

CT FEATURE



Jail Inmates Bake Their Way To Successful Reentry

By Susan L. Clayton



Cakes, cookies, pastries, pies — the keys to success. This may not be the case for everyone, but it is for the inmates enrolled in the “Sweet Release” Bakery Job Training Program at the Montgomery County Correctional Facility in Clarksburg, Md. This culinary job training program, which began in 2003, aims to reduce recidivism of ex-offenders in Maryland. It is designed to teach inmates how to obtain and keep a job in the baking/food service industry upon release.

The three-month-long (40 hours per week) program focuses on hands-on commercial baking and sanitation skills, as well as the process of making positive changes to ensure successful reentry to the community. “If someone has a job, a way to earn a living, they may choose that rather than going back to a life of crime and coming back to jail,” said Chris Johnson, bakery program manager. She adds that besides reducing recidivism, the goal of the program is to give hope for the future. “We help them realize that they can, in fact, do something besides be criminals. They have skills, and after three months of this program, it really builds a person. They come out different. They have a lot of self-confidence. They have hope for a new life for themselves and their families.”

There are five formal goals of the program:

- Reduce the recidivism rate of inmates at the Montgomery County Correctional Facility;
- Obtain a job in the baking/food service industry for each program participant;
- Teach inmates in the program how to get and keep a job;
- Teach basic and advanced elements of baking production so

that permanent, full-time employment is possible; and

- Provide the education necessary so that each graduate can pass a national sanitation exam and obtain a food service manager license.

Program Elements

Eligibility and admission to the program is based on the following:

- Sentencing has taken place and there are at least three months remaining on the sentence;
- Pre-screening and selection by counseling and correctional staff;
- Expressed interest in full-time employment;
- Interest in baking/food service as a career opportunity;
- Good record during incarceration (no violent behavior); and
- Ability to read at an eighth grade level.

Johnson receives about 40 applications every three months for which there are only six available spots. She conducts one-on-one interviews to narrow down applicants. Johnson tries to find the people who are serious about the work and who need the most support when they get out in the community. Ideally, she likes to take people who have about four to six months left to serve, as this allows the perfect amount of time to complete the program and to obtain a job in the community.

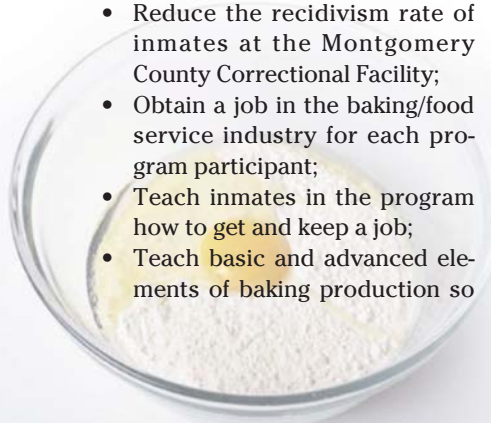
Five days a week, program participants report to the kitchen by 6 a.m. for hands-on baking instruction. Recipes and baking techniques begin with simple products and progress to the more difficult as the weeks pass. After a lunch break, formal classroom instruction takes place. This part of the program is divided into six sec-

tions: baking skills and techniques, pre-employment skills, job skills, food service sanitation, life skills and confidence building. All participants are required to complete a resume before graduation.

According to Joanne Zacharias, food service manager, Montgomery County Department of Correction and Rehabilitation, the cost of the program is minimal. All of the food that is prepared is used for inmate desserts or events/programs in the jail. Zacharias notes that both the staff and inmate population have been very supportive of the program. For example, through the inmate canteen fund, inmates have donated money to help defray the costs of licenses and supplies. “I think a lot of people we get in the program are maybe people who haven’t had a lot of support most of their life and didn’t really have many goals,” Zacharias said. “This program gives them goals and a sense of pride and accomplishment.”

