

CONNECTIONS

TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE

PILLARS OF IMPACT

December 2023



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CONNECTIONS

The first issue of the Criminal Justice Connections was published in August 1994 and continued as a printed newsletter through the September/October 2005 issue. After that, it was published only as an online newsletter beginning with the November/December issue. During COVID-19, the Connections became less of a newsletter and more of a memorial page for our friends and colleagues we lost during the pandemic.

Now the Connections is back as a printed publication! We hope you find it informative and a fitting publication for the best agency in Texas!



The first Criminal Justice Connections newsletter, printed in 1994.

DEAR TEAM:

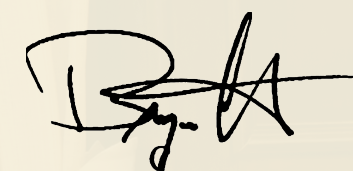
Looking to the future of the agency, I see opportunity and promise on the horizon. Although the COVID-19 pandemic presented unprecedented challenges, it pushed us to reevaluate how we did things. Now, TDCJ has an opportunity to seize this momentum and make changes in our culture and our system.

Leaders who oversee every function within this agency were challenged to create a plan that would help TDCJ achieve its goals. These plans were combined to create an overarching 2030 Vision. The vision consists of seven Pillars of Impact that will help us transform lives for a better Texas and protect the public of our great state.

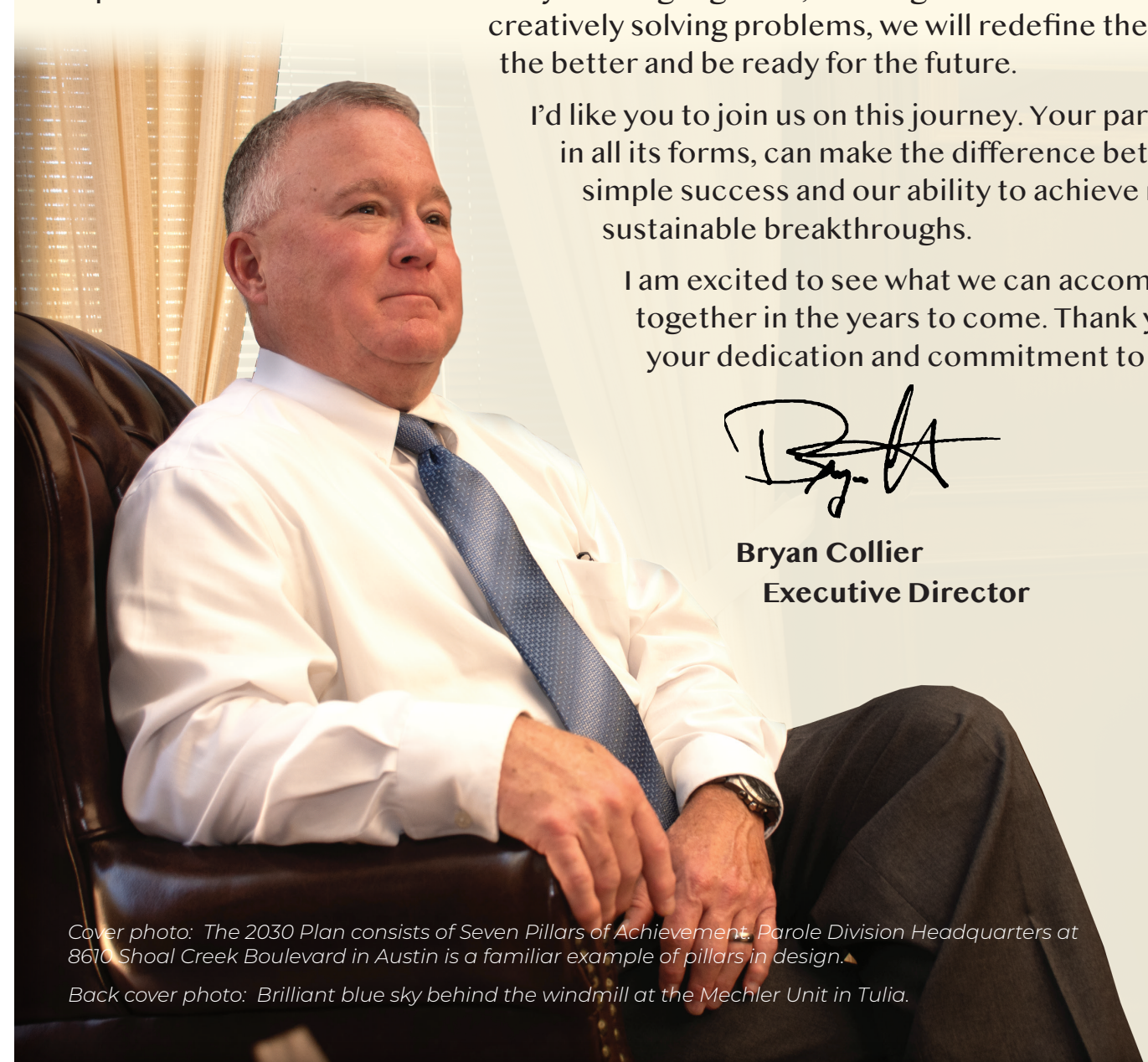
Inside this new magazine version of Connections is a glimpse of the many initiatives our team will be bringing to fruition. These Pillars of Impact are the blueprint for the future, but it is our dedicated board members, legislatures, employees and community partners that will lead us there. By working together, thinking outside of the box and creatively solving problems, we will redefine the agency for the better and be ready for the future.

I'd like you to join us on this journey. Your participation, in all its forms, can make the difference between simple success and our ability to achieve real and sustainable breakthroughs.

I am excited to see what we can accomplish together in the years to come. Thank you for your dedication and commitment to TDCJ.



