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Eric Gambrell, Board Member

Learning skills to help the visually-impaired: Mountain View Braille

By Eric Gambrell, Board Member



The Manufacturing and Logistics' Offender Work and Training Programs division operates four designated training facilities. The primary functions of these facilities are to develop production skills and a work ethic in offenders, while providing valuable services to state agencies and Texas school districts that help reduce costs. Through these programs, eligible offenders are provided opportunities to learn specialized, technical job skills, and earn national certifications for those skill sets.

One of these programs, the Mountain View Braille Facility, provides female offenders the opportunity to learn and become certified Braille transcribers. The offenders are trained in this specialized field, and then work in the facility to transcribe materials for school districts statewide.

The Mountain View Braille Facility began operation in 1983 with 50 offenders reproducing thermoform copies of tactile graphics for visually-impaired students in Texas. Tactile graphics are raised images that enable visually-impaired people, through touch, to

obtain a representation of how something appears. Without tactile graphics of geometric shapes in math books, or maps in a geography book, the visually-impaired student would not have an image to illustrate that shape. The Braille facility reproduced tactile graphics for all of the state's textbooks, with the actual transcription of print being completed outside the agency.

By January 1999, Braille transcription at the Mountain View facility was a complete textbook production operation, with the offenders providing tactile graphics as well as print transcription services. As the Texas Education Agency established a requirement for all textbooks to have a Braille version, the demand for reproduction and transcription services in Texas accelerated to accommodate orders from the state's education centers.

To address this increased demand, the facility's plant manager developed a curriculum

to teach Braille and tactile graphics to the offenders. The offender students started by learning the Braille alphabet, and by typing on a Perkins Braillewriter. A Perkins Braillewriter is similar to an old manual typewriter, but with only six keys to represent the six cells that make up Braille. The students were taught by Texas Correctional Industries employees in short course classes at the facility, after normal work hours. Since the transition in 1999, the facility has transcribed a wide array of school books, to include foreign language books and college level calculus textbooks.

As technology has improved, it has been incorporated into the Braille production. Today, offenders still learn on the Perkins Braillewriter for their first few lessons, but computers and software enable the transcriber to work faster and more efficiently. Even tactile graphics are benefitting from graphics software and digital printers or laser engravers. The Braille facility has part-

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nered with the Georgia Institute of Technology for a Second Chance Technology Grant from the Department of Justice. This grant has allowed the facility to benefit from some much-needed technology as well as a refined Braille curriculum. The grant also introduced an interpersonal skills and a small business curriculum to help released offenders become self-employed as Braille transcriptionists.

On average, 100,000 pages of Braille and tactile graphics are produced by the facility in a year, through the efforts of approximately 100 offenders. The Mountain View Braille Facility has become one of the largest prison Braille programs in the country. The facility is operated by a plant manager, who is a certified Nemeth transcriber, and four employees, all of whom are certified in literary Braille. The program currently has 43 female offenders with their literary certification from the Library of Congress, 15 certified Nemeth transcribers, three music-certified, 10 textbook-formatting certified and one that is a certified proofreader. Nemeth-certified transcribers are individuals who are proficient in Nemeth Code, which is used in the transcription of mathematics, science, and most other technical material. Since the program's transformation in 1999, a total of 115 literary, 24 Nemeth, 20 textbook-formatting, six music and one proofreading certification have been awarded to the facilities' offenders. Of those who have been released with certifications, the majority are working as

independent contract transcribers for Braille production companies.

The Braille Facility at Mountain View is achieving big things. Its work helps Texas' visually-impaired students learn and teaches offenders a rewarding and marketable skill that allows the certified offenders to be productive and self-sufficient in a Braille transcription career following their release. ●