**Walworth County Jail Literacy Program**

CORRECTIONAL EDUCATION IS TRANSFORMATIONAL

A 2019 study from the National Conference of State Legislatures supports investment in correctional education which benefits the individual, community and correctional settings. The return on the investment is great**,** the case for correctional education is clear.

* Incarcerated adults are 2 times more likely than the general population to have no high school credential.
* Over 75% of individuals released from prison into the community are of prime working age, between 25-54 years of age.
* 95% of incarcerated individuals are released into the community where they need to rebuild their lives, secure gainful employment and pay taxes.
* Although unemployment is currently low in the general population, unemployment for formerly incarcerated individuals is at 27%.
* Educational programs increase successful reentry into community; individuals are better equipped to gain and maintain employment with sustainable wages. Lifelong learning, another characteristic gained through correctional education, prepares a workforce for future higher skilled job demands.
* Investing in correctional education reduces likelihood of re-incarceration by 29%, and in return benefits a state’s workforce, economy and saves a state money. Educational programs within correctional facilities help prepare workers who need employment for the jobs that need to be filled.
* Reduced recidivism saves taxpayers an average of $5 for every $1 spent on correctional education.

**Programming within the jail**

* Adult Basic Education (*math, reading and writing*) classes are offered at the Walworth County Jail in Elkhorn, WI (inmate population 150). Three volunteer instructors teach incarcerated adults in furthering their education (those who do not meet GED requirements, need to improve skills to qualify for GED acceptance, or may have GED), in small group classes once per week.
* Inmates are required to adhere to a Behavioral & Attendance policy with the Walworth County Literacy Council (WCLC), and it is stressed that the classes within the jail are a privilege, not a right.
* On average, 7 individuals are taught per month in each class.
* Literacy classes are held in a jail classroom within the programming section. The classroom is complete with a dry erase board, podium, tables and chairs. Teaching materials, such as textbooks, are provided by grants and generous donors.
* Implementation of jail-based education/literacy programs is of necessity governed by the policies and needs of the jail. It is also influenced by a variety of sentencing structures. The two elements together influence attendance, duration of enrollment, and outcomes.

**How it got started**

* In 2008 the WCLC Board of Directors embarked on researching the need and desire for a literacy program within the county jail. The first step was to survey each new jail inmate, via questionnaire. The survey addressed demographics and the need for literacy classes. The survey was distributed by jail staff to each new incarcerated individual. Within 6 months, 567 surveys were completed. Survey results clearly illustrated a need and desire for literacy classes in the Walworth County Jail.
* Based on the local need and desire for jail literacy classes, the proven effects of educational jail programming nationwide, and the cooperation of the Walworth County Jail, Walworth County Literacy Council launched its Jail Literacy Program in 2008.
* Since its inception, 400+ students have benefitted from literacy classes in the jail.

Recognition:

* Walworth County Board of Supervisors Recognition for Outstanding Volunteer Service to the Walworth County Jail, 2019.
* Department of State’s International Visitor Leadership Program, discussion on regional Jail Literacy programs, 2018.
* Walworth County Jail Literacy Program was awarded the prestigious Eisenberg Award from the State Public Defender Board for its outstanding efforts in empowering the disenfranchised through education, 2015. (See Vimeo.com search 144920764 for video)

**Challenges and how we have worked around them**

* Follow-up of students leaving jail and transitioning to other institutions, treatment centers, work/release programs, etc. is difficult to track due to lack of information about transfer location. Also, number of inmates returning to community upon release from jail is typically very low. However, those transitioning to D.O.C. will be given opportunity to further their education at an institution if appropriate. Therefore, jail education is critical for this next step.
* Keeping accurate records/having tutors maintain records. Fluidity of jail population is constant. One day an inmate is there, the next day they are gone, often without instructor’s knowledge of release. WCLC instructors submit applications of inmates who have been released on a quarterly basis.
* Contraband in jail. Train and impress upon instructors, new and existing, that inmates are in a secure jail and the safety procedures are in place for a reason. Instructors need to remember that boundaries need to be kept in place. It can be easy to sympathize with an inmate after teaching them and developing instructor/student relationship. However, rules must be adhered to so that program is not jeopardized. Account for all materials before and after class. Do not give out candy. Don’t make phone calls on behalf of inmates. Don’t pass messages to outside world for inmate. Follow jail rules to a T.
* Assessing new students to find out level when they start, and ongoing assessments to measure progress.
* Start-up funding. WCLC secured a large grant to get program started.
* Ongoing funding for staff salary and keeping supplies stocked, books replenished etc.

**Tips for agencies looking at working with their local jails**

* Establish cooperation and support from jail staff.
* Establish cooperation and support from probation staff.
* Develop a thorough training program. We partner with jail for a comprehensive training.
* Offer ongoing trainings for jail instructors during the year. They are invited to all literacy council trainings, events, etc.
* Provide community resource packet to every inmate we come in contact with at jail. We never know where they will be tomorrow, so make sure they are given instruction and educational resources for when they are released.
* If possible, agencies consider reaching out to inmate once they are released to remind them of community-based literacy program.
* Maintain open line of communication with jail instructors. What is working? What do they need support with? How can council best support them to ensure a successful service is being provided.