Upon completion of the program, graduates receive a certified food manger license from the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services. This, Johnson said, is the ticket to a job for them. At this point, they will have obtained bakery training, completed a nationally recognized sanitation course and attended courses in life skills and job training. Through her contacts in the community, Johnson helps place graduates who are being released in food service jobs.

“Some of us have never known what it is to have a job. This program teaches you how to work with people, teaches you how to be responsible,” said William Jaume, a recent graduate of the program. “It changes the way you feel about being released. It helps conquer some of the fears you have about where you’re going to work and live and



what you're going to do with yourself. ... It does teach you a way to earn a living and gives you a sense of accomplishment," Jaume added. "It's a program of hope. It gives you a skill when you walk out the door that you can use so that you don't have to end up coming back to jail."

Montgomery County Pre-Release Center

The bakery program works in cooperation with a county residential treatment facility, the Montgomery County Department of Correction and Rehabilitation Pre-Release Center in Rockville, Md., which has been cited as a national model by the U.S. Department of Justice. Some of the graduating inmates will be released directly to the community, while others are transferred to the prerelease center. At the center, offenders live in a highly structured residential work release and treatment facility, which closely supervises them and monitors their behavior. Full-time bakery or food service jobs are found in the local community for each resident. Usually within one to three months, the people sent to the prerelease center are discharged. The inmates who are not transferred from the jail serve out the remainder of their sentence and are assisted by Johnson in finding jobs.

Hillel Raskis, work release coordinator at the center, gets all of the transferred jail program graduates in his unit. "Here at the center, we give residents a chance to change themselves through employment, counseling, education, treatment, housing, money, a job," Raskis said. He works closely with the bakery program and notes that some offenders come to the center for assistance in final job preparation before being placed in a job.

Before bakery program graduates are transferred, Raskis is notified. When they arrive, they must participate in a week of classroom instruction to work on issues that led to their criminal behavior and prepare them for work. Raskis talks to them about their skills and possibilities for employment. Then the job search begins. Raskis helps identify restaurants and bakeries that might be



Photos by Capt. Guy Ruffner



Chris Johnson, bakery program manager, and two program participants prepare devil's-food cake, one of the many bakery items prepared each day for 900 inmates and staff.

appropriate for job placement. He sets up interviews and contacts employers to let them know that residents are at the center and what their charges were.

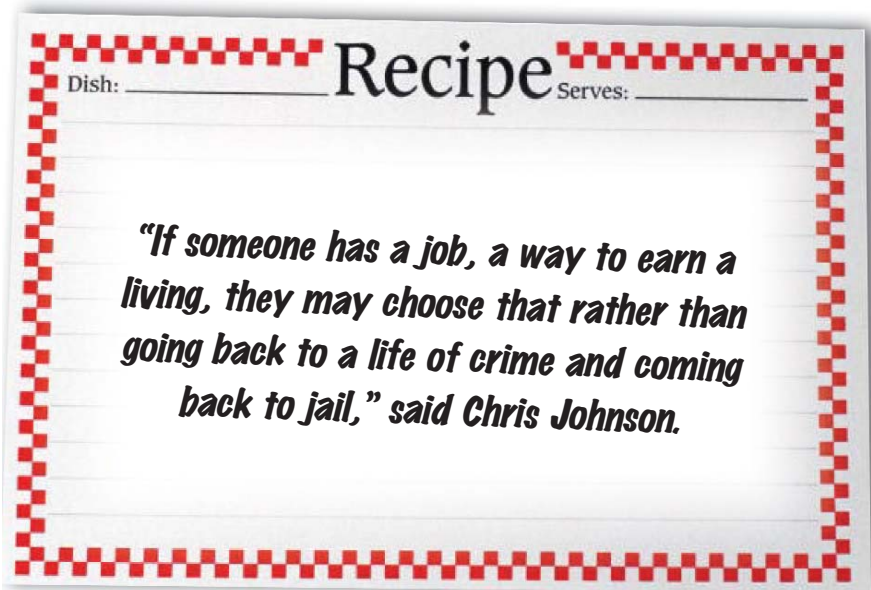
Raskis said that the center stays in contact with employers and tries to do a follow-up at the 60-day mark to see if people have kept the job with which they left. He notes that everyone in the bakery program has been able to get a job in the food service industry. "Many offenders have no job skills but come out of the bakery program with experience and job readiness and a will to work. It's a very well-structured, well-thought-out program."

