The Washington State Department of Corrections’ (WDOC) division, Washington State Correctional Industries (CI), recognizes the significant role they play in reentry. This role, the catalyst that inspired the creation of a team dedicated solely to preparing offenders for post-release employment, is the Offender Workforce Development (OWD) program. Early on, OWD established a living, breathing strategic plan, which included the community to play a pivotal role in successfully transitioning CI workers to post-release employment. The OWD dynamic strategic plan guides efforts into the future, which on the inside, are complemented and enhanced by partners and employers within the community. CI is in a unique position to establish partnerships to benefit motivated offenders and help them continue their success in the community workforce. OWD’s Strategic Priority #3 is, “To develop partnerships with community providers on job readiness, job placement, and training and education.” Opportunities for partnerships include the private sector, nonprofit community organizations, higher education, vocational education schools and faith-based organizations already engaged in reentry efforts.

Community partners in Washington are varied, including the Seattle-based FareStart, a culinary training program for disadvantaged individuals with the slogan “Great food, better lives.” Another partner is the Goodwill of the Olympics & Rainier Region (GORR), which desires to reach into the prison system to provide connections and services prior to release as well as post-release. This is a continuum-of-care model. Other partners include small local businesses that have successfully employed people with convictions in their histories. These owners want to do more to reach this population and benefit from the technical skills and motivation many of these individuals are released with. As CI prepares offenders to be work...
ready upon release, the OWD team will continue to enhance the success of offenders leaving prison by partnering with the community to give them a hand up, or by educating employers who will agree to provide them with an opportunity to compete fairly for jobs with other applicants with whom they share skills, abilities and a motivation to work.

OWD’s strategic plan defines work readiness as “having an ability to demonstrate work ethics to consistently meet the needs of employers, to include a professional attitude towards the work and colleagues; a demonstrated ability to meet production, service and safety standards; and the ability to effectively communicate.” The work done both within the institutions and outside in the community is multifaceted. One could consider the correctional institutions as communities. Without the help of a variety of WDOC employees, the OWD initiatives would not move forward smoothly. Supported by CI line staff, CI general managers and WDOC custody staff, OWD staff serve as trainers for “Makin’ It Work,” a 20-hour occupation-based soft-skills program; monitor and evaluate the CI Certificate of Proficiency program to document technical-skill acquisition; maintain a career center for offenders; track and develop industry-accredited certificates and external certifications; help offenders develop post-release employment plans; coordinate efforts to provide direct assistance through community partners; and work to develop a bridge to employment and upskilling opportunities. A very important factor in success is how CI staff contribute to the “Makin’ It Work” soft-skills program. General CI staff find time in their days by balancing their other duties so they can schedule and conduct classes. Some offenders participate in the “Makin’ It Work” class because it is essential in reaching the two highest pay levels. Others participate to gain and

OWD established a living, breathing strategic plan to transition workers to post-release employment.

FareStart participants prepare and serve meals during the downtown restaurant’s lunch hour in the final level of their training.

OWD staff participate in the Building a Pathway from Prison to Higher Education Symposium.
Much of the work readiness goals are achieved while the person is inside, to include creating documents, taking job preparation classes, participating in a mock interview and learning soft skills.

improve their soft skills, which complement the technical skills they will market to employers. CI staff also model pro-social behavior and provide on-the-job training to the program offenders with skills ranging from sewing to accounts receivable. To transition that work toward developing productive, tax-paying citizens, OWD knows that a variety of partners and community engagement is critical. To that end, CI currently has two very strong, established community partners.

Culinary Arts
With FareStart

FareStart is a unique program in Seattle. It is a 16-week comprehensive training program that combines hands-on food service training with classroom instruction, housing, case management, life skills and direct connections to other services. Students do not need a background in culinary arts or the food industry to become involved. FareStart provides ongoing placement and retention services upon graduation from the program. To help raise funds for their programs, they also host Guest Chef Nights on most Thursday evenings, providing gourmet meals for the public at a reasonable price. On these nights, a local guest chef, assisted by the students, prepares a beautiful, three-course gourmet meal. This allows students to benefit from the culinary knowledge of chefs currently practicing the art. FareStart also conducts formal graduation ceremonies on the restaurant floor.

CI’s relationship with FareStart was borne out of a similar need, because WDOC releases a large number of
offenders to King County. FareStart leadership wanted to better serve the population of men and women being released from prisons, and CI was looking to connect with organizations that could support the specific social needs of offenders while providing them with structure, training, job placement and retention support services and, at times, stable housing. As the story goes, the program administrator for OWD and the vice president of programs for FareStart met in the parking lot at the end of a local institute on offender reentry. They got to talking and realized their missions matched. Today, CI has a direct-entry contract with FareStart. Unique to this program, CI offenders apply, interview with FareStart intake staff, and are selected or denied in advance of their release. This application and approval process allows an offender to plan his or her life after prison with some certainty. During a recent visit, CI’s staff had an opportunity to meet with several of its students. The students reported that they appreciate the FareStart staff, enjoy the training, and are happy they had a productive place to go upon release.

