

Public Safety Works Program Helps Towns Across Maryland

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After a storm last September caused massive flooding in Port Deposit, a team of five men spent 12 days assisting in cleanup. The men came each day from the Baltimore City Correctional Center, one of several inmate work crews participating in the Public Safety Works (PSW) program, