

Beyond license plates: New director sees gains in prisoners' work

By Emily Sweeney, Globe Staff | May 29, 2005

BRIDGEWATER — A young man in a weathered T-shirt sits on a swivel chair at a desk, with his eyes transfixed on a Macintosh computer monitor. With a few keystrokes and clicks of his mouse, he creates business cards for a client. A large printing press nearby eventually transfers his design onto heavy stock paper.

It's a typical job order for this designer, but this is no typical print shop: It is tucked deep in the Old Colony Correctional Center in Bridgewater, and is staffed entirely by inmates of the prison. Meanwhile, next door, at the Massachusetts Treatment Center, convicted sex offenders work in a silk-screening and sign shop, where they produce customized bumper stickers, aluminum street signs, and town seals that go on police cruisers.

The products are marketed through Massachusetts Correctional Industries, or MassCor, and if its new director, James F. Karr, has his way, MassCor would no longer be the state prison system's best-kept secret.

"Maybe we'll be selling [MassCor jeans] on Newbury Street," said Karr, half-jokingly.

For now, the products — from jeans to jumpsuits, business cards to boxer shorts, and even beds and mattresses — are sold primarily to state agencies and municipalities. They are also available to the public — at least to the few who have MassCor's catalog.

Karr's boss, state Department of Correction Commissioner Kathleen M. Dennehy, wants to expand the industries program. More products sold will mean more jobs for inmates, and since Karr became director in August, sales have increased. MassCor is projecting revenues of \$7.5 million in fiscal 2005 — \$200,000 more than the previous year. Those revenues go back to the industries program to cover payroll, inmate wages, materials, and equipment.

An online store (www.masscor.us) is scheduled to be launched this year; currently, the only way for the public to order products is through MassCor's 45-page catalog, whose cover states, "Working on the inside — Succeeding on the outside." It's a slogan borrowed from the National Correctional Industries Association, replacing MassCor's previous, somewhat flippant, one, "We're here for you . . . ALWAYS!"

A janitorial shop is slated to reopen at MCI-Norfolk, and a brush and broom shop will be added to MCI-Cedar Junction in Walpole. Together they will provide up to 20 new jobs for inmates.

"We employ just under 3 percent of the [prison] population," said Karr. "I'd like to have 15 to 25 percent."

For convicted criminals, MassCor positions are the most sought-after jobs behind bars. Each shop is managed by a Department of Correction employee, and even though hourly wages range from 50 cents to \$1, there are usually waiting lists for these positions.

John Sullivan, a 57-year-old inmate at MCI-Norfolk, said working, even at those wages, is "much better than the alternative — wandering around aimlessly with nothing to do."

The bulk of MassCor's products are made at MCI-Norfolk. The medium-security facility has a building dedicated to manufacturing, where inmates upholster furniture, make mattresses, assemble three-ring binders, and sew clothes.

MCI-Norfolk's clothing shop employs 103 inmates. It's a busy factory, with industrial-size fans and a punch clock on the wall. Dozens of inmates sit at sewing machines under fluorescent lights, stitching pieces of dark blue denim that will become jeans. Others unroll and measure white twill broadcloth that will be cut and sewn into aprons.

Piles of white, 50/50 cotton/polyester blend T-shirts sit in large gray canvas bins on wheels. Size XXL white T-shirts are the most popular item, according to the shop supervisor, Sergio Servello.

Some inmates serve as clerks, crunching numbers, tracking inventory and orders. Others, like Lawrence Bland, a muscular man with broad shoulders and football-sized biceps, work in the shipping department, where his ability to bench press 400 pounds "comes in handy," he said. Each day Bland, 41, uses clear packaging tape to seal the orders in large cardboard boxes. Then he stacks them in the back room.

"I like it," he said. "It's a good job."