Bryan Collier
Executive Director



Cover photo: The 2030 Plan consists of Seven Pillars of Achievement. Parole Division Headquarters at 8610 Shoal Creek Boulevard in Austin is a familiar example of pillars in design.▲

Back cover photo: Brilliant blue sky behind the windmill at the Mechler Unit in Tulia.

TDCJ SETS NEW TARGET: BEST EMPLOYER IN TEXAS

On that long walkway between 13 and 1 Building, flanked on either side by the pristine landscaping of the Polunsky Unit, Captain Nelaj stands with his hands on his hips, looking at the ground with his brows furrowed in intense concentration. He commits his line to memory with ease – but there’s always the age-old question of what to do with your hands. His head snaps to the camera and a satisfied smile splashes across his face. **“OKAY. I KNOW WHAT TO DO.”**



WHEN THE CAMERA STARTS ROLLING, Captain Nelaj walks toward 1 Building with purpose, as he has done for over a decade of service.

“Our goal is to be the No. 1 employer in the state of Texas by 2030 and we can’t do that without you!”

Nelaj ends the shot with a resolute point to the camera, evoking Uncle Sam and the most iconic recruitment drive in the history of the United States. It’s an unscripted moment that resonates with the agency’s 2030 Plan of increasing employee satisfaction and engagement.

It’s no secret. TDCJ has struggled in recent years to maintain staffing levels, particularly among correctional officer positions. The COVID-19 pandemic placed an unprecedented strain on everyone in the system, including officers who are already under tremendous pressure by the very nature of maintaining public safety in one of the largest prison systems in the United States.

Though enticing new recruits has been a major focus in the agency’s efforts to improve staffing levels, data collected by TDCJ’s Research and Development Department is leading a fundamental change in how the agency seeks to overcome staffing challenges.

“It’s retention,” Andy Barbee, director of the Research and Development Division said.

“We’re very good at getting new recruits in the door, but data shows that we have struggled recently with keeping employees. This tells us that pay, though important, isn’t the most important factor in keeping people. Much of retention comes down to the experience they have once they put on the uniform.”

The goal of not only being a good place to work, but the best place to work in the Lone Star State, originated with Bryan Collier, the Executive Director of TDCJ. A voracious reader, Collier keeps up with Forbes’ list of “America’s Best Employers by State,” published every year. TDCJ is not anywhere on that list, but Collier has set his sights on changing that.

“It’s a lofty goal, but that’s what you have to shoot for. You don’t get anywhere by making goals that are easy to achieve. I don’t want to check boxes just to check boxes. I want to transform where we work, so we have to set those tough-to-achieve goals and get after it,” Collier said.

He points to one company, H-E-B, whose employees’ responses to the Forbes survey routinely catapult the company

to its coveted No. 1 employer spot.

“Here are jobs that are not the highest paying jobs, but it’s a good environment to work in. It’s not about looking to H-E-B and doing everything they’re doing. What makes those employees so invested in where they work? That’s what we want to try to replicate,” Collier said.

With a five percent pay raise to all state employees secured in the last legislative session and another five percent pay raise coming September 2024, TDCJ is placing more emphasis on transforming the working environment. Soon, employees will be provided with a career plan and career-path counseling, so a path to upward mobility is available, and tuition reimbursement will offer pathways to employees seeking higher education. TDCJ’s Training and Leader Development Division is also revolutionizing how training is delivered to employees to ensure that all state employees can be reached with online learning platforms and hybrid training.

Some changes are already being seen at the unit level. Earlier this year, the role of the lieutenant transformed into a position focused on staff retention within the unit. There is also a greater emphasis on flexibility and trying new ideas, as seen through mobile correctional officer teams and correctional officers who volunteer to work at units that struggle with staffing levels.

However, some of the changes that may end up having the

greatest impact involve rewriting prison operational policies to create efficiencies without sacrificing public safety. For instance, the introduction of pulse detection fences renders picket officers largely obsolete. That means those officers, who were once physically isolated for long stretches of time, are now available to cover other areas within the unit. Correctional officers will also aid in accountability while also protecting our employees, thereby bolstering a safe and professional work environment.

For now, TDCJ leadership is working out the details on how exactly to measure whether we’ve achieved the goal of being the number one employer in the state of Texas. The CReW Survey, which Captain Nelaj’s video helped promote, may be retooled later to ask that question. Town hall meetings with TDCJ employees or using outside survey groups to gather that information may be another method. And, of course, there’s always Forbes. Regardless of the method, maintaining an open dialogue between management and labor is paramount to achieving this goal.

“We have to become a learning organization,” reiterates Andy Barbee. “We have to give employees ownership, agency, and influence in ways we never have before.”

In the meantime, if you see that Correctional Retention and Wellness survey come to your phone, take the survey. Be part of the change.



“We want to be the number one place to work in Texas!” This is the message from David Yebra, director of the Training and Leader Development Division. To achieve this goal, TDCJ is implementing a program for employees who want to begin or further their education by reimbursing their tuition.

THIS FALL, an application process was launched for employees to submit requests to their division directors to have their tuition expenses reimbursed while pursuing educational opportunities at accredited institutions of higher learning.

To apply for the tuition reimbursement program, one must be a full-time TDCJ employee with at least three continuous years (36 months) of service, a satisfactory annual job performance evaluation and not be on disciplinary probation or be a return-to-work retiree.

The form to request tuition reimbursement must be submitted 60 days before the deadline to enroll in a higher education course with an explanation of the relevance for taking the course along with details about the institution of higher learning.

A review committee consisting of agency administrators will evaluate each application based on the eligibility, course

relevance and potential
improvement in job-related skills.

