

TRAINING FOR A NEW DAY

MITCHELLVILLE PRISONERS LEARN JOB SKILLS

BY PERRY BEEMAN

WHEN YOU DO THE TIME, YOUR TIME IS DONE. YOU SHOULD BE GIVEN A CHANCE."

— Pat Steele, site director, Central Iowa Works

Pat Steele has a central goal when he visits the women's prison in Mitchellville. He wants to give the inmates a chance to learn business skills they can apply as soon as they are paroled and free.

When he leaves the prison, he encourages employers to strongly consider hiring prisoners who have done their time and are ready to work on the outside.

Steele is site director for Central Iowa Works. He came to Mitchellville in early 2016 and suggested the program to Patti Wachtendorf, the longtime warden at the facility before she was named warden at the Fort Madison penitentiary in January. "I told him I had no money, but I did have women," Wachtendorf said. "I said, 'I will give you women and space and the internet' " with proper controls to prevent access to anything but the program materials, she recalled. A couple of months later, Steele had arranged financing and the program was on.

"I probably hugged him," Wachtendorf recalled. "The timing was good. We had 120 women living outside the fence" and potentially clients for the program. "We have the warehouse. We have a classroom."

All 15 women who were in a recent class taught by Steele's son, Zach, earned their transportation distribution logistics certification. The training included certifications in forklift operations, Occupational Safety and Health Administration matters, and logistical and technician work. The women heard from Zach and others, worked on computer simulations and ran forklifts.

The money came from the Walmart Foundation — which made this the only prison class funded among 10 grant recipients — and Jobs for the Future through United Way of Central Iowa. The goal of that grant is to train 225 people in two years.

The recent graduation was the third in 2016. Twenty-one students from the two classes that graduated in May and July are out of prison; 16 have jobs.

The program has a placement rate of 80 percent.

During a tour day, Zach Steele supervised a computer simulation that taught the inmates about accounting, sales, shipping and receiving, payroll, logistics and computer skills via laptops in a classroom outside the prison. They learn self-confidence and how to speak in front of a group. They earn letters of recommendation.

The class, which is limited to 15 and has been full, runs as a simulated business, with the inmates doing the jobs as if they are running a company. The program is from the Boston YMCA and Boston Federal Reserve.

Enrollment is voluntary, but the enrolled inmates have to show up. "Attendance is always perfect," Pat Steele said with a smile. This is, of course, a prison. There are rules.

During the tour, inmates were working for a simulated company that supplies the hospital-ity industry.

Some of the inmates talked about how the training would give them a better chance of landing a job — something many would have found easy before crimes such as drug abuse landed them in prison.

It's not that they are uneducated. Most Mitchellville inmates have at least a high school diploma. Of 8,500 prisoners in Iowa, 1,600 don't have a high school diploma or the equivalent, Pat Steele said.

One inmate said she finally thought she had true potential after scoring 98.9 percent

on a final exam. Another said, as she worked on the laptop, that she had concerns about age discrimination on the outside. "I can use all the help I can get," she said. So she signed up for the voluntary simulation program.

These inmates were very close to release. They walked over to the class.

For many, the class will be the difference between making maybe \$8.50 an hour and \$12 to \$14 an hour, assuming they can get someone to hire them. Pat and Zach Steele are working hard to convince employers they should hire ex-convicts, and there is talk of trying to change state law to remove some roadblocks in certain fields.

Wachtendorf sees the value in training women, more than 70 percent in for nonviolent drug offenses. It costs taxpayers \$30,000 a year to care for the inmates. The training Steele arranged costs \$1,600 per student. A similar program is offered to men at the Newton prison.

Wachtendorf mentioned that 75 percent of women released from Mitchellville aren't jailed again. That's another reason to help them get ready to re-enter general society.

A couple of inmates mentioned they had been close to getting degrees in health fields when they got busted — they didn't say for what — but know they won't get jobs in that field now. One learned to run a forklift. Others are learning to help do administrative tasks at warehouses or distribution centers, for example.

All tried to set up better days outside of prison. "When you do the time, your time is done," Pat Steele said. "You should be given a chance." ■



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