William R. Riley, with curly tufts of gray hair, a 5 o'clock shadow, and a stocky build, is a fixture at his work station: a sewing table decorated with a sticker that says "Willie's Place, Hours 8 a.m. to 3 p.m." A denim pillow cushions his wooden chair.

The 36-year-old Brockton native sits at his Singer sewing machine, hemming red and gray material. He makes jumpsuits that are similar to hospital scrubs, and come in seven colors – orange, red, gray, white, green, tan, and maroon – coded for use by certain inmates in each prison facility.

"The main thing about this job is, you have to be consistent. It's tiring, but you have to keep going," he said. "It's a great place to work, though. It keeps my mind occupied, especially in an environment like this. You need to keep busy in an environment like this."

Riley has five more years before he's up for parole. "The best part about this job is that I can sit at a desk and work without someone leaning over my shoulder telling me what to do," he said.

It also gives him a nest egg – albeit a small one – for when he makes parole. Half of the inmates' paychecks are deposited into a checking account, and the rest is put into savings for when they're released. Inmates use their checking accounts to buy clothes, snacks, and toiletries at the prison commissary.

MCI-Cedar Junction, the state's maximum-security prison, has one Correctional Industries shop, and that's where every license plate in the state is made. Inmates produce about 60,000 plates per week in about 215 designs, some featuring logos commemorating the latest New England Patriots' Super Bowl championship, the Red Sox, Bruins, Cape Cod lighthouses, the Basketball Hall of Fame, and war veterans.

The shop is noisy. All the inmates here wear gray jumpsuits, with the white letters "DOC" emblazoned on the back – just like the ones Riley hems down the road at MCI-Norfolk.

Sheets of shiny aluminum roll off a giant red spool into machines that emboss the numbers and letters. Thomas P. Moore, 49, is one of 23 inmates who operate the mint-green hydraulic presses. When he presses the button, 60 tons of force stamps the numbers and letters into the aluminum.

If more inmates were working, "it would alleviate half the problems you have in prison," said Moore, who has thinning, close-shaven salt-and-pepper hair, and has a faded tattoo of a pinup girl on his forearm.

Farther down the assembly line, at the opposite end of the building, five inmates pull freshly painted plates out of slots. A few custom-made vanity plates – "GHETTO," "GOO GOO," and "FREEZE" – are the only decorations around their workstation. The inmates inspect the plates, place them in wax-paper sleeves, and package them in brown cardboard boxes for shipping to the Registry of Motor Vehicles.

"People are fighting for these jobs," said Kevin Sullivan, a convicted murderer who has been in prison for 23 years.

Like Moore, Sullivan believes more job opportunities are needed for inmates.

"Stamping license plates is all right, but they need more jobs," said Sullivan, 48. "Most of these guys are in for drugs. . . . These kids need to learn some work ethics, and learn a trade. They should open more vocational training programs for these guys," he said.

"When you hit the street, you're not going to be making license plates."

The print shop at the Old Colony Correctional Center has various positions; inmates work as clerks, run printing presses, and use graphic design software to make envelopes, business cards, and letterheads.

The operation occupies just a small part of the Bridgewater prison complex, behind cement walls, barbed wire fences, and 3-inch-thick steel automatic sliding doors. Next to the shop entrance, 32 black pegs stick out of the wall. This is where the incarcerated employees hang their gray scrubs, sweatpants, and jeans before going to work.

On a recent afternoon, hundreds of weekly bingo reports were zipping off one of the shop's six printing presses. The forms were ordered by the Massachusetts Lottery Commission, one of MassCor's institutional clients.

The shop manager, Michael Kmiecik, supervises 31 inmate employees. The shop recently received a deal on a new printing press, which will add four to six positions.

It's good news for Karr, who hopes eventually to establish job-placement partnerships with companies.

The shop "gives guys a marketable skill," he said. "A guy can go out on the street and say, 'Hey, I'm a typesetter by trade.'

"If guys are leaving and they've been doing manufacturing, we could contact manufacturers, and develop relationships with those businesses."

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