“Our workforce is the backbone of this agency, and investing in their education and professional development is vital,” TDCJ Executive Director Bryan Collier said. “Through the EmpowerEDU Tuition Reimbursement Program, we aim to empower our employees to not only excel in their current roles, but also to prepare for future challenges and opportunities.”

When an employee is selected for the tuition reimbursement program, they must remain employed during the semester of their course work, as well as for a specified period after they have completed their studies. If an employee fails to adhere to these requirements, then they may be required to make a full restitution of the payment.

Employees must request reimbursement within 20 days of receiving their final grades and successfully completing the course, as verified by the TDCJ Business and Finance Division. Reimbursement is capped at

\$5,000 per fiscal year for tuition, books and mandatory fees.

The tuition reimbursement program benefits employees by improving job-related skills and providing financial assistance while positioning them to excel within the agency.

Yebra said TDCJ needs to make sure that job seekers know that there are opportunities available within the agency besides being a Correctional Officer.

“When you look at the job postings on the agency’s website, you’ll see positions in Information Technology (IT), Manufacturing, Agribusiness, Logistics and Health Services,” Yebra said. “We have to let folks know that opportunities exist in TDCJ besides being an officer on a unit.”

For more information about the tuition reimbursement program, contact the Training and Leader Development Division at 936-437-3201 or scan the QR code to access online information.



Putting yourself in the shoes of a correctional officer and the daily challenges they face is one of the goals of the Citizens' Academy at TDCJ. The inaugural academy consisted of six sessions held at various TDCJ sites in Huntsville this fall.



THE CITIZENS' ACADEMY educated participants about the agency while building relationships with community leaders, media and interest groups. They met the leadership of TDCJ while hearing from various divisions about the agency's operations that are of interest to the public.

“Our first Citizens’ Academy provided participants with a first-hand look into the inner workings of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice,” TDCJ Executive Director Bryan Collier said. “Hopefully, they became more familiar with the hard work that our correctional officers and support staff put in daily to keep Texas safe, as well as the opportunities available to the inmates to further educate themselves and prepare for a better life upon release.”

The first week of the Citizens' Academy introduced participants to the various employment opportunities that exist within TDCJ. Representatives from the agency's Business and Finance Division, Victim Services Division and Community Justice Assistance Division gave presentations on how each of those divisions operates.

"Each division director or their designee led the portion of the course that focuses on their area," said TDCJ Director of Communications Amanda Hernandez.

The second week allowed participants a close-up view of prison operations including a “Day in the Life of a Correctional Officer” scenario and a tour inside the Huntsville Unit, the oldest continuously operating prison in the state of Texas.

In the third week, representatives from the Manufacturing, Agribusiness and Logistics Division enlightened participants on what Texas Correctional Industries does and the opportunities that exist within the agency for working with

horses, other animals and farming equipment. They also learned the intricacies of transporting inmates across the state.

Learning about job training opportunities for inmates and how TDCJ provides them with education opportunities for securing employment upon their release was another aspect of the curriculum.

The final two weeks focused on rehabilitative programs available for inmates and how the agency prepares them for returning to their communities with educational programs like STRIVE and job fairs.

At the culmination of the six-week Citizens' Academy, there was a panel discussion with former inmates and then a graduation ceremony for the participants on Nov. 8.

"TDCJ was thrilled to embark on this new endeavor by engaging with the community through the first annual Citizens' Academy," Hernandez said. "Attendees gained valuable insights into our daily operations, initiatives, and our unwavering commitment to public safety and the rehabilitation of those within our care."

Hernandez said the goal is to have a Citizens' Academy in each TDCJ Region.



by Communications Staff

CRISIS PROGRAMS OFFER SUPPORT AND HOPE

In This Together

WHILE CORRECTIONS can be a rewarding career for many, the inherent danger of working with incarcerated individuals, as well as the extraordinary stressors associated with the job, can seriously affect the well-being of staff. When this happens, TDCJ's Crisis Response Intervention Support Program (CRISP) is available to help.

Established in 2008, CRISP is always ready to lend a hand of support when needed. Specially trained staff impact teams, who are distinct from CRISP but managed through the Victim Services Division's Employee Support Services (ESS) section, are ready to provide valuable services that include critical incident support and debriefing, peer support, information and referrals, as well as follow up support. ESS staff victim advocates are available to help should you become crime victim of a crime while on the job.

Your CRISP team members work with you or near you; they are your fellow TDCJ employees. They understand the nature of working for TDCJ, because they work for TDCJ. They also are continually trained and equipped with the knowledge and tools to help you through a crisis or trauma. Whether they are on your unit or a neighboring office or region, CRISP team members are ready and able to assist.

To request ESS support, you can talk to your supervisor or contact your regional ESS member.

At TDCJ, we are not immune to or free from potential significant traumatic events, stress and burnout, alcohol dependency and substance use, accidents, crime, or domestic and family violence. As the CRISP program

has developed, more and more team members began to express a need for extended peer support for traumatic events that happen on the job and in our daily lives.

At TDCJ, we are
not immune to
or free from
significant
traumatic events.

While your CRISP team members are available to provide critical incident support, ESS staff also provide peer support interventions as well as extended information and referral services for a number of situations, including mental

health concerns, anxiety and depression, suicide awareness and prevention, and protective orders. ESS staff can help you understand and exercise your statutory rights as a crime victim, provide guidance with Texas Crime Victims' Compensation claims, and support you through the criminal justice process. ESS staff also provide training and support for CRISP team members across the agency.

