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Reducing recidivism, one chair at a time

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(view clip)

WESTOVER -- Crediting a prison inmate for a night's sleep is less of a stretch for the student sprawled on their bed in a Salisbury University dorm.

Both prisoners and students can have sweet dreams. Loss of half its \$1 million fund balance cushion isn't slowing Maryland Correctional Enterprise's production of top-grade dormitory mattresses, work stations or restored furnishings for the 5,000-bed campus and other government buildings in the state.

By last year's figures, the \$7.2 million industry employs a record 2,000 skilled inmates -- 220 of them at the Eastern Correctional Institution in Westover -- in furniture restoration and textiles jobs that train and build a work ethic for a productive life on the outside.

In effect, ECI inmates literally put the clothes on the backs of some state workers, cushion their seats and refinish their desks, too, says assistant warden Ronald Dryden, showcasing the MCE operation at the 3,300-inmate or more medium security prison.

"For many inmates, this is their first, full-time job," Dryden said, underscoring that a requirement to joining the MCE program is to be infraction-free over time and have a high school diploma or GED equivalency. "They make furnishings for college dorms, refurbish mahogany furniture -- anything that goes in a state building."

The program is based in Jessup and is ninth among the nation's Top 10 prison industries for sales and employees, supplying even meat products, U.S. flags, produce and laundry to state agencies, buildings and government employees throughout Maryland, said Mark Vernarelli, spokes-man for the DPSCS.

Budget crunch

The Maryland Board of Public Works made state budget adjustments last week that either cut or transferred \$280 million to help make up for a \$700 million financial hole, a measure that for DPSCS transfers \$500,000 from MCE's fund balance to the DPSCS general fund. The cut also eliminated \$588,000 for correctional officer retention bonuses.

"MCE does not look to cut its operations, because its core mission is to provide jobs and job skill training for inmates to make them more likely to become successful taxpaying citizens when they leave prison," Vernarelli said.

The half-million-dollar fund balance transfer likely would mean a possible delay in the purchase of

new vehicles and equipment, or plant expansions at other locations, he said.

Beyond bars

Statistics show societal benefits of MCE: Inmates who worked at least one year in the program have a prison return rate half that of the general prison population, he said.

"In other words, the overall recidivism rate for Maryland inmates...is about 50 percent," Vernarelli said. "For inmates who worked at MCE, the rate of return was 24 percent; inmates who worked for MCE are far less likely to return to prison than those who did not."

Inmate Tommy Hughes said earning a GED, a high school equivalency diploma, and skills training are tools necessary for success after prison. He and other inmates spoke about life behind bars at a media open house last week. "If you don't have a plan, you plan to fail," he told a group of journalists. "Most guys fall back on what they know -- the streets."

Diverse work

Uniforms worn by workers at the State Highway Administration and prison correctional officers are the handiwork of participating ECI inmates, Vernarelli says.

"They restore and reupholster furniture, produce textile products and handle laundry for correctional and (Maryland Department of) Health and Mental Hygiene facilities," he said. "Salisbury University is among the colleges that purchase furniture restored by MCE inmates."

The MCE imprint is elsewhere -- from wheel chairs manufactured at the Western Correctional Institution in Cumberland to cages for oyster spats at the Eastern Pre-release Unit in Church Hill.

"MCE inmates supply meat products at the Hagerstown plant, women inmates in Jessup sew flags," Vernarelli said. "The prison industry in Maryland these days means far more than making license plates -- which inmates still do in Jessup."

Bay grass picked last year by Poplar Hill Pre-Release inmates in Quantico were grown in a Hagerstown MCE greenhouse. This summer, inmates on the Eastern Shore will plant them along bay islands for shoreline restoration.

The Department of Natural Resources purchases the cases for oyster replenishing in the Chesapeake Bay and tributaries, and ECI spokesman Mike Miller recalled the initial 1,050 oyster cages made by MCE workers in Westover. "It started (at ECI) as a prison project," he said.

At ECI, the state's largest prison, there are plans to eventually expand an embroidery operation in the textile plant, providing 25 more inmate jobs, Vernarelli said.

"A prison as large as ECI needs all the jobs and idleness-reduction it can get," he said, "and MCE is very important on that compound."