

Prison Reform: A Course Correction

By Cynthia Barnett - 5/1/2009

WEB EXCLUSIVE

Jailhouse Conversions [Video]

Fact: Prisoners at faith- and character-based correctional facilities are less likely to return to prison than other inmates. Prison "is a very good time for God to get your attention -- when he's got all your attention," says Allison DeFoor, who ministers to inmates at Wakulla Correctional Institution in Crawfordville.

Below, watch a video report on why such institutions work.

<http://floridatrend.com/article.asp?aID=50954>



Skill Building: Inmates learn masonry work at Baker Correctional Institution, one of two Florida prisons that are now "transitional" facilities for inmates nearing release. Inmates who get a GED and a vocational certificate while in prison are nearly 20% less likely to return to prison.

[Photo: John M. Fletcher]

In a classroom tucked behind the razor-wire-topped fences of Wakulla Correctional Institution in Crawfordville, a convicted thief named Darryl Simpson is teaching a class that any high school or college student in Florida would do well to take: Credit and debt management.

Today's lesson: Steering clear of debt-consolidation companies. Simpson's lively teaching style has his fellow inmates engaged and outraged. One man says he'll write his wife to give her the scoop on credit counseling.

Simpson's course is among 47 business, general-education, vocational, religion and substance-abuse classes now offered at Wakulla. In addition to inmate instructors, the prison relies on nearly 1,000 community volunteers, from Tallahassee business executives to area religious leaders. All courses are "ultimately geared toward personal growth and character development," says Warden Russell Hosford. "And it doesn't cost the state a dime."

Wakulla, which became a "faith- and character-based" institution in 2006, is one of four such facilities in Florida, reflecting how a new approach toward rehabilitation and life after release is spreading broadly through the Florida Department of Corrections. In addition to the faith-based prisons, there are also two new designated "re-entry" facilities at which inmates get education and substance abuse treatment along with life and job training before they're released.

The change is striking for a state that for decades has defined "corrections" narrowly: Build more prisons and lock 'em up.

32.8% of all released inmates return to prison within three years of release.

More than **46%** of Florida prison inmates have been in Florida prisons before.

15% of inmates have been in the Florida prison system three or more times.

Florida has persisted in that definition despite some inconvenient truths, beginning with the fact that while it locks more people up for longer periods, it cannot throw away the key. Nine out of 10 criminals serve their sentences and are released back into their communities. One in three of those released inmates then commits more crime and is back in prison within three years.

Statistics show that recidivism rates fall dramatically for inmates who receive GEDs, vocational training and especially substance-abuse treatment behind bars. But Florida has ignored those facts in managing its prisons, spending less than 2% of its 2008 corrections budget, for example, on educational, vocational and substance abuse programs.

"From a public-safety perspective, the No. 1 question I'm focusing on is this: Are we sending inmates back into a life of crime?" says Walter A. McNeil, Florida's Department of Corrections secretary. "We believe there's a smarter way of looking at crime and punishment and incarceration."



Money Management: Convict Darryl Simpson teaches credit and debt management to other inmates at Wakulla Correctional Institution.

[Photo: Jeffrey Camp]

McNeil is not the first state official to push reform. Under former Gov. Jeb Bush, Florida made Lawtey Correctional Institution the nation's first faith-based facility in 2003. Hillsborough Correctional Institution, a facility for women, became faith-based in 2004. The Glades Correctional facility becomes faith-based in May.

Wakulla, since converting to a faith-based institution in 2006, has become the world's largest, attracting keen interest from inmates — more than 5,000 are on a waiting list seeking transfers there.

Average Florida Inmate as of June 30, 2008	
98,192	Florida's inmate population
93%	are male
49.8%	are black
39%	are white
10.6%	are Hispanic
36.9	average age
6.9	average grade level
14.3	years average sentence

A 2007 Urban Institute study found six-month recidivism rates for Lawtey and Hillsborough inmates significantly lower than those for inmates outside the faith-based programs. Initial recidivism rates for Wakulla inmates — the Wakulla population includes more who serve time for serious offenses — are reportedly less than 10%, but DOC officials say the data are incomplete and can't be compared conclusively against figures showing 32.8% of inmates statewide are back in the system within three years. The DOC says it will release figures on the long-term recidivism rates of Lawtey inmates later this year.

Despite the programs' popularity and the initial anecdotal and statistical results showing promise, Florida's politicians have remained wary of reform efforts, equating reform with being soft on crime. But a new voice is pushing an overhaul of the system over the next few years: The state's business community. "Our members make up one of the largest providers of tax revenues in the state of Florida, and we are funding a system that ensures people will recidivate, and that is a waste of our money," says Barney Bishop, president of Associated Industries of Florida.