ESS Program members, left to right: Linda Gonzales, Tracie Sible, Jordan Schlafer, Caleb Taylor, (Executive Assistant to Ms. McCaffity), Mary McCaffity, (Deputy Director, Victim Services Division), Gidgett McKnight, Sumer Wassef, Trisha Boardman, Dawn McKeehan (ESS Manager), Brenda Gutierrez, and Connie Kennard



CRISIS SUPPORT WHEN SHE NEEDED IT

IN JUNE 2023, SHANTORA GREGGS was on a cruise with her husband when they got a phone call letting them know that their two-month-old grandson had suddenly died from an unexpected medical condition. Stunned from the news and dealing with her grief while also trying to provide comfort and support for her grieving son and the rest of her family, Greggs, a long-time correctional officer at the Ellis Unit, sought out support from her unit CRISP team.

Busy with the difficult planning of her grandson's memorial service, CRISP team members provided peer support and care for Greggs but also stepped in to find a venue and arrange for the memorial service repast. The team had everything set up and helped with serving the food and refreshments for those who attended. They even brought a gift in memory of her grandson.

Greggs found comfort in the care and support of her CRISP team when they were needed. She also said it is comforting to know she has this kind of peer support. She is grateful for how they stepped up and exceeded her expectations in her and her family's time of need.

Above: Tracie Sible, ESS CRISP Coordinator, and Connie Kennard, ESS Victim Advocate, talking to staff about the ESS Program. Left: Sible, Shantora Greggs and Kennard.



If you or someone you know needs **peer support**, contact the Victim Services Employee Support Services team at 800-848-4284. The 800 number is answered Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. To find the ESS team member for your region, just scan on the QR code.

TO *in this* **GETHER**

VOLUNTEER SHINES THROUGH SERVICE

“I should have been one of those women up there. I tell them, ‘The only difference between me and you is that you got caught and I didn’t.’”

BY THEM, MONICA MARKS means the women she serves as a volunteer for Kairos Prison Ministry at the Hobby Unit in Marlin.

“So, I guess that’s why I’m passionate about it. And I tell them, ‘There’s no difference. I am absolutely no better than you. The Lord doesn’t love me anymore than he loves you. The only difference is I didn’t get caught. I should have, but I didn’t.’”

Marks has been open about her past struggles with substance use. She’s been sober now for over 13 years and thanks God for keeping her clean. This is what led her to volunteer with Kairos.

The program has a mission to bring love and forgiveness to those incarcerated. She remembers the dark days she struggled through and recognizes that she was lucky. She was lucky she didn’t get caught, but she’s also lucky she had a support system. During some of her darkest days, she had friends and family she could lean on as well as people to help her make

“... for those women to see that we have some of the same struggles that they have makes us more genuine in their eyes.”

the right choices. Sometimes hard choices, but the right choices.

“I chose the lifestyle. These women chose the lifestyle,” Marks said. “I don’t think any of us ever stopped long enough to realize how detrimental our choices could be to our lives.”

“Sometimes we don’t understand that the smallest choices can lead to some of either

the biggest breakthroughs or the biggest downfalls.”

Now Marks tries to be a beacon of light into their darkness. She knows how it feels to live in the dark.

“I could be one of them. But I saw my actions and the bad choices I was making, and I decided to choose differently,” Marks said

She volunteers most Saturdays. “I kind of laugh now because when I’m on Highway 6 coming in and I can see that water tower way off in the back, I get excited because I know I’m bringing light to a dark place.”

“And these women are hungry for it. They’re asking us all the time, ‘When are y’all coming back?’”

As the women begin to file into the small classroom, Marks and her fellow volunteers begin clapping and welcoming each of them. They exchange greetings and hugs and catch up since the last visit. And then, they just share. They talk about life, their children, their struggles, their accomplishments, and their choices. It gives the women a chance to stand in the light.

“I think for us to go behind the walls and for those women to see that we have some of the same



Marks and Kairos staff meet program participants as they enter the classroom.

struggles that they have makes us more genuine in their eyes. It makes them realize why we are there,” Marks said.

“Prison can be a dark place and I want to shine a light into those dark corners and be a beacon for them. And if I can touch just one person, then I’ve done the work.”

She says she’s been repeating two letters: “U” and “N.” Un –

Unwanted.
Unloved.
Unworthy.
Unnecessary.
Unreveled.

“You could go down the list.” That’s how she felt, and that’s how she knows these women can feel.

But she has made the choice to see her life differently “NU.” She is NEW. And she wants these





women to make that same choice. Be new.

"Oh, that's powerful. I am Worthy, and I am Wanted, and I am Loved," she said.

Marks received the TDCJ Employee Volunteer Award during the Governor's 2022 Criminal Justice Volunteer Service Awards Ceremony for her work as a Kairos volunteer.

Kairos of Texas began their ministry in TDCJ units in the 1980s. Kairos volunteers minister to both male and female inmates in 46 units across the state.

The organization's mission is to bring Christ's love and forgiveness to those incarcerated and their families and to assist in the transition to become a productive and successful citizen.

Learn more about TDCJ's volunteer programs here:



Volunteering most Saturdays, she says, "I kind of laugh now because when I'm on Highway 6 coming in and I can see that water tower way off in the back, I get excited because I know I'm bringing light to a dark place."

Weekend visits bridge the gap between longer, full weekend retreats that happen at units throughout the year.



by Jason Henderson

“IF YES, EXPLAIN” EASING THE TRANSITION FROM INMATE TO EMPLOYEE

Paul Blanchard is busy filling out a job application form. He recently moved to a new town and hopes a change of scenery will do him good. He has plenty of work experience and knows he would make an excellent employee. The job he held at his previous location gave him so much work experience in various fields that he’s not even sure he can fit all that information onto one page.

BLANCHARD SPENT TEN YEARS at his previous location learning everything from wood working to plumbing to metal machinery. He can operate machines for wood working and metal fabrication. He can even drive the forklift to haul his creations to a loading dock and onto a truck. Blanchard’s application is almost complete. There’s just one more section that needs to be filled. The small section at the bottom of the form that reads “Have you ever been convicted of a felony?” This is the dreaded moment when he must explain that his previous job location was at the Stevenson Unit in Cuero, Texas.

