

Free inmate labor gains popularity as budgets shrink

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SALISBURY -- Sifting through mountains of glass, plastics and metals at the Wicomico County recycling center is hard work.

So is removing deer carcasses from the roads. Or cleaning the restrooms at county parks.

The jobs, and many others that could be called thankless, fall to inmates at the Wicomico County Detention Center. The inmates do the work for free -- a perfect fit for local governments who are looking for ways to stretch their budgets.

"We've received probably twice as many requests for free labor," said Les Moore, a major at the detention center. "It's definitely because of the economy."

About 40 inmates are now participating in the free labor program, up from the 25-30 who are typically involved, said George Kaloroumakis, the interim director of the detention center. Inmates who participate will earn credits toward an earlier release date, he said.

"It's the concept of 'restorative justice.' It gives them a sense of appreciation that they are helping someone," Kaloroumakis said.

Inmates have also performed free labor for nonprofits, such as Habitat for Humanity of Wicomico County and the Salvation Army.

Local governments who use inmate labor save a significant amount of money, up to hundreds of thousands of dollars in some cases.

In Wicomico County, inmates help pick up road kill, sort the recyclables and clean out ditches. The county recreation department saves \$200,000 annually by using inmates for janitorial, landscape and event-staging work, according to figures calculated by the Department of Recreation, Parks and Tourism. Each year the Wicomico Youth & Civic Center saves \$78,000 by using inmate labor, according to the same analysis.

"We use inmates to the fullest extent possible," said Gary Mackes, director of Recreation, Parks and Tourism.

Mackes said his department has had very few problems with inmate labor. In some cases, the recreation department has hired former inmates who did exemplary work, he said.

Each day, a crew of several inmates will perform janitorial and landscaping work on the recreation department's behalf. The crew is supervised by a recreation department employee who has received specialized training, he said.

"I'd be a lost ball in tall grass if I didn't have inmates every day," Mackes said.

Inmates from state prisons are "doing more projects in more corners of the state than ever before," said Mark Vernarelli, a spokesman for the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services.

Vernarelli said an average of 375 inmates are involved in free labor jobs each day throughout the state. This year, inmates began caring for retired thoroughbred horses at a horse rescue farm in Sykesville. Inmates also plant trees, build oyster cages and help restore historic sites, such as the

Antietam Battlefield. Furthermore, inmates who are honorably discharged are cleaning up

veterans cemeteries.

"We are absolutely busier than ever with meaningful inmate work projects. It's not really based on the economy, but rather, it's been growing thanks to our own initiative," Vernarelli said.

Inmates who participate in the free labor program at the Wicomico County Detention Center are carefully screened. Only inmates who are deemed to have the lowest possible security risk are included, meaning that sex offenders, child abusers and violent offenders are all excluded, Kaloroumakis said.

Problems that arise from an inmate performing the free labor are rare, as it's been about five years since the last incident, he said. Instances in which inmates walk off during work release are more common, though still atypical, he said.

The inmate labor program is nothing new, but the number of requests for it in the past year has been "unbelievable," Moore said.

"It's been in place even when the economy is good. Now it's more appreciated," he said.