Johnson maintains contact with graduates for at least the first six months of new employment. At the beginning, she talks to them every week; gradually, it becomes every six weeks. "We get to really know each

other," Johnson said. "We have a lot of ups and downs, and at the end of the three months there is a real bonding that takes place."

Results

As far as successes go, Johnson acknowledges that the program is still young. "We need to get three years under our belt of measuring to truly evaluate it," she said. To date, the program has 22 graduates. Each of the 22 passed the national sanitation exam (ServSafe) and earned a certified food server license. Of the 22, 12 are serving out the remainder of their sentences in jail or at the pre-release center; four are working at local bakeries and restaurants; four have been released and are in residential treatment centers for relapse prevention; one is selling cars; and one has been reincarcerated.



Five women at the jail have also earned their certified food manager license in a scaled-down trial version of the program that taught sanitation and job skills only. They all remain incarcerated. Hands-on baking was not possible for the women due to security issues in the kitchen. Johnson and Zacharias hope to expand the program in the future to fully include women, who make up about 10 percent of the jail population. In total, 27 inmates at the facility have taken the national sanitation exam and 26 have passed.

Helping the program participants succeed is paramount to Johnson. "They've been hopeless for such a long time and then all of a sudden someone is trying to help them," she said. "Structure, attention and the feeling that somebody cares about them and is going to help them find their way and teach them a new skill are key."

Michael Velez, a current program participant is confident that the "Sweet Release" program will help him pursue a career when he is released. "I've never had a career. I've had jobs, but never had anything that would take me anywhere," Velez said. "It's scary to come out of jail and not know what you're going to do. This helps you build self-esteem. I'm 23 years old and I've been in jail twice. I've spent every holiday in jail, and I don't want to do it anymore. It's about a lifestyle change for me ... getting out and staying out, and this program has taught me what I need to do it."

Challenges And The Future

According to Johnson, the challenges of the program are similar to many new reentry projects: funding; reluctance on the part of employers to hire convicted felons; substance abuse relapse; realities of hard work at a regular job; and the lure of a criminal lifestyle. She notes that there are three future goals for the program. The first is a partnership with a local chemical dependence treatment facility. Counselors would come into the jail twice a week to conduct group and individual sessions on drug and alcohol relapse prevention. "Almost all of the graduates of this program have had chemical dependency issues, and the majority of them [issues] contributed to their crimes," Johnson said. "If the addictions are not dealt with, the long-term success of the project will be negatively impacted." The second component is weekly continuation of the relapse prevention therapy after release, which Johnson said would become part of an offender's sentence. Finally, the program would partner with one or more community food service employers to hire the graduates and institute an aftercare component that could be expanded. The work environment could become a support system for these ex-offenders.

Zacharias notes that some of her staff would even like to expand the program beyond baking.



"We definitely feel that food service gives them a skill they can use when they go back to the community because there are a lot of food services jobs available," she said. "We can give them the training and the certificate that gives them marketable skills for when they get out. I think the guys really feel a sense of pride in accomplishing something."

Traditionally, Johnson said, people are often released from jail with no money, no job, no home, no hope. However, "when they get released from this program and reenter, whether they go through the pre-release center or not, hopefully we are going to have a job set up, a place to live, a plan," Johnson said, adding, "That's what it's all about — successful reentry."

Susan L. Clayton is managing editor of Corrections Today.