Carol Ann Vaughan is a professional ice breaker. As the post release employment specialist at TDCJ, she knows how hard these inmates have worked to gain knowledge and experience. She also knows there are plenty of companies in Texas looking for skilled laborers. If she can break the ice with

these companies and open them up to the idea of hiring former inmates, the employment process will go much smoother, and the newly-released inmate will have a significantly lower chance of ever going back to prison.

Vaughan spends a lot of time online searching for companies that could use the skills of former inmate workers from the Manufacturing, Agribusiness, and Logistics Division (MAL). She also networks with companies that already have existing partnerships with TDCJ. MAL, which includes the Inmate Work and Training Department, will often set up quarterly Skills Demonstration and Career Expos within TDCJ. “We [the Committee for the Skills Demonstration and Career Expos] send emails out with a flyer,” Vaughan explained. “The employer must send back registration information, so we know who’s coming. ... If it’s somebody new, I try to send them an email beforehand to introduce myself and explain the

mission and purpose of the Skills Demonstration and Career Expo.”

These Expos are a way for the inmates to show off their skills, to network with potential employers and to help the inmates prepare for the social side of employment. Potential employers from various industries walk around the Expo area and watch the inmates as they work on engines and perform other skills like welding, carpentry, and computer programming. They are encouraged to speak with the inmates and have casual although informative conversations.

“I educate our staff on how they are impacting lives and what they can do to assist in our mission, and I educate employers on what TDCJ, specifically MAL, is doing to assist our incarcerated workers with developing and improving skills they can use for employment upon their release.”

After meeting in person with the inmate or an individual who MAL has informed me about who has worked with or for the inmate and has released or is about to release, Vaughan creates a resumé for the inmate, giving official job code work descriptions, complete job skills history, as well as certificates of achievement and safety training merits.

Vaughan likes to host practice interviews with inmates. Asking them questions that a potential employer might ask. Of course, the one question she prepares them for is the one regarding the reason for their incarceration. She

knows that question will come up. So, it is important for the inmate to answer it honestly and to the point. “You did whatever it was. Talk about what it was and own it,” Vaughan continued. “You’re here. This is what you did and that’s not who you are anymore. Always talk about it in the past tense.”

These practice interviews have clearly paid off. One company hired an inmate straight out of prison with a job starting at over twenty dollars an hour. They also purchased a set of tools for him. There have even been instances where the employers would drive their new, *former-inmate*, employees to their parole appointments. Clearly these companies are willing to go the extra mile to make a difference in these workers’ lives, but also benefit their own companies with skilled, dependable workers. For the people of Texas, this is a win. Inmates are not only paying their debt to society, they are also learning rehabilitative skills, and hopefully keeping the recidivism rate low with gainful employment.

Vaughan will sometimes hear from former inmates through email. They tell her about their new jobs, new experiences, and even offer advice to the next group of inmates looking for work. With every happy ending, Vaughan uses the experience and knowledge she gained to improve her approach when breaking the ice with new employers.

*Includes the Reentry & Integration Division, the Windham School District, the Rehabilitation Program Division, the Laundry, Food Service & Supply Division, the Facilities Division, and the Manufacturing, Agribusiness & Logistics Division.

VIRTUAL RECOVERY USING THE POWER OF TECHNOLOGY TO HELP INMATES

The road to recovery can be long and filled with many obstacles that can be hard for an individual to overcome without the proper resources and support.

FOR INCARCERATED INDIVIDUALS, navigating that road can be even more strenuous.

The Rehabilitation Programs Division (RPD) provides these important services and support to the inmate population. They work diligently to develop new and innovative programs for the men and women in TDCJ facilities.

In 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the world was faced with having to adapt to a new way of life. For the agency, it was learning how to use the power of technology to serve the inmates in the In-Prison Substance Use Treatment

Program. From there, the Technology Assisted Treatment Program was created as part of an agency-wide effort.

“The Technology Assisted Treatment Program really came to many people’s thoughts and has been something that we [TDCJ] have discussed before,” Deputy Director of the Substance Use Treatment Programs Andrea Canul said. “Then the idea was really pushed with COVID, because a lot of the world was going virtual.”

The program, which was first implemented in April 2023 at the Polunsky Unit in Livingston,

gives inmates the capability to visit virtually with a substance use counselor individually and in group settings.

As part of the program, inmates undergo 15 direct service hours with a substance use counselor over a span of six months. They are housed in an in-person therapeutic community where inmates who have similar treatment needs live together and help with each other’s addiction recovery and developing positive behavior.

Canul said the program helps inmates not just work on their recovery but really learn about addiction and the effects it has on an individual.

“We have inmates who have done some serious time, and they have reported that there are certain things about substance use that they’re now learning,” Canul said. “The program definitely has had a positive impact and it’s something we’re going to continue to use.”

RPD Director Chris Carter said the program has had a huge impact on the inmates who are participating in the program, the division and agency as a whole.

“The new virtual substance use treatment program has truly enhanced RPD’s ability to administratively assign

individuals to an intensive treatment program,” Carter said. “This program was developed to provide individuals treatment based on need, and not primarily focused on sentence length and parole eligibility status.”

According to Carter, this model has proven to be a major game changer in the lives of the participants.

“I have personally witnessed testimonies on how the treatment sessions have empowered them to maintain a healthy lifestyle free from drugs and alcohol,” Carter said. “Virtual programming allows our agency to deliver quality treatment, increase productivity, maximize resources and reduce cost in the future.”

The agency is beginning to look at expanding the program to other units, as well as how other programs outside of substance use treatment could benefit from using the Technology Assisted Treatment Program.



RPD Director, Chris Carter talks to inmates about the new Technology Assisted Treatment Program.



