

Jailhouse Redemption

PLUS Program Promotes Faith, Character

Instead of stealing, they are creating handmade quilts for those in need. Instead of throwing punches, they are reading books like “The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People,” the “Bible” and the “Koran.”

An Indiana Department of Correction (IDOC) initiative is using faith- and character-based curriculum to empower offenders to become productive members of society. Four years after its debut, the Indiana Purposeful Living Units Serve (PLUS) program is posting positive results: Fewer graduates are returning to incarceration compared to the general prison population.

Participants live in a separate dormitory during the 16-month program that includes classes and community service projects. Involvement is strictly voluntary, and no sentence reductions or other privileges are rewarded.

Since the pilot program was launched in three facilities in 2005, it has expanded throughout the state to 16 participating correctional locations (12 adult and four juvenile). Approximately 1,200 beds are designated for the program, and those stay filled, notes the Rev. Stephen Hall, IDOC director of religious studies.

Faith in change

The program is the result of legislation co-sponsored by Rep. Eric Turner (R-Marion) and Rep. Peggy Welch (D-Bloomington) in 2005.

“We believed that for those men and women who are incarcerated that if we don’t help change their hearts, then no matter how much educational opportunity we give them, they may not come out changed,” Turner explains.

As a member of the House Ways and Means Committee along with Turner, Welch notes the program also has fiscal value. PLUS should ultimately save the state money as fewer inmates return and prison population growth is slowed.

More than 2,000 adults have graduated from the PLUS program, and more than 225 have been released from prison, Hall estimates.

While the program is still too new to track recidivism rates (IDOC defines recidivism as the number of returning offenders three years after release), Hall says the return rate for graduates so far is significantly lower than that of the general population.

Data showed a return rate of 9.25% for PLUS graduates. Most returned for technical parole violations (such as failing to receive permission to purchase a car or failure to check in with a parole officer), opposed to new crimes, Hall notes.

Comparatively, the statewide recidivism rate for 2008 was 37.4%.

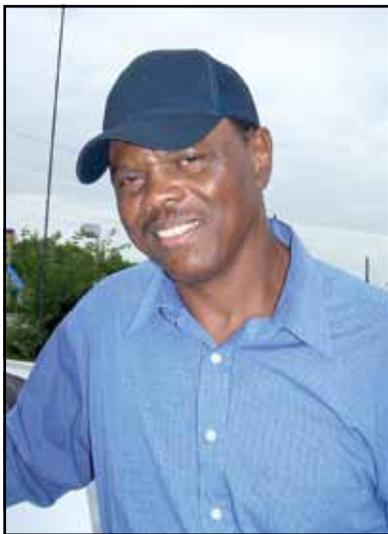
Three pillars comprise the program:

1. **Community concept:** Living together in a community allows participants to develop a positive culture in which they hold each other accountable and offer support, Hall asserts.
2. **Faith and character curriculum:** “Faith is not the content so much as it is the context in which people are working on their issues. We don’t teach religion in there,” he explains. Classes focus, for example, on taking responsibility for actions, acknowledging errors in thinking and self understanding.
3. **Transition back into the community:** Volunteers serve as mentors to offenders as they take steps to be successful after release.

Participants put their lessons into practice through community service projects – a required part of the curriculum. “A lot of times they’ve only done things for themselves, and nothing for anyone else,” Hall observes.

While the program’s classes provide the foundation for change, Hall has found transformation really takes place when individuals start serving others.

At the Wabash Valley Correctional Facility, quilting has become the program’s primary community service project. After a volunteer taught the skill, inmates offered new ways to use quilting to give back.



Samuel Young credits an Indiana Department of Correction program for helping him lead a productive life after being released from prison last winter.

By Candace Gwaltney

“This was a bunch of maximum security guys down there (serving) a very long time – big, burly creatures with tattoos all over their bodies – and they are sitting there making a quilt,” Hall says. “They got really good at it.”

A quilt is now given to a family member for every Indiana soldier who is killed in Iraq or Afghanistan. Another project provided blankets to sheriff’s departments to use in emergencies.

Finding new direction

Samuel Young has spent approximately half of his 54 years behind bars. He first entered the system at age 13, and says he’s spent 27 years incarcerated (with the last stint for burglary). In December, he walked out of the Pendleton Correctional Facility a changed man. He already had an interview set up to work for the same entity that put him in prison – the state of Indiana. He had hope, a set of values and faith.

Young graduated from Pendleton’s first PLUS class.

