

## "You Gotta be a Little Creative"

Just as an abandoned house can provide the materials to build a sturdy new home, offering new beginnings to society's offenders can help build strong and healthy communities. Giving a chance to ex-convicts to develop skills and a healthy work ethic while diverting valuable construction materials from swelling landfills serves to reaffirm the value of people and things too often discarded and forgotten by our society. With our trust and creativity we can rehabilitate and restore.

### ORANGE COUNTY COMMUNITY DISTRIBUTION CENTER, ORANGE CO., FL

Thinking outside the box can lead to ideas that address several societal needs at once. The participation of diverse community stakeholders is an important aspect of a risky program's success.

Rick Stanley, Senior Job Placement Counselor for Orange County Corrections, was at a construction site checking on his crew, and he couldn't help but notice a growing pile of usable building materials that was marked for the dump. Growing up poor, Stanley and his brother had accompanied their grandfather on several scavenging trips, gleaning usable windows, molding, and boards from abandoned houses in order to build another home. George Holleman, then head of Central Florida Builders Exchange, was also at the work site that day, and the two got to talking. Holleman said that dozens of nonprofit agencies constantly called him, seeking his help in locating donations of paint, wood, and other materials the agencies couldn't afford to buy. Stanley, whose primary concern at the time was finding decent employment for his work-release inmates, thought about other training programs at the correctional center and wondered whether opening a warehouse would be viable. Stanley and Holleman brainstormed and created the outline for what is now the Orange County Community Distribution Center (OCCDC), a warehouse through which donated building supplies and other items are directed to community organizations in need.

The distribution center addresses multiple issues at once. First, by accepting items that are typically thrown away, OCCDC has so far spared Florida public landfills over five million pounds of refuse. Corporations generating this waste are in turn relieved of significant tipping fees. Next, the center cleans up, organizes, and inventories the goods in preparation for reuse, providing warehouse training to minimum-security offenders. OCCDC also maintains a database of over 600 local churches, mental health agencies, youth organizations, and other nonprofit operations that need items that businesses discard. To date, these community organizations have received well over \$10 million worth--some 3,800 tons--of building materials and other items from the center free of charge.

OCCDC is a joint venture with Orange County corrections, a private sector advisory council, and the Florida Technical Institute, which provides instructors and curriculum. Weaving the interests of various organizations makes a stronger program, said George Welch, Unit Supervisor of OCCDC. "My grandfather was a farmer, and he taught me that a three-legged stool is the most stable because it will adapt itself to the surrounding terrain," said Welch.

Despite its success, the concept was not initially received with enthusiasm by the county corrections division. "The corrections industry draws people from the military," explained Stanley, who used to be a commanding officer. "They're not used to creativity and entrepreneurship." In the beginning, Stanley had no financial backing, but that didn't slow him down. He drove around town looking for a building to house the project and eventually came across a dilapidated warehouse with a "For Rent" sign listing an out-of-town number. Stanley called the owner and warned him that drug dealers and hoodlums had been using the building, and explained to the land owner his ideas for development. In the end, the owner gave Stanley use of the warehouse at no charge until the owner could sell it.

That part settled, getting the operation off the ground was "a grassroots thing," Stanley said. Inmates were persuaded to help Stanley clean, put up firewalls, and do other repairs on weekends in exchange for smoking privileges. At one point, Stanley's own son worked with him from dusk till dawn to prepare the warehouse for a morning inspection. Businesses donated materials, and the fifteen-member private sector advisory council stepped in to handle negotiations, PR issues, worker safety, and more. Orange County followed with \$ 8,000 to finish construction, \$4,000 of which was returned unspent because the community had pitched in. Signs for the lumberyard were made by girls from a local church, for example, and an ex-con who had become a disc jockey plugged the center on his show. The Walt Disney Company began to make donations, and the doors opened in 1993.

Because, as Stanley remarked, "It was a home-grown warehouse," the response from the community has been overwhelmingly positive. "Let's face it," Welch said, "nobody likes the fact that somebody broke into their home and stole their TV set or VCR or worse, but ultimately, all of those people return back to the community, and part of our goal here is to return the people in a better state than that in which they started out."