AIF, the Florida Chamber and TaxWatch have all warned that the state's prison population is out of control. Between 2004 and 2008, the population shot up from just under 82,000 inmates to more than 100,000, in part because of the Legislature's tough stance on crime in the 1990s, when Gov. Charlie Crist earned the moniker "Chain-Gang Charlie" as a state senator. In response to high-profile crimes, Florida lawmakers abolished gain time, which allowed inmates to shave time off their sentences with good behavior. They required that all prisoners serve 85% of their sentence regardless of crime and mandated prison time for even minor violations of probation.

The policies keep criminals off the street in the short run, but the state is learning there are financial limits. Florida now spends nearly \$3 billion a year on corrections, more than it allocates to the state's universities. Amid the current budget crisis, the DOC faces the same financial pressures as other state agencies. Corrections officials say unless Florida can lower its recidivism rate, the state must build 20 prisons — at \$100 million each — to make room for new inmates and ex-cons who revolve back into the system.

Other states facing similar pressures, including traditionally conservative Kansas and Texas, have saved hundreds of millions of dollars by shifting money from new beds to community re-entry and rehabilitation programs — without seeing an increase in crime. Florida's corrections culture has been slower to change. Last year, for example, the Council of State Governments sought an invitation to make Florida a learning site for its Justice Reinvestment project and got supportive letters from Crist and then-Senate President Ken Pruitt. But Marco Rubio, House Speaker at the time, warned in a letter that "there are certain policy options that the House does not wish to explore and will not support," from any form of gain time to any extension of prison confinement to community-based programs.

" 'Do the crime, do the time,' is fine," says Steve Seibert, vice president and director of policy at the Collins Center for Public Policy, which is leading reform efforts and plans a major statewide summit on criminal justice in November. "But we have forgotten that other precept that you actually can 'pay your debt to society.' Ex-offenders do, and then continue paying for the rest of their lives — the punishment never seems to end."

In addition to saving money, reformers want to make the system fairer, for example, for those who need services rather than incarceration, such as non-violent offenders who are mentally ill. (Half of the women in Florida's prisons are mentally ill.)

Most important, they say, is reducing the likelihood that former inmates will commit new crimes. At Baker Correctional Institution in rural Sanderson west of Jacksonville, Warden Melody Flores puts it bluntly. Which stranger would you rather have sitting in the same movie theater as your daughter, she asks: The recently released inmate with a drug-abuse problem, no education and no job, turned loose with nothing but \$100 and

a bus ticket? Or, the former inmate who'd earned a GED, got help for his drug problem and came home to start working?



Safety: Warden Melody Flores at Baker Correctional Institution thinks it's essential to reduce the likelihood that former inmates will commit new crimes: The public is safer if inmates get help with job training and substance abuse counseling before they leave prison. [Photo: John M. Fletcher]

The DOC recently converted Baker, along with Demilley Correctional in Polk County, into "transitional prisons" that are geared specifically to prepare inmates for re-entry into society. Traditionally, inmates released from Baker's squat, institutional-yellow buildings were dropped off with a bus ticket at the Lake City Greyhound station. "Within 100 yards of every Greyhound station in Florida is a saloon, a hooker and a drug dealer — all trying to get the new releases' \$100," says Dan Eberlein, administrator of the DOC's substance abuse services program in the Office of Re-entry.

Under the new policy, Baker gets inmates who are within 18 months of release and will be returning to homes in northeast Florida. The prison's proximity to Jacksonville, which sees nearly 1,900 ex-offenders a year return to its neighborhoods, makes Baker an ideal place to show how a focus on re-entry can impact crime.

\$100 million - Cost of a new prison

\$55.09 a day - Cost to house an inmate at a major publicly run prison

\$40.92 - for operations

\$13.02 - for health services

\$1.15 - for education services

88% of Florida's inmates will be released at some point.

The state's inmate population has increased by almost **20%** since 2004.

The population grew by

5.8% in 2008 alone and passed the 100,000 mark in December.

Republican Sheriff John Rutherford and other Jacksonville officials have put in place some of the most progressive re-entry policies in Florida — all in response to the county's soaring violent crime and murder rates. The most impressive program, faith-based Operation New Hope, was selected by the White House in 2003 to develop a federally funded re-entry model called Ready4Work. Three years later, the program, which focuses on helping ex-

offenders find long-term employment, stable housing, substance-abuse treatment and strong community/family relationships, had a 5% recidivism rate, compared to the countywide rate of 54%.