Releasing to the community, STRIVE graduates like Regan Sayon (above speaking to her fellow graduates) have a place to live, new skills, a good job and hope. Two of the ambitious pillars of the Pillars of Impact address recidivism and reentry success. With progressive programs like, STRIVE, more inmates have a chance of not returning once they release from TDCJ. To learn more about Sayon’s story visit the TDCJ YouTube page at <https://www.youtube.com/@TDCJvideos/videos>.

THE FUTURE OF FOOD NEW, NUTRITIOUS FRESH FROZEN MEAL PROGRAM

As part of a long-term strategic plan, TDCJ inmate students enrolled in the Windham School District’s Culinary Training Program will develop fresh frozen meal options for use in select facilities in the TDCJ system.

THESE NEW, READY-MADE meals can be stored safely for an extended time and then quickly reheated. They will replace the “Johnny Sacks” and resemble the popular TV dinner style meals that can be found in the freezer section at your local grocery store.

“Currently our Fresh Frozen Program is in its infancy,” said Garth Parker, Deputy Director of Manufacturing, Agribusiness and Logistics for Texas Department of Criminal Justice. “The goal of the program, which is part of the agency’s 2030 plan, is to replace the sack lunch options inmates now receive with a more nutritious, hot meal option.”

Every aspect of the production of the new fresh frozen meals will be implemented by inmates under direct supervision of TDCJ staff. The inmates will cook the meals; package them into trays; and then use speed-sealing machines to freeze and prepare the meals for storage.

“The meals would be packaged, flash frozen, and stored in a cold storage until needed,” Parker said. “When they are needed, they would be put into an industrial re-heater and prepared in batches to then be passed out to the inmates.”

Inmates participating in the program launch facilities will also be able to provide input in the menu options for these new trays. The ideal menu for the new meals will consist of a main entrée with sides consisting of a vegetable and a starch, like pasta and rice.

“Our goal with the program is to incorporate inmate feedback to help develop a high-quality product,” Parker stated. “We want the input from inmates during the development process on what works and what doesn’t because ultimately, they are the ones who the new trays are designed for.”

Parker explained one of the main hurdles with the program is finding meal options that are complete in nutritional value

and are enjoyable after the re-heating process. The program is piloting at three facilities, the Daniel Webster Wallace Unit, the Pam Lychner State Jail, and the A.M. “Mac” Stringfellow Unit. Kosher meal options are being produced at the Stringfellow Unit. The agency plans to increase the number of production facilities to six in the future allowing for one facility to be in each TDCJ region.

Part of TDCJ’s 2030 plan is for 95 percent of inmates to have a job prior to release. This program not only increases the quality of food inmates receive inside TDCJ facilities but will provide inmates with the education and job skills needed to join the food service and warehouse industries, assisting in their reintegration into society.

About the Culinary Training Program:

The Culinary Arts Training Program, taught by Windham School District, is an intensive 18-week course available to inmate students. The course teaches students all the basic skills that apply to most food production, such as kitchen safety and sanitation, standard recipe use, meat, vegetable, fruit and pasta preparation, and menu development. Upon graduation,

students earn a ServSafe culinary certificate from the National Restaurant Association Educational Foundation. This certification includes an eight-hour exam, which all food handlers must possess to pursue a career in the food industry. Future classes will also begin the development of the skills needed to create meals that will be provided to fellow inmates.



Steam rises at the kitchen at the San Antonio Food Bank. Inmates in the Windham School District Culinary Arts Program participate in the development of fresh frozen meals and learn valuable and meaningful skills that translate to free world jobs.

by Roxanne Moss



PREDICTING TO PREVENT

Suicide has historically been a leading cause of death in prisons. According to the National Institute of Corrections, “rates of suicide are far higher than the national averages.” The need for preventing carceral suicide is urgent.

THE TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE considered this need and assembled a special team of Research and Development, Correctional Institutions Division and Victims Services Division staff to work towards a solution. Their in-depth examination of carceral suicide identified statistical analysis and the necessity of safe spaces as criteria for developing the agency’s self-harm prevention program.

In 2021, the Research and Development team began a statistical analysis. As explained by Andrew Barbee, Director of the Research and Development Department, their assignment “was two-pronged; first, work with executive services to gather data, compile a database and form a risk assessment screening tool with an algorithm that made sense, and then enlist health and wellness services, University of Texas Medical Branch and the Texas Tech University System for access to inmate health records.

Mr. Collier wanted to understand suicide and somehow quantify it. This was the basis of our assignment.”

The next task was “suicide distinction,” a means of capturing suicide in stages to determine at-risk classification.

The last task was constructing the algorithm for the risk assessment screening tool. It was daunting.

Barbee described the algorithm’s job as “scanning the database to identify and sort inmates by suicide distinction, combining diagnostic terms and inmate records with that distinction, and returning an accurate at-risk classification. The output would be a daily report, identifying inmates at risk on a unit while relaying a quantified percentage of those inmates compared to the total inmate population.”

The risk assessment screening tool was put into action last year. The results from the first year were promising. Barbee described the risk assessment

screening tool as “classifying 6.5 percent to 7 percent of the inmate population as being at risk and accurately predicting 50-55 percent of all suicides and self-harm events.”

The second-year goal for the tool is to accurately predict 65 to 70 percent of all suicides and self-harm events. The enhancements for the tool to meet that goal will begin when the Correctional Information Technology System installation is complete.

In addition to the risk assessment, self-harm prevention offices were established. TDCJ is currently operating 16 pilot offices. The provision of staff for these offices is a collaboration between Correctional Institutions Division employees and peer support coaches, also referred to as self-

NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH 5 ACTION STEPS TO SUICIDE PREVENTION



Ask



Stay Connected



Be There



Keep Them Safe



Help Them Connect

harm prevention specialists. These offices use inmate peers to interact with the at-risk inmate population to build connection and reduce isolation. The need to leverage these resources and offer training prompted the implementation of the five-step action plan by the National Institute of Mental Health. The five action steps are ask, keep them safe, be there, help them connect and follow up.

