



## **NEWS RELEASE**

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

### **Detention Center program helps change lives, keeps former inmates from returning to jail**

GEORGETOWN COUNTY — For a number of years now, the Georgetown County Detention Center has gone above and beyond its role of simply housing inmates. Since the introduction of the Georgetown County community re-entry program in 2007, the detention center serves as a place where inmates can learn the kinds of skills they'll need to get a fresh start after their sentences have been served and avoid the pitfalls that lead so many back to jail.

The program tracks participants for one year after their release date and, so far, officials have observed no recidivism — a major problem around the nation — of its graduates.

"They're all working in jobs, getting married, having families and living their lives," said Debbie Barr, re-entry program director.

In more than 20 years as Georgetown County Sheriff, A. Lane Cribb said he has observed many times how hard it can be for someone getting out of jail to make a fresh start.

"What happens is they get out with no training to get a job and no self-esteem," he said. "That's what we're trying to fix with this program. It lets them know they can do something and then it helps them do it."

More than 120 inmates have completed the program. Only seven were eliminated from the program for not following rules. The program is completely voluntary and to remain enrolled, inmates are required to follow stringent behavioral guidelines. They have to be willing to work hard and show commitment to the program.

It's the only program of its kind in the state, though Charleston is trying to start one and Barr regularly fields calls from other cities and states interested in doing the same.

The program was introduced by Cribb with the aid of a grant. He recruited Barr to implement the plan and manage the program, and has been extremely pleased with the results.

"The numbers show it's been very successful and it has kept growing," Cribb said. "We've had so many of the ones who have gone through the program to come back and thank us for doing it. It's a good program and we've got a lot of good people that make it possible."

Participants in the program do assigned labor all day, just like all other inmates. But in the evenings they go to class learning valuable trades such as construction, welding, barbering, HVAC repair, small engine repair and automotive skills. The program also provides WorkKeys training, which helps jobseekers make career decisions and compare their skills to those required by in-demand jobs. In short, the program tackles head-on a major cause of recidivism: difficulty finding work after being released from jail, especially if the jobseeker has a felony on his or her record.

“It’s so wonderful; these guys are coming out of jail after five- to 25-year sentences and they’re getting very good jobs because of the skills they’re learning here,” Barr said. “Some of them are even getting jobs lined up before they’re released. We work with them to set up interviews with employers and help them get their résumés ready. A lot of times they’ll be released from jail on a Monday and start work on a Wednesday or Thursday.”

A number of inmates who complete the program actually go on to find work with Georgetown County’s Public Services Department. The department utilizes inmate labor for a number of tasks, from sorting recyclable materials at the county landfill to construction.

“We couldn’t do the amount of work we do without the inmates,” said Ray Funnye, the county’s director of public services. “We’ve got a great paid crew, there’s no doubt, but every day we get new assignments and the list gets longer and longer.”

Over the years, he’s found that many of the inmates are already skilled and more are willing to learn. Those who prove themselves valuable to the department have made the transition to paid employees very successfully and have become valued members of Funnye’s team.

“We are hiring them and we’re hiring them with great satisfaction,” Funnye said. “These guys are committed to their jobs. They demonstrated that as inmates and continue to do so as employees. I go to a job site and inspect what’s being done and they are fully engaged. They’re very inquisitive and often offer suggestions on how to improve the process.”

Program graduates say the self-confidence and strong work ethic they build in the program make as much a difference as the trade skills. John (whose last name is being withheld to preserve his privacy) finished the program three years ago and now works in a job he loves, which he’s had almost since he was released.

“When I was 19, I started getting into drugs and selling drugs,” John said. “I got lost and mixed up in that whole lifestyle,” he said.

He was sentenced to five years and spent more than two years in the community re-entry program.

“I think one of the biggest things about the program is the way (Barr) treats everybody,” John said. “She doesn’t take no for an answer; she just believes you can do something, and that kind of rubs off on the guys. That kind of faith means a lot to someone who has been in trouble. When you leave, you feel confident, like nothing can hold you back.”

That was a feeling John needed during those early weeks after his release.

For those in John’s position, now free and trying to rebuild their lives, the program switches gears from education to making sure they have what they need to survive outside the walls of the detention center. Barr works with the Georgetown County Human Services Collaborative to help newly released inmates get assistance, such as funds to pay for their first month’s rent while they look for a job. But she’s also there to offer advice if they find themselves facing a difficult situation or need guidance with something as simple as what they should wear to a wedding.

“They can call me seven days a week and it means a lot to them to know they have someone they can turn to for help; someone who’s on their side,” Barr said.

For many relearning how to live independently and make decisions for themselves that kind of support goes a long way toward being successful and avoiding going back to jail.

Barr is extremely proud of her program and every person who has come through it and wants to see it continue to grow and change lives. With approval from the Department of Corrections, the program just recently started working with young offenders. And as more

people learn about the successes of the program its resources and the kinds of help it can offer slowly increase. The program relies entirely on donations and is always in need of people willing to share their individual skills, as well as materials such as computers and accessories (power cords, hard drives, etc.), and other kinds of equipment on which to practice hands-on skills in the classroom.

“We always need volunteers,” Barr said. For example, she currently has two participants studying graphic design who need a volunteer to help them create a portfolio. For more information about the community re-entry program, or to make a donation or become a volunteer, contact Barr, (843) 545-3420 or [dbarr@gtcounty.org](mailto:dbarr@gtcounty.org).

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