“When I first started this walk (of faith) in the penitentiary and the PLUS program, my name was Rev. Do Wrong,” Young shares. “Everybody in the yard called me Rev. Do Wrong, because they knew all the wrong I did. And they still would see me do some wrong, so they knew I couldn’t be all the way right. That went on for three years. Then the last three and a half years it changed to Rev. Do Right because they started to see changes in me.”

Stopping bad habits was a challenge for Young, but moral standards, such as humility and honesty, taught in the PLUS program helped him focus, he says. “I hadn’t been an honest person, and I had no integrity whatsoever. I began to apply those principles, and they began to work in my life to make different changes.”

The day before Young was released from prison, one of the PLUS workers approached him in the yard with a letter. He was instructed to take that letter to Jim Atterholt in downtown Indianapolis.

Within a couple weeks, Young landed a reception job at the Indiana Department of Insurance (IDOI) – a feat he describes as “a miracle from God.”

Atterholt, a former state representative and current commissioner of the Indiana Utility Regulatory Commission, first learned about the PLUS program from his friendship with Welch and Turner. His own religious convictions led him to hire a PLUS graduate while he was commissioner of the IDOI.

“I, for a long period of time, have understood the importance of reducing the recidivism rate of those incarcerated. And quite frankly, I think the only way we can do that is if we give folks an opportunity when they get out to change and better their lives,” Atterholt shares.

Young worked at IDOI for a few months before starting a business.

“If God didn’t give me the platform, the stepping stone, through Jim Atterholt and the IDOI, who knows where I would have been today because I wouldn’t have stayed out here and starved. That job got me through until I could start my own thing,” he proclaims.

Young now has his own handyman services company. He



PLUS participants at the Wabash Valley Correctional Facility sewed quilts to honor Hoosier soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan. One offender summed up the community service project: “A quilt is just a bunch of scraps that aren’t much use on their own, but together they have beauty and purpose. Just like us.”

also invented a tool called the R.T.C. (roof, tile, carpet) stripper, named because the device can be used to remove all three materials. He hopes to produce the stripper with the ultimate goal of creating jobs and opportunities for others like his experience at the IDOI, he says.

Atterholt says Young was not the only person who benefited. "His (Young's) attitude and his spirit and his thankfulness to have an opportunity had a tremendous impact on the existing employees at the Department of Insurance in a very positive way."

Opportunity for success

As the PLUS program's reputation grows, Welch hopes more stories like Young's emerge. The curriculum offers lessons that transfer to qualities of a good employee such as leadership, values, respect, resisting temptation and controlling tempers, she notes.

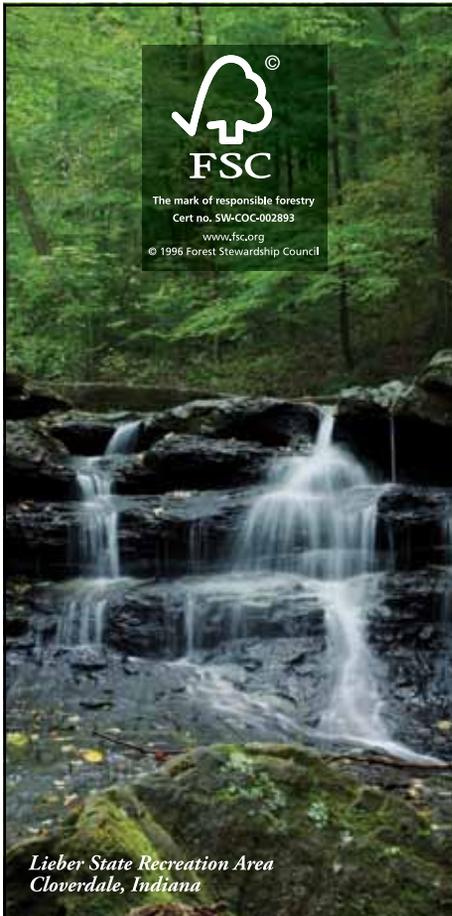
Turner agrees. "What we don't want them to do – we don't want them to come back (to prison). ... We've all made mistakes, and they have too. They got caught, they paid their debt and now they need to go lead productive lives."

In August, the Indiana PLUS program received national recognition from the American Correctional Chaplains Association with the American Correctional Association (the accrediting agency for correctional facilities). PLUS received the Chaplain Offender Program Award, which is given each year to a program that has demonstrated effectiveness through outcome-based measures.

"There's a huge financial cost of incarceration, but clearly there is an even greater cost to society by repeat offenders. If we can do anything to eliminate that, I think we are certainly bettering our society," Atterholt surmises.

INFORMATION LINK

Resource: Indiana Department of Correction at www.in.gov/ido



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