Though the original warehouse was sold after OCCDC had been in operation about two years, the county relocated the operation to a new 20,000 square foot building, which houses the warehouse and classroom space. In groups of about five, inmates on work release go through a voluntary six-week training program.

They receive no remuneration, but in exchange for their labor they are not charged rent at the work release center, where they live. Men and women inmates get on-the-job training to learn how to operate a forklift, safely handle hazardous materials, apply first aid and CPR, manage inventory, and more. "People skills" are also taught, including networking, conflict resolution, and personal accountability. Inmates leave the program with hands-on experience and official certification in six areas.

## **Inmates Serve the Community**

Inmates are directly involved with the customers who come to the center to drop off or search for materials. Welch said the warehouse typically has an inventory of about 500 different items. Inmates process a large amount of building materials, such as staircases, roofing, and lumber. Orange County has many hotels that are regular sources of tables, chairs, and carpet, but donations to OCCDC can get much more interesting than that. One day, Welch was dismayed to discover that a warehouse had accepted a donation of 300 theaterstyle seats. He wondered how they would ever get rid of them. "But they didn't last the afternoon," he said. The warehouse database tracks the types of nonprofit organizations registered with the OCCDC, and after a few phone calls by staff, the theater seats ended up as choir seating at a dozen churches. Recently, the center received a full-size, portable, lighted tennis court from a local family. Inmates dismantled and transported it from the owner's home, and then converted it into a roller rink and installed it at a local YMCA.

Occasionally Stanley takes a crew from the warehouse into community service. They identify a need, and then use materials from the warehouse to fill it. Inmates built a wheelchair ramp at a day care center that didn't have funds to construct one. For materials, they disassembled staircases. "You gotta be a little creative," Stanley said.

Through community service and customer service at the center, inmates and the community at large get used to each other again. Since 1993, 656 inmates have graduated from the OCCDC program, and Stanley's office has found jobs for all of them. Stanley teaches other work-release inmates the telemarketing skills needed to find job leads and build a database, now composed of 5,000 employers. "We've got more jobs than we've got people, " Stanley remarked. OCCDC shares its success. Stanley's office finds work not only for inmates, but for scores of other people on probation or home confinement, individuals from battered women's shelters and from the Coalition for the Homeless, and people who simply walk in off the street. To him, filling orders is just good business, and it will keep employers calling. "This," quipped Stanley, "is probably the only jail around that people come back to to get help."

"Rehabilitation is a by-product of accountability," Stanley asserted, and the workplace is an important arena in which to develop accountability. He doesn't have recidivism rates for those who have trained at OCCDC yet, but four seniors hired through American Association of Retired Person's Senior Citizen Employment Program are currently working four hours a day to follow up on ex-cons and compile this data. "They are the backbone of this place," said Stanley. The senior workers also stand in as role models of responsibility. When young inmates complain that they can't get to work without a car, Stanley refers them to a -year-old employee who takes the bus to work every day, even in the rain. Stanley himself has cerebral palsy. He avoids "preaching" to inmates the virtues of a strong work ethic, but, he added, "I don't accept any excuses."

## **The Tip of the Iceberg**

Though processes "tons and tons and tons of stuff" daily, Stanley believes they are merely scratching the surface of the volume of material they could save from landfill. Because the warehouse has only one driver and one correctional officer for the county's 1,000 square miles, it depends largely on donations made by contractors. To make it easier for donors, Stanley would like to place several large dumpsters designated for reusable materials at large construction sites. Soon, to more easily access the materials themselves, OCCDC will move to a permanent home at the landfill. There, according to Stanley, they'll have triage teams to sort through a larger volume of materials.

Stanley would also like to open a laundry near OCCDC because the warehouse frequently receives working washing machines. A laundry would allow OCCDC to accept clothing, which in turn could be sold at a thrift store or given to inmates who have no clothing to wear to work or to interviews upon release. Though he expects the inevitable raised eyebrows at his suggestions, Orange County is moving toward a more community-oriented approach to corrections, and Stanley's ideas may have a place. Stanley and Welch are both convinced that a version of OCCDC could be replicated in almost any community. Welch points to the fact that landfills are increasingly impractical, while at the same time most communities have organizations that need materials, contractors who want to avoid hauling and dumping expenses, and people who need jobs.

Source: [The Democracy Collective at the University of Maryland](#)