

# Various state organizations work to improve incarcerated people's re-entry to society

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There are 56 state prisons in North Carolina and nearly 38,000 people in the system.

Within most prisons there are a number of programs implemented to rehabilitate incarcerated people and prepare them for successful reentry into society. These efforts are meant to prevent people from returning to crime.

This effort isn't just the work of one entity. Nonprofits, the N.C. Department of Public Safety and advocacy groups also work with people who are or have been incarcerated.

The Daily Tar Heel profiled a few of these organizations and the work they do, as well as the challenges they face.

## **N.C. CURE seeks equality**

To see some of the brokenness of the criminal justice system, Elizabeth Forbes says all people have to do is sit down at a courthouse and watch what happens.

Throughout the day, an obvious racial disparity between people brought in front of a judge can be seen, said Forbes, director of the North Carolina chapter of Citizens United for Restorative Effectiveness

"Criminal justice is a complicated system and a broken system," she said.

The group is dedicated to ensuring incarcerated persons have the necessary tools to successfully transition back into society after being released, a process known as reentry.

Not having proper resources leads to a return to a criminal lifestyle and ultimately a return to prison, a phenomenon known as recidivism.

Forbes said this resource gap stems from a lack of state funding for reentry programs like hers.

She and her advocacy group have worked with the North Carolina Department of Public Safety to raise awareness and provide information to create more effective programs for people once they leave prison.

"They are taking steps in the right direction, but it is still underserved," she said.

She said many of the people want to leave their criminal history in the past, but the stigmas around people with felonies on their criminal record hinders their progress.

The group works with state legislators and the Department of Public Safety to bring awareness to the needs of the prison population.

Forbes said with some administrations are more supportive than others.

“With (former Gov. Bev) Perdue in office we were lucky to have a sympathetic ear,” she said. “The (Gov.) McCrory administration has been very closed.”

Rehabilitation starts in prisons

Nicole Sullivan, director of Rehabilitative Programs and Services for the N.C. Department of Public Safety, said the department works to pair prisoners with the most appropriate rehabilitative program.

The Department of Public Safety provides vocational training, counseling services and substance abuse treatment based on an individual’s need.

“In North Carolina, we’ve offered various types of programs to reduce recidivism for a number of years, and we are always paying attention to correctional research and best practices from other states to identify new programs that could be implemented here,” Sullivan said.

Sullivan said the programs are voluntary, but the department encourages all inmates to utilize them.

“We do try to offer as many programs and job opportunities to all incarcerated individuals to assist in their rehabilitation and preparation for release back into society,” she said.

Reentry programs start the day someone is incarcerated in order to start the process of transitioning back into the community as early as possible, Sullivan said.

Part of that is preparing inmates for jobs.

At each prison there are jobs that inmates can have, such as those in the kitchen, and there are programs under the Department of Public Safety that provide technical training for incarcerated people.

Karen Brown, director of Correction Enterprises, which provides jobs in 17 industries, said the program employs 2,200 prisoners at any given time. Correction Enterprises employs about 5,000 people annually.

The program works with companies operating in North Carolina to get people jobs in the industries they work once they are released.

“We’re concerned about inmates staying in North Carolina,” she said. “We want them to get a job and earn a living wage.”

Brown said there are around 400 companies in the state that are willing to interview or hire people with a criminal record.

According to Brown, the incentive for companies to work with the Department of Public Safety’s programs is the eligibility for tax breaks.

**Farms use therapy, job training**

Other transition programs, geared toward both jobs and general well-being, include nonprofits — but the road to effectiveness can be difficult in a state with dwindling funds.

Benevolence Farms, which is located in Graham, has worked since 2007 to start providing transitional assistance to people who have been incarcerated.

The farm hopes to secure its funding and open this year, said Tanya Jisa, the founder.

She was inspired to start the prison after learning about the number of incarcerated people in the United States.

Her farm will give residence and work to women recently released from prison.

“Those are the two biggest obstacles, they cannot find a place to live or work,” she said, adding that she hopes Benevolence Farm will be a model for other programs. “We definitely want to provide support.”

As an avid gardener, Jisa knows first-hand how healing and therapeutic nature can be.

She hopes to allow former people who have been incarcerated a chance to live on the farm for anywhere from six months to two years — longer than the average reentry program.

“Through the experience the women will create the skills needed in areas such as customer service (and) marketing,” Jisa said. “They will be able to explore different career paths.”