In addition to substance-abuse treatment, reading instruction and GED courses, the Baker prison's inmates will have access to job-training and certificate-granting programs in bricklaying, cabinetmaking, electrical work and plumbing. The Jacksonville Sheriff's Office hopes to employ a full-time resource specialist at the prison to begin working with offenders a year before they're freed. When they leave prison, rather than being dumped at the bus station, they'll be driven to a Jacksonville re-entry portal staffed by the Sheriff's Office, where they'll check in with the police and meet with probation officers, drug counselors, religious volunteers who can help with clothes and housing and potential employers. "This is beyond anything anybody's ever done in corrections in this state," says DOC administrator Eberlein.

McNeil wants a transitional facility in each of the DOC's four districts. He has told lawmakers he will hold back on plans for new prisons while the department continues to gather data on its community re-entry programs.



But some advocates for prison reform say it's moving too slowly — acknowledging that McNeil has an uphill battle in changing Florida's correctional culture, which has deep roots in Starke and other parts of rural Florida that have grown to rely on prisons as an industry. Allison DeFoor is a longtime GOP political operative and former Monroe County sheriff who became convinced of the power of reform after becoming an Episcopal priest and ministering to Wakulla inmates. The DOC's value system, he says, "wants more prisoners, no scrutiny and no accountability."

Former DOC Secretary Jim McDonough, who also tried to push reform and is still trying, says the cultural issues are "bigger than the DOC — much bigger." Change requires buy-in from the judiciary system, which has expanded drug courts and mental-health courts, but most of all needs backing from lawmakers and the citizens who elect them.

That's not an easy sell these days. Florida Department Law Enforcement data show crime rates are at a 30-year low. Is it because the state has incarcerated more people or because of a period of relative economic prosperity? Anecdotally, police say they've seen an uptick in crime since Florida's economic decline. At the same time, the public's sympathies may lie more with jobless Floridians without criminal records than with former inmates seeking to re-enter society. McNeil, the former chief of police in Tallahassee, says he doesn't dismiss those points of view. He also wants to make sure victims have a strong voice in re-entry policies and procedures. The issue is more complex, he says, than either side makes it out to be. "There's no question that 20% or more of the inmates who come to us need to stay locked up for the rest of their lives because they are a danger to society," he says. "But the truth is that 80% of them are coming back into communities — and they are committing crimes again and again."

Leaders at the Florida Chamber of Commerce and Associated Industries respond that the idea is not to focus only on today, but to put in place policies that will allow Florida to prosper in the future. They imagine a future of lower spending on prisons; a single-digit recidivism rate; and job-training for inmates targeted at the needs of Florida businesses in 2020, 2030 and beyond.

"In the heyday, if we had \$100 million, it was easier to build a new prison than it was to work on this problem," says Tony Carvajal, executive vice president of the Florida Chamber Foundation, the research arm of the Chamber of Commerce. "We don't have that option anymore. But at the end of this, we don't just want to balance the budget. We want to build a better state."



Allison DeFoor, a former sheriff of Monroe County, is now an Episcopal priest who ministers to inmates at the Wakulla Correctional Institution. Since Wakulla became faith-based in 2006, fewer than 10% of inmates released from the facility have returned to prison. [Photo: Jeffrey Camp]

Closing the Revolving Door

Inmates who had a GED at release are **7.9%** less likely to return to prison than inmates overall.

Inmates who had a vocational certificate at release were less **14%** likely to return.

Inmates who had both a GED and a vocational certificate at release were less likely **18.3%** to return.

Inmates who completed a substance abuse program were **56%** less likely to return than felony offenders with substance abuse problems who did not receive treatment.

Why They're in Jail

20.5% - Drug offenses (20,071)

14.3% - Burglary offenses (14,073)

12.5% - Murder/ manslaughter (12,296)

0.5% - Violent offenses (48,804)

Ready to Work

As President Obama campaigned in Jacksonville last summer, Kevin Gay challenged him: "What if I told you I could save you \$30 billion in your first year of office?" Obama listened as Gay explained how 1,000 former inmates in his Operation New Hope and its employment arm, Ready4Work, had a 5% recidivism rate, compared to the countywide rate of 54%. "We've been successful because we've figured out what the issue is," says Gay, whom Obama tapped for his transition team on the Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships Council. "The issue is not bad people — the issue is poverty."

Operation New Hope has garnered strong support from Jacksonville's business community. The project, which has become something of a human resources department for businesses, offers job training, background checks, drug testing and the like. Businesses report a 65% retention rate for New Hope employees.

The Jacksonville City Council passed an ordinance requiring the city and its contractors to provide "full and fair consideration" to qualified ex-offenders and has made incentives available to private businesses that hire former inmates. "The incentives part is icing on the cake," Gay says. "What employers mainly want to know is whether the employee is reliable, on time, dressed properly and has the right attitude. That's just what we're bringing them — we're bringing them someone ready to work."