

SNG-prison graduation-8-20-18

Offenders trying to break into this prison

By Jim Nowlan

I just came back to my home office after attending the first-ever graduation of Illinois prison inmates who earned—outside their razor-wire fence “home”—their skilled welding program certificates at a Black Hawk College career training center in Kewanee.

Less than a year ago, I wrote in this space about a new, unique prison in Illinois called the Kewanee Life Skills Re-entry Center. The idea here is to provide career and behavioral training to medium and high-risk offenders who are within one to four years of release.

Black Hawk College has a welding center a few blocks from the Life Skills Center. Why not have inmates take their training “outside,” at the center?

“No way, can’t be done,” the bureaucrats said, of course. State senator Chuck Weaver (R-Peoria) and nearby attorney and workforce development specialist Mike Massie said, “Phooey on you,” and the barriers to such were pushed aside.

The objective is, of course, to reduce the Illinois recidivism rate, one of the highest in the nation. Recidivism refers to those released from prison who are returned to incarceration within three years of release. In Illinois the rate has been about half, and for African-Americans it has been three in five!

Here's a real eye-opener: At the non-public graduation ceremony attended by top prison and college officials plus us media, state corrections director John Baldwin noted that smart students at the University of Chicago have been evaluating “big data” stats about released inmates.

The students and their professors found, preliminarily, that only 1.6 percent of all Illinois inmates released between 1999 and 2015 had experienced eight straight quarters of employment in any two-year period!

This suggests strongly that ex-offenders are either barred from employment by statute or employer concerns, or they lack skills, or maybe motivation, or a combination of all the above.

The simple fact is that they *are* going to come out some day. So, how do we want them to come out?

[Believers in the Kewanee concept feel recidivism can be reduced sharply, maybe down to the 25 percent in nearby Michigan, which has a profile in inmates similar to that in Illinois. And do so even for the high-risk inmates who have been in the hoosegow for 10-20 and more years.]

Here is how the Kewanee center works: Inmates across Illinois prisons who have one to four years left to serve must write an essay as to why being transferred to Kewanee will benefit them and make them productive citizens once released.

Many are applying. It's as if here we have a prison that offenders want to break into!

After about one year in operation, there are almost 300 inmates at the Kewanee IDOC center, and this number will slowly increase to a maximum of 670, as career programs and staffing expand.

At present, inmates may select among career training programs in restaurant management (inmates operate the food service and a café in the center), manufacturing skills, computer programming, custodial management, and welding. Additional programs will be offered in the future.

In addition to the career programs, these high-risk, high-need inmates also receive intensive counseling to address a range of behavioral issues such as impulsivity, anger management, patience and focus.

The Kewanee center looks and acts almost like a small college campus. Staff and students (inmates) say Hi or High Five one another as they pass in the corridors. Inmates have their own alarm clocks and dine when they wish. They control their own schedules, though most of the time they are in class or learning a skill.

There is an art studio and even a menswear store, where inmates about to be released shop among racks of lightly used clothing for two sets of clothes, one for street wear and one for interviews.

After the graduation ceremony, welding graduate Samuel Stewart told me he already had a job with a manufacturing company, upon his release at the end of August. A native of the Quad-Cities, Smith is finishing a 10-year sentence with IDOC.

“This has been a great opportunity to learn a high-demand trade, become employable and earn a livable wage,” said Stewart.

Welding graduate John Palmer was elected by his fellow inmates to give a valedictory speech at the ceremony.

“Thanks to all of you for taking this leap of faith in us,” Palmer said to the 50 in attendance, as his fellow graduates sat nearby in their caps and gowns, probably the first time many had ever worn such.

Now the challenge is to see that the inmates who wanted to break into Kewanee are able to succeed when they come back to society.