Imagine working with a young man who has been in prison for a considerable amount of time and is very close to release. Imagine this person seeking out your assistance, coming close to tears while he confides in you. He explains that he has no one on the outside and is afraid of being released to the community after such a long time. Imagine realizing you have an option for him: He could go to FareStart to learn culinary skills and have the support of a team of people equipped to help meet his needs. Now, fast forward to after this man’s release. You learn he has completed FareStart and has hopes of opening a food truck. You wonder how he can smoothly go from inmate, with no family support, to small-business owner. He emails you regular updates. The man notes that his regional manager for a bakery he has proudly worked for since completing FareStart wants to work on a development plan with him. The FareStart graduate shares that he has completed a Seattle-based nonprofit business program with a food truck program and plans to pursue a bachelor’s in business management. When you read that he likes the sound of “regional manager” on his business card, you recognize that this young man had hope, but needed help. That is where FareStart came in: to provide him with skills, housing, confidence and support. This is just one success story of many to come. It is a testament to the meaningful work that is done to offer wrap-around services. This individual knew where he was going before he left prison. It was a sure thing, which provided him with something to look forward to: a food truck dream to direct his future.

Goodwill of the Olympics and Rainier Region

As previously mentioned, GORR was interested in bettering chances for self-sufficiency of offenders by providing employment readiness services to Washington’s incarcerated, while they are still in a facility, and case management services once they are released. Ultimately, a relationship was forged...
to provide GORR access to a population they felt was underserved for obvious reasons: metal gates and barbed wire. Today, the assigned GORR case manager communicates with each facility’s OWD specialist to connect with individuals being released to Pierce and Thurston counties. Much of the work readiness goals are achieved while the person is inside, to include creating documents, taking job preparation classes, participating in a mock interview and learning soft skills. In the community, the GORR case manager helps to not only connect people with work, but provide future career-planning and mentorship meetings to support the offender’s transition into the community, and to advance them from entry-level work to a career. The GORR case manager has even been known to assist in wardrobe selection from a clothing closet for offenders. For men who have worn khakis and a red shirt — the offender worker uniform — day after day for years, interview clothes or a work-appropriate wardrobe selection in a changing fashion environment is a daunting task. Other referrals to community partners and service providers are made to meet other non-employment related basic needs.

Recent 2016 Education Symposium

OWD staff recently participated in the Building a Pathway from Prison to Higher Education Symposium. Washington’s community and technical colleges have partnered with the WDOC for decades to provide high-quality opportunities for men and women in their prisons. The goal was to start the conversation about breaking down barriers to education. The conversation was very similar to those conversations about releasing people to employers or other upskilling opportunities, including the FareStart process. The participants noted plenty of similarities between the transition to education and the transition to community employment. The critical piece to both was through community partners, education and involvement.

Employer Engagement

What appears to be a key to an offender’s employment success in society is a tacit agreement with businesses and employers to let people releasing from prisons prove themselves. CI is looking to establish more than a tacit agreement. By establishing community employment specialist positions, they can educate future employers on the value that people releasing from work at CI can offer. At the ready, community employment specialists have a long list of jobs that offenders participate in and the skills gained while programming with CI. They can explain how CI is a unique blend of business and government that provides offenders with work experience and training as they produce high quality, competitively priced products. Also of interest to the employer is the need in businesses that offenders can fill. Community employment specialists can connect employers with talented, technically skilled workers with people skills; this has a potential for saving companies time and energy on recruitments. Further, the specialists in the community can invite potential partners into the operations to witness the men and women at work. Tours of CI can help assuage the negative assumptions some employers may have about offenders. A tour shows visitors that men and women who work for CI use computers, collaborate to efficiently unload trucks, apply lean principles, operate forklifts, and train others on highly complex and expensive machines. “Time served” means something different to a CI worker. It means thinking before saying something potentially regrettable to a coworker or supervisor; completing a task that meets quality standards; showing up ready to contribute on a team; and, ultimately, preparing to transition from the life in CI to a life at a job in the community.

While tours of a buzzing factory floor, a business office or a functioning commercial kitchen are incredibly useful to demonstrate value, further education is also helpful to employers who are undecided on fostering this potential relationship. CI
intends to increase communication with businesses by putting members of the team into the community to facilitate the “warm hand-off” to potential employers in the community that have agreed to give people with convictions in their history a chance to compete.

**In Closing**

“Community” looks like many different things in this model of success. Internally, the WDOC community and the CI community contribute time, energy and knowledge, and model behavior in offender interactions while in the work program. CI staff spend time teaching employment-based soft skills to help men and women keep jobs and advance professionally and financially. The program functions as a business, but provides so much more than on-the-job training. The external network may be small now, but it is mighty. It will grow as CI engages the stakeholders. Plans for a successful future will require commitment from WDOC staff and community partners. Employment is a protective factor for this population. It takes a village to support people as they release from prison to jobs, and doing so as a community helps maintain safer neighborhoods, schools, churches, public venues and workplaces.

**ENDNOTES**


2 Ibid.

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