areas that pay inmates \$5.80 an hour due to the transitional nature of their incarceration, and the availability of minimum wage jobs in those regions.

To give us some perspective on expenditure, Slayton Work Camp inmates worked a collective 86,623 hours for WVDOH in the fiscal year of 2014. That amount of time multiplied by the work rate of \$1.50 per hour equals to an annual expenditure of \$129,934.50. That amount is almost one-sixth what would be paid to the same number of workers making West Virginia's minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour.

In the 2013 fiscal year, inmates amassed 353,475 hours of work. That amount leaped to over 450,000 hours in the 2014 fiscal year by maintaining near the same amount of hours at previously participating institutions, and by adding the Salem Correctional Center, which transitioned from being a juvenile facility to an adult facility. Workers from Salem worked almost 100,000 hours for WVDOH in that period.

Some may contend that jobs are being taken away from workers and given to prison inmates in an effort to save money, but administrators of the program counter that they cannot fill the positions for this kind of work at a minimum wage salary. The jobs are largely unskilled and would not merit higher than minimum wage pay in the open job market. Moreover, by using the inmates for these lesser tasks, WVDOH workers are free to work on bigger responsibilities like road and bridge building, and major road repair, which in turn creates a better use of time and budget.

This hand-meet-glove approach is working brilliantly for West Virginia. The state cannot fill its positions for these workers, and this kind of work gives our inmates a sense of purpose, which helps us to prevent their return to the correctional system. By the time autumn comes, West Virginia's roads will have been repaired, and if all goes well, so will the self-identity of the state's prison inmate workers.