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Print Page

A different kind of prison

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Completed construction at Lake City Correctional Facility has caused growth in inmate population, staff and programming.

The prison's inmate population nearly tripled from approximately 350 inmates to 893, said Warden Fred Lawson.

The facility holds young inmates ages 19-24, called "youthful offenders," who come from all over the state.

"With the construction and larger inmate population, we hired about 80 new employees, including 50 new correctional officers, and we paid for the tuition and basic training for the majority of the officers," Lawson said. "With the increase of inmates comes a need for increased officers, support staff, educational and vocational programs."

Kitchen equipment was also upgraded in order to produce 3,000 meals a day instead of the 1,000 made before.

The medical department also expanded in order to care for the increased number of inmates.

The LCCF is in the process of adding new programs to its existing ones.

One is a multi-denominational, faith-based community in the dorms that inmates can request to live in.

"We survey the inmate population and they can opt to be in, but it is not mandatory," Lawson said.

A New Approach to Treatment

Currently LCCF officers and staff are receiving training for a new program called Residential Drug Abuse Treatment Program (RDAP).

The new program is characterized by a state-of-the-art cognitive-behavioral drug abuse treatment approach.

LCCF is the pilot institution for RDAP in the entire Corrections Corporation of America system.

"This program is different from other treatment programs because it focuses on community and working together rather than peers," Lawson said. "We had to find something that is most effective for the age levels we have here. What works for older inmates is different than what works for younger inmates."

Jean Bellinger, manager of inmate programs, oversees training LCCF staff in the new program.

"This was created and continues to be operated by the Federal Bureau of Prisons," she said. "It is modeled after one of the most successful treatment programs in the nation."

Bellinger calls it an individualized treatment program that takes nine to 12 months.

The program utilizes "interactive journaling," in which each participant receives seven personalized journals covering each of the major areas of treatment.

The journals monitor inmate thinking and behavior throughout the program.

All inmates in the RDAP program who lack a high school diploma or GED are required to attend classes.

"This program addresses thinking patterns and then works to develop skills," she said. "We can't change personality, but we can change behavior. We need to fix these issues inside rather than outside, because having this behavior outside lands them back in prison."

The inmates in the program will receive curriculum half of the day and then work to apply skills while working or taking classes later in the day.

"The key here is that this program stresses community," Bellinger said. "Each inmate must do his part, emulating the world outside."

In addition, personal accountability, personal responsibility, honesty and readiness to change are all points of RDAP.

Lawson hopes to launch the new program by the middle of July.

Knowledge is Power

Grant money has allowed LCCF to offer vocational classes including electrician and computer support courses.

All classes are paid for by the inmate or his family.

"Taxpayers don't pay for these classes," Lawson said. "They all have the opportunity to study, but they have pay for it."

LCCF began offering classes to inmates through Lake City Community College in the fall of 2001.

Educational classes include business math, business communication, remedial courses and correspondence courses.

Currently, there are approximately 33 inmates taking college classes.

Some classes are taught by LCCF instructors.

For others, inmates watch video lectures and the professor may come to the facility periodically to review material or administer exams.

"Even if they can't get college credit here for some classes, by taking them and showing their transcript when they are released, they may be able to get credit later," Lawson said.

One inmate, Nathan Wilson, began taking classes in the spring of 2002.

He received his associate's degree this spring and graduated with a 3.97 grade point average with Summa Cum Laude honors.

Wilson took history, composition, psychology courses among others.

In addition, he took several correspondence classes at the University of Florida.

Wilson credits his strong family support for his success.

"We all have to do our time, but it doesn't have to be hard time," he said. "You get out of it what you make of it."

In addition to his A.A., Wilson enrolled in a year-long program in culinary arts and earned a Pastry Chef certificate.

"It has helped me pass the time and keeps me busy," he said.

Wilson continues to take correspondence classes to earn a bachelor's degree.

When he is released, he hopes to go back to his high school to speak to its students.

"When I joined the military, I went to speak to them," Wilson said. "Now that this has happened, I want to go back and encourage them to stay out of prison."

Lawson believes the classes offer inmates a way to better themselves.

"Offering classes gives these inmates a better chance to turn their lives around once they get out," he said. "They can go out, raise a family and be productive citizens."