Mary McCaffity, Deputy Director of the Victims Services Division, explained that Employee Support Services works in

conjunction with other agency departments to advance suicide prevention initiatives across the agency.

McCaffity elaborated that “they train on this continually, they talk about these five action steps all the time. Our support staff and peer coaches use these steps to connect.”

Some of the inmate peer support coaches have taken additional steps to enhance their one-on-one connection. At the Robertson Unit, 70 peer support coaches rotate their shifts

to give inmates comfortable engagements with their favorite coach.

Inmate Brandon Coppock, a self-harm prevention specialist at the Estelle Unit, offered insight on the activities of the program.

“A lot of what we do is just going around creating and cultivating relationships, talking to people in their housing area who are going through different things. A lot of these guys are already on our risk tool, so they are on our radar,” Coppock said. “But we may also come into contact with other

inmates on the way. They may stop us in the hallway, know we are self-harm specialists and say ‘Hey, I really need to talk to you.’”

He shared an additional acronym: listen, observe, validate, and emphasize (LOVE), and explained that they apply this acronym when talking to those additional inmates.

“We teach LOVE, to love them, to tell them we love them, to emphasize that we really do care about them.”

The TDCJ suicide prevention program is still in its infancy, but it has broadened the lens of carceral suicide behind bars

and in front of them. Combining risk assessment with human connection has created daily opportunities to lessen suicide and stop self-harm within the agency. The plan for growth is multifaceted, with the focus remaining on predicting suicide to prevent it.

“The staff that is working inside these offices and the inmates that work in it have to have a heart; they have to have the want and will to change people, to help people out, and care about people,” Estelle Unit Food Service Major, who assists with the suicide prevention program, Jennifer Helm said.

The initiative isn’t just for inmates, but staff as well. “There are as many staff members coming into these offices as there are inmates,” McCaffity said. “Sometimes they come to take a time out, maybe they need to decompress from the noise, or there could be something personal going on they need to talk about. When they leave, they feel better. That’s what we want to happen. This is who we want to be as an agency.”

by Shawn Dickens

INMATES FIND HOPE IN RECOVERY HOUSING

A 2022 survey of TDCJ inmates found that approximately 67.2% of inmates admitted to substance use. This statistic is concerning, as it suggests that a large number of inmates are struggling with addiction.

TO AID IN COMBATING illegal drug use in its facilities as well as reducing the number of inmates with substance use disorder, Rehabilitation Programs Division developed the Peer Recovery Housing program. The mission of Peer Recovery Housing is to assist inmates identifying and correcting self-defeating

behaviors and instilling the value of self-examination and servant leadership. Using these tools, inmates take charge of their recovery and have a voice in developing their path to long-term sobriety.

The Peer Recovery Housing provides inmates an opportunity to incorporate a holistic approach to addressing substance use

and cognitive disorders in an environment that is conducive to recovery.

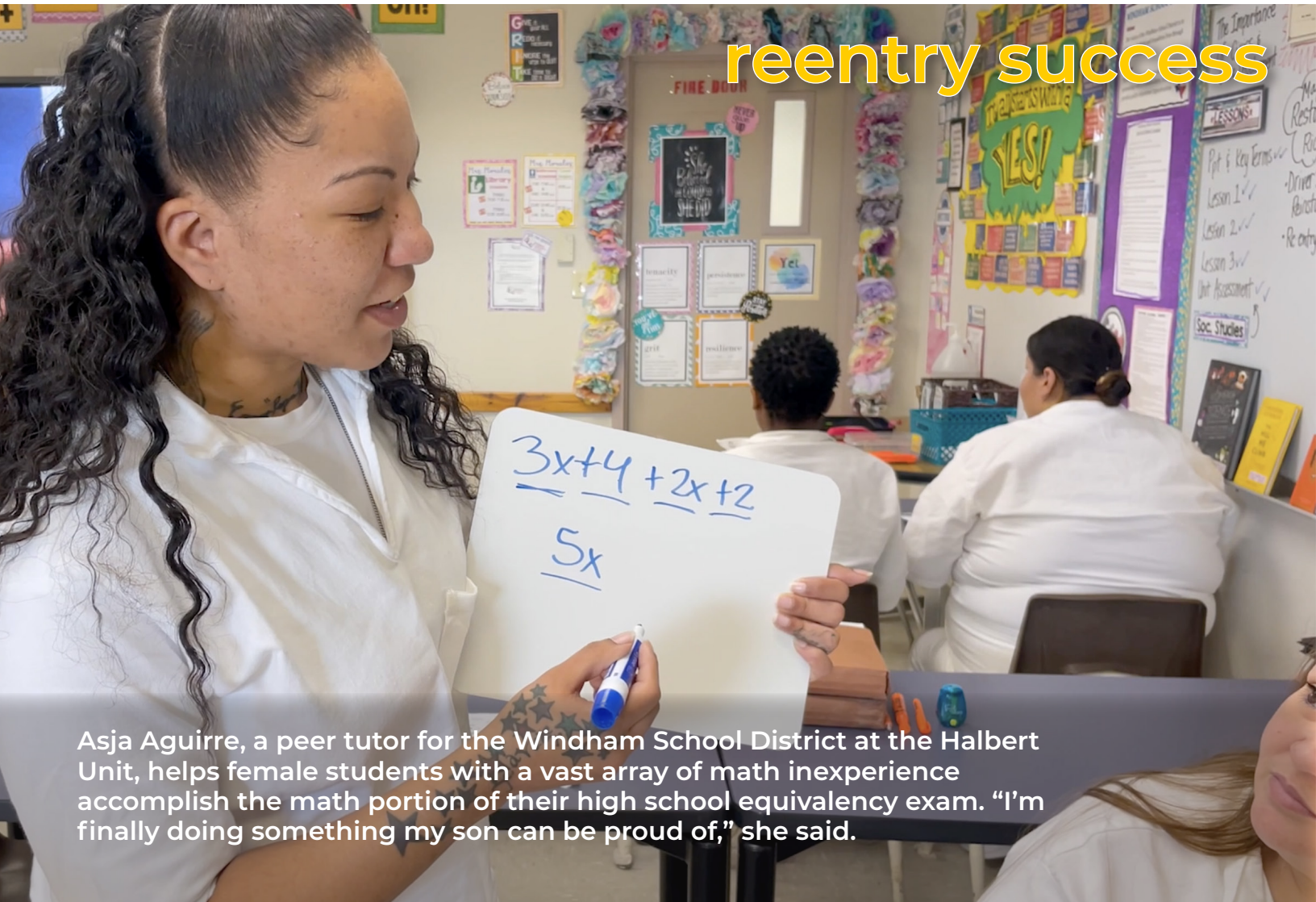
“We are providing the inmates both the tools and the environment to fight back,” said Christopher Carter, Division Director of the Rehabilitation Programs Division. “The inmates participating in the program are ultimately in control of their own success or failure.”

