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County OKs pact training inmates

Commissioners overwhelmed by success of pilot

Vivian Sade | The Journal Gazette

FORT WAYNE – A new contract for a company that provides career training and support for former criminal offenders was approved Friday by county officials who admitted surprise and pleasure at the success of the organization.

“When this program started, I wondered how in the world it was ever going to work,” Allen County Commissioner Linda Bloom said, adding she was pleased with the results.

The program, Blue Jacket Inc., was a pilot project of Allen County Community Corrections to serve the disadvantaged and to provide training and employment to ex-inmates, Executive Director Tony Hudson said.

The county is one of more than 30 community agencies that partner with Blue Jacket for its services. The not-for-profit organization is funded through contracts with its partners, and Allen County Community Corrections budgets about \$80,000 a year for Blue Jacket services.

The Blue Jacket organization includes an employment agency called Opportunity Staffing; clothing bank, soon to be a full fledged retail store; and a four-week Career Academy where clients decide their own destiny.

“They must be on time, they must have their assignments done daily and they must be dressed professionally. In other words, they must ‘walk the walk’ ” Hudson said.

Violators are dropped from the program, he said.

The organization turns away about 120 people a year who ask to be in the program, Hudson said.

“Employers have to be able to trust their employees and this program allows clients to regain that trust,” Hudson said.

The program dovetails with WorkOne of Northeast Indiana, which also provides employment opportunities and information on education and training programs, Commissioner Therese Brown said.

The clients usually come to Blue Jacket from jail with nothing but “\$7 and some lint in their pocket,” Hudson said

The program costs \$287 for each graduate, but most of that is funded through a scholarship grant provided by donations, Hudson said. “We ask each client to pay \$30 for the Career Academy so they have some investment in the process,” he said.

Blue Jacket also raises money by selling clothing and produce raised from its 36 gardens, Hudson said.

Two indicators of recidivism are employment and education.

“We have one of the best programs in the country because we address that,” Hudson said. About 18 percent of Blue Jacket graduates return to prison. That is significant when compared with the Department of Correction’s rate of 38 percent, Hudson said.

Commissioner Nelson Peters said the success rate speaks for itself.

The program recently graduated five students from an intensive pre-apprentice training regimen.

Through a grant award from Associated Builders and Contractors, the students received 90 hours of in-class and lab experience learning the fundamentals of construction, safety, and mathematics, while receiving other training certified by the U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Apprenticeship and Training and the National Center for Construction Education and Research. Students also earned certification in Occupational Safety and Health Administration standards, qualified rigging and signaling and forklift training.

Blue Jacket's services were recently made available to non-offenders such as the homeless, veterans and low-income residents, Hudson said.

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