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Inmates contributing from behind bars

New correctional center garden grows vegetables for nonprofit groups

by Andy Zieminski | Staff Writer

Inmates of the Prince George's County Correctional Center in Upper Marlboro have planted seeds that will allow them to help some of the county's needy from behind bars.

This spring they are tending a vegetable garden at the jail as part of a new vocational activity correctional center officials are offering inmates. But instead of eventually using the garden's produce at the jail, it will be donated to local nonprofits and charity organizations. "It makes you feel like you're doing more for the community than just doing time," said Julius Tate, 23, one of the inmate gardeners.

Tate, of Temple Hills, and five other inmates who are on the jail's landscaping crew are responsible for taking care of the garden, which consists of four 20-foot-by-40-foot plots on a grassy field inside the fences.

The inmates are growing or planning to grow beans, okra, squash, watermelons, peppers, potatoes, radishes, onions, tomatoes and other crops.

Alfred J. McMurray Sr., director of the correctional center, said the program is designed to make the jail more of a neighborhood partner.

"That's the basic idea, to give back to the community, to let the community know we're not here just to house inmates," he said.

Correctional center officials have not decided what county charities will receive donated vegetables from the garden, but McMurray said the decision will be based on an evaluation of need.

Marie Dread, the center's acting assistant division chief, said that at least some of the donated vegetables will likely go to organizations that already partner with the facility, including churches and inmate re-entry houses.



*Inmates cultivate the soil as part of a gardening program. Produce from the garden eventually will be given to needy people in Prince George's County
Susan Whitney/The StaR*

“It’s just a way of giving back for all the assistance and help we’ve gotten,” said Dread, who along with McMurray organized the garden’s creation.

Setting up the garden was a joint effort of corrections center staff, inmates and officials from other county agencies, including the departments of parks and recreation, public works and transportation, and environmental resources, McMurray said. **The Neighborhood Design Center, a Baltimore-based nonprofit that assists communities and organizations with revitalization projects, also helped.**

The collaborating organizations provided design and horticultural expertise, as well as equipment and help breaking ground. Jan Townshend, program director for the Neighborhood Design Center’s Prince George’s County office, said the inmates involved in the garden were receptive to guidance she and others gave during a workshop earlier this year.

“They wanted to get it right,” she said.

The landscaping and gardening crew consists of minimum security inmates. They are serving sentences of up to 18 months for non-violent crimes and have demonstrated good behavior behind bars. Inmates spend up to eight hours a week watering, weeding and doing other work on the garden under the supervision of a correctional officer, officials said. McMurray said the gardening project is unique among classroom, vocational and counseling programs the correctional center makes available to inmates.

Participating in the gardening project and other correctional center programs can help inmates reduce the time of their sentence, McMurray said.

Dread said one way she hopes to expand the program in the future is by partnering with outside organizations that can help train and certify inmates as gardeners and landscapers. Tate said that along with the charitable aspect, working on the garden provides him with job experience he hopes to take advantage of when he is released.

“I think this is something I could look forward to doing,” he said.

Tate said he plans to take business management classes at Prince George’s Community College and eventually start a landscaping business. “I never looked at gardening as part of landscaping,” he said. “Now this is kind of advancing my education as a landscaper.”

None of the six inmates who work the garden had any previous gardening experience, they said.

“This is my first time gardening,” said Daniel Edmonds, 23, of Capitol Heights. “Before we started doing it, I didn’t think I would like it.” But Edmonds, who plans to pursue landscaping as a career and hopes to work for the county’s parks and recreation department, said gardening has grown on him.

“The best part is seeing the results,” he said one afternoon, holding a rake and standing beside long rows of healthy bean plants.