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Inmates Need Jobs

By Gordon Mehler

DENVER — Less than 20 percent of the national prison population works. Most inmates just sit around, becoming bored, restless and, sometimes, violent. The best way to reduce idleness and prevent violence, while cutting costs and helping prisoners rehabilitate themselves, is to give inmates a job.

Until about 50 years ago, prisoners were expected to work, though their jobs were often useless or cruel. Rock piles and chain gangs were designed primarily to exploit prisoners and break their spirit. These abuses were ended, but pressure from organized labor remains a major obstacle to building prison industries. Fearing competition from goods made by prisoners, who are paid low wages, unions have induced many legislators to ignore worthwhile prison work programs that teach job skills and good work habits.

Meanwhile, the cost of maintaining a single inmate has risen above \$16,000 a year. A prison cell costs almost as much as a new home. If prisoners work, these costs can be reduced; if they don't, the tab will soar, especially when the price of riots and recidivism is added on.

The courts consistently have held that prisoners can be required to work, provided the workload is reasonable. These rulings are academic, however, because most inmates want to work — if only to keep busy and make the time go faster.

The United States penitentiary at Leavenworth, Kan., houses one of the most successful prison industries. Inmates work in one of five prison factories, making a variety of products, among them furniture and shoes, that are sold to the Federal Government. They earn up to \$1.05 an hour, a decent wage when you consider that nothing is deducted for rent, groceries or utilities.

Prisoners who cause trouble or are repeatedly late are fired, but good workers are given incentives. In addition to pay, inmates earn promotions and bonuses for high productivity. They can also have up to five days lopped off their sentences for every month they work.

Leavenworth is relatively tranquil, thanks in part to its excellent work programs. Many of its inmates are young and poor. Prison industries often provide them their first steady job. Young prisoners have energy to burn. They won't sit in a corner

and rot quietly, nor should they.

To some extent, prison life is supposed to be boring. The punishment in losing freedom is losing the fun and excitement that come with it. But pervasive idleness is something else. Working isn't necessarily fun, but it does provide a sense of dignity, a feeling of accomplishment that can change a prisoner's negative attitudes into more positive ones.

Unfortunately, the extensive work programs in Federal prisons find few counterparts in state systems, which hold more than 90 percent of all convicts. State officials complain that they don't have the money to develop better prison industries. In truth, prison work programs can support themselves.

Federal Prison Industries Inc., the Government corporation that runs work programs in Federal prisons, not only receives no money from Congress but actually turned a profit of \$27 million last year. The bulk of the profit is put back into vocational training and prison improvements.

The biggest expense involves start-up costs (to finance plant, equipment and inventory), but if states give tax breaks to investors who back prison industries, even this initial cost can be defrayed somewhat.

The toughest problem is to find markets for prison goods. Chief Justice Warren E. Burger, an early advocate of prison industries, has urged repeal of laws that limit the sale of prison-made goods to the public. Labor leaders oppose this measure, but their fear of competition from prison industries is exaggerated.

By diversifying the mix of products, we can protect single private industries from bearing the brunt of competition from convict labor. And precisely because of the low wages paid to prisoners we can establish prison industries in markets where cheap foreign labor has made American products uncompetitive.

Congress has begun to make it easier for prison work programs to prosper. In 1979, seven pilot projects were allowed to sell prison-made goods in interstate commerce, and last year Congress authorized the use of prison-made materials in federally funded highway construction.

We're deluding ourselves if we continue to lock people up at great cost, let them sit idle and hope that crime will just disappear. It won't. When an ex-convict returns to society unskilled, unmotivated and unaccustomed to earning a living, it's a safe bet that he will commit more crimes. New outlets for prison labor must be explored and expanded.

Rocky Mountain News Commentary

Prisoners need to be put to work



Prisoners work in a workshop at Leavenworth Penitentiary in Kansas.

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