The difference between Recovery Housing and typical general population housing is in the writing on the wall, literally. When you enter the Recovery Housing area, painted on the walls in the common areas are the House Guidelines outlining the commitment required by the participants to maintain a drug-free lifestyle. Making these daily reminders to be respectful, be honest, and be on time *front-and-center* in the housing area helps inmates keep sight of the real goal.

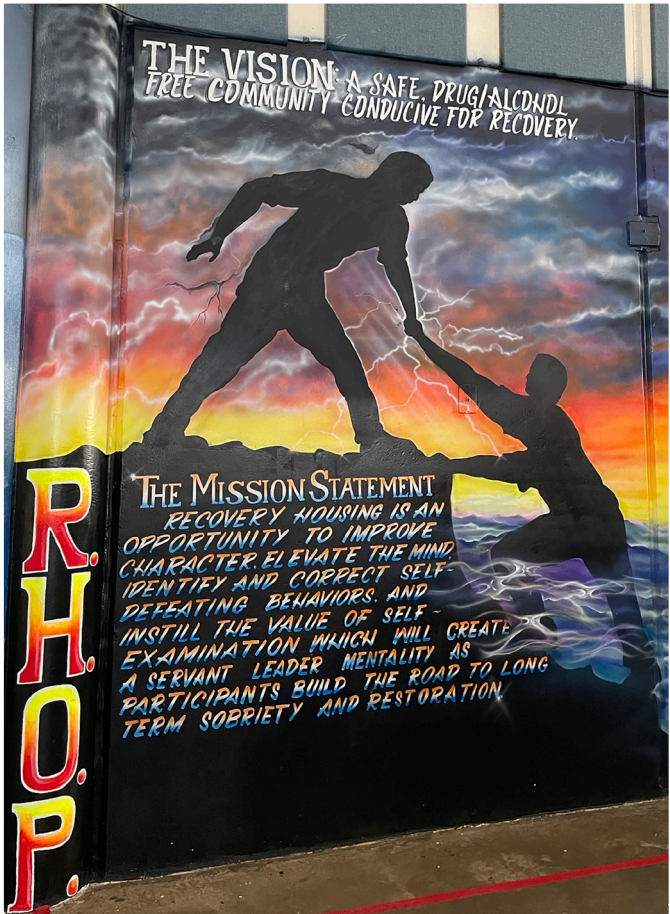
“It is not just about wanting to be in recovery,” Carter explained. “It is about doing the work required to maintain that desired drug-free lifestyle and creating an environment that fosters the inmates to buy into the program.”

The changes being made inside these Recovery Housing areas is not just benefiting the inmates, correctional officers are seeing the results as well.

“The environment we have created in these housing areas is affecting positive change in the COs who work in the dorms as



Asja Aguirre, a peer tutor for the Windham School District at the Halbert Unit, helps female students with a vast array of math inexperience accomplish the math portion of their high school equivalency exam. “I’m finally doing something my son can be proud of,” she said.



Recovery Housing Mission Statement

well,” Carter said. “I visited one of the housing areas recently and had a correctional officer who works in the recovery dorms pull me aside and tell me that it was an honor and a blessing to be able to work in the recovery housing.”

Recovery Housing operates under a zero-tolerance policy, but not just for substance use. Fighting, stealing, and gambling are also not tolerated. Participants in the program also undergo random and frequent drug-testing as a major component of the zero-tolerance policy.

“In implementing the Recovery Housing Program, we have

found one of our best resources to leverage positive change is peers,” said Andrea Canul, Deputy Director of Substance Use Treatment Programs for TDCJ. “Using peer support coaches has been a valuable tool in the success of the Recovery Housing Program.”

According to the Texas Department of Health and Human Services, a peer support coach is an individual with lived experience who gives assistance to those with a substance use disorder. TDCJ has partnered with the Texas Certification Board to provide inmates the opportunity to certify as peer support coaches while

still incarcerated. Formal peer support refers to those who have completed specialized training and received a certificate. Once certified, these specially-trained inmates help their fellow inmates through emotional support, shared knowledge, teaching recovery skills and assisting peers as resource brokers.

Peer Support is nationally recognized as a valid recovery tool and many states offer certification to peer specialists.

Bottom left: New recovery housing peer support coach graduate in June 2022; Bottom: Inmates in the Recovery Housing attend classes; Right: Peer Support Coaches.



