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Construction program helps female inmates

Published: Thursday, May 18, 2006

A three-bedroom modular home, built by hand from the ground up, sits in two completed pieces inside the razor-wire fence surrounding the Southeast State Correctional Facility in Windsor.

Sitting proudly on a bench just outside one of the sections Wednesday were five of the female inmates who helped construct the house.

They were among a group of prisoners trained in construction, carpentry, electrical wiring, plumbing, roofing, Sheetrocking and more to complete the structure. They studied math and sought certification in the trades. They hope to leave prison with a professional skill that leads to good-paying jobs on the outside.

"I'm putting all I can into not coming back to jail," said Mia Hendricks, who plans to move back to Rutland after her release in 21 months, and stay in the construction field.

These inmates are participating in a program spearheaded by **Northern New England Tradeswomen -- soon to be renamed Vermont Works for Women** -- which was launched in 1987 to support girls and women entering the building trades industry.

The goal of the Windsor prison project is to improve the job prospects of female inmates following their release. Along with the textbook instruction and hands-on construction training, the inmates receive self-esteem counseling, lessons in social skills, help preparing resumes, mentoring and more to improve the likelihood that they will succeed on the outside.

That outcome is not only important to these women and their families, but to all Vermonters.

When an inmate leaves prison, it is often challenging to find work, housing, services for substance-abuse problems, transportation and more. These obstacles make re-offense more likely, with too many inmates ending up back behind bars -- on the taxpayer tab.

Female inmates present special issues. They sometimes leave behind children who might end up in state

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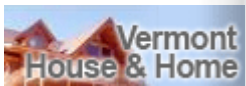
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custody -- on the taxpayer tab. These children are themselves more likely to face problems that can require social services or even prison -- on the taxpayer tab.

Programs that help inmates return home and find work that pays a livable wage don't guarantee success. But they improve the odds.

The Windsor program is fairly new so it's too early to calculate its success. One woman who participated in the program secured work with Engelberth Construction Inc., returned to jail on a drug offense, but was re-hired by Engelberth upon her subsequent release. That's a credit to the inmate and the employer.

Another benefit of the program: This three-bedroom home, valued at roughly \$150,000, will be moved to an affordable housing site in Springfield and sold at a discount to a low-income family who otherwise could not afford a home. The prison team will install that home on its permanent foundation, then return to jail and begin another modular home for a similar use.

These women are helping repay a debt to society.

They are reducing their likelihood of returning to prison.


They are building better lives for themselves and their children.

They are moving off the taxpayer dime.

The five inmates, including Hendricks, who helped on the house probably haven't received a lot of praise in their young lives. But the round of applause they won Wednesday from an appreciative audience viewing the home for the first time was well earned.

How to help For more information, contact [Northern New England Tradeswomen](http://www.nnetw.org) at 878-0004 or visit www.nnetw.org.

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