

## My Perspectives on Working with the Wisconsin Department of Corrections on Employment Services for Offenders

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I need to clarify that I am not speaking for the Wisconsin Department of Corrections today. I am very happy to share with the committee my experiences and the things I have learned after working for about ten years with DOC on employment and training programs for offenders. If the Committee would like to have more detailed information from the perspective of DOC, I would be happy to assist in arranging that. DOC has provided a booklet to us describing their reentry services. It is important to note in that booklet that 97% of Wisconsin's prisoners will be released back into our communities at some point in their lives. With almost 23,000 inmates in the state, this affords us some real opportunities to meet our workforce needs and address the worker shortages we have been hearing about. There is also a huge return-on-investment (ROI) if former prisoners become taxpaying citizens. The cost of incarcerating an adult is about \$30,000 per year. The cost of incarcerating a juvenile can be three times that according to a recent article in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel!!

It is also important to understand, in my experience, that there are two distinct parts to our state correctional system: the prison system itself, and "Community Corrections," which is made up of the agents who supervise offenders after they are released back into our communities. You can read in Secretary Raemisch's report that there are more than 71,000 individuals on supervision. This distinction is important because DOC has a policy called "no fraternization" which means that the moment an individual leaves a correctional facility, they can no longer have contact with staff inside. This policy, while beneficial in some ways, is a real jolt to the released offender, and there is often real discontinuity between the preparation for release done while still incarcerated and the actual implementation once freedom is restored.

Also, some offenders never go to prison, but rather they are sentenced just to community supervision. Many other offenders stay only a very short time in one or another of our prison facilities and then they are released, often under the supervision of a DOC agent. While our prisons do indeed offer a variety of training and services, Many prisoners do not stay long enough or stay in one facility long enough, to take advantage of those opportunities. When you look at the need for basic skills remediation for the prison population, it takes time to get people to where they need to be in order to secure good-paying employment.

A quick overview: I am familiar with several of the state's correctional institutions and I want to describe my experience. The Bay Area Workforce Development Board has had a program called "Windows to Work" with the Oshkosh Correctional Institution for about 10 years now. I will speak more about Windows to Work in a moment. I also have several times visited the Kettle Moraine Correctional Institution near Fond du Lac, and I have made some efforts to connect area employers with the training services, especially

welding and masonry, that are available there. Both Oshkosh and Kettle Moraine are *medium security* facilities.

*Windows to Work* is a unique program that is co-funded by my organization and the Wisconsin Department of Corrections for prisoners at the Oshkosh facility who return to Brown, Manitowoc and Sheboygan counties. The program bridges the gap between what goes on inside a state prison and the needs of an offender after release. Case managers from our contractor, Family Services of Northeast Wisconsin, meet with about 25 individuals each year while they are still incarcerated and then follow through with them during the reintegration process. Program funds also help to fill in some of the gaps that are needed to stabilize housing and maintain employment. Here is an example: one of our program enrollees left prison during the winter months with no winter clothes. The case manager was able to meet the newly released offender in the parking lot of the prison with winter clothes.

The Green Bay Correctional Institution is a *maximum security* prison and that distinction in level changes some of what you can do with the inmates there. I am pleased to tell you that I have been invited to be the commencement speaker at the GED/HSED graduation ceremony at the Green Bay prison on October 14. I have participated as a guest speaker in the *Choices and Possibilities* class there. We also have a very active group called the Brown County Corrections Relations Board that brings together a diverse group of area stakeholders including law enforcement, program staff, state political leaders, religious groups, and others to discuss issues of common interest and build collaboration. That board has generated some real results and created a very positive partnership. It is led by the Green Bay Warden, Bill Pollard.

In Green Bay we have our most organized effort to work with DOC. We conduct bi-monthly job center orientation sessions for offenders at the Northeast Wisconsin Job Center in Green Bay. The Community Corrections agents refer appropriate individuals under their supervision to the orientation session so that we can work more closely together to help these men and women become employed. There are several weekly workshops at the job center that promote employment and provide individual job seeking assistance. In addition, there is a weekly employment workshop specifically for individuals with conviction records that focuses on some of the unique needs of this population. Several of our other job centers also work with job seekers coming out of state and local prison facilities. In Green Bay we also have a Circle of Support group that brings volunteers into the process of promoting successful integration upon release. I facilitate the Steering Committee for the Green Bay Circle of Support.

There is a great model at the Sanger B. Powers Correctional Institution located just west of Green Bay. Sanger B. Powers is a *minimum security* facility with a strong work program administered by good people such as Gail Kowaleski and Onie Walker. About 70% of the 120 or so inmates at that facility go out to work every day. Employers such as Bay Shipbuilding and Bayland Builders regularly hire inmates to work for them. A former board member of mine, David Lisle from Wausaukee Composites, has been working with Gail Kowaleski for about a year now and is very pleased with that effort that brings a group up workers from Sanger B. Powers up to Wausaukee every day. Gail

and other staff at Sanger B. Powers are able to address a variety of needs: helping inmates get drivers licenses and Social Security cards are important ones, in addition to dealing with child support arrearages and transportation barriers, so that inmates are ready to go to work and maintain it upon release.

My organization also funds a program called "Transitions" for juveniles in the state Lincoln Hills facility who are returning to our Bay Area counties. Again, the program works to bridge the gap between inside and outside so that there is continuity and consistency. We serve about 22 young people a year and we have had some wonderful success with them. There is a real focus on getting the participants into postsecondary training at our technical colleges. One young man, Tyson, was a real success story two years ago when he graduated from a one-year program in Industrial Mechanics at NWTC and entered the workforce making close to \$40,000 a year after only two semesters of training.

I have a lot more stories to tell and only a few more minutes. Working with the Wisconsin Department of Corrections has been interesting and challenging, and it is ongoing. Here are some observations that I hope you will find useful:

1. The Corrections system is complex and challenging. It works with some very difficult and even dangerous individuals. DOC's first and foremost responsibility is for public safety. Training and employment efforts come second.
2. Reintegration efforts that result in successfully returning an inmate to one of our communities provide a demonstrable return-on-investment for the public in the use of their tax dollars.
3. Research shows that there are four key elements to successful transition after incarceration: Housing, Employment, Treatment, and Support.
4. Successful efforts will require a statewide collaborative effort since an individual may be incarcerated far away from the community he/she will return to. I know how to get employment services to people from my area, but over half the prisoners in the Green Bay facility will eventually return to Milwaukee.
5. There is a real need to establish continuity between the preparation for release during incarceration and the implementation of that plan once release happens. The corrections bureaucracy is not set up to do this, although there are some good initial efforts being made within DOC to change this. Our *Windows to Work* and *Transitions* programs as well as some of the work done at Sanger B. Powers clearly demonstrate the value of system change for a smoother transition rather than an abrupt one upon release.
6. Job Centers, technical colleges and other educational institutions can be important partners in this effort. Agencies, even different state offices, do not always create partnerships easily or readily. Successful partnerships take resources and effort. They need to be supported by innovative policy at the

department level. I would recommend a statewide, multi-agency effort to redesign reintegration policy in Wisconsin. Right now, DOC is trying to do this on its own.

7. Many local communities are enacting residency restrictions for sex offenders through local ordinances. These ordinances are widely opposed by DOC staff and local law enforcement, but it is difficult to go against such ordinances politically. The result is that the public has a false sense of security and released sex offenders go underground so that law enforcement loses track of them. State action is required to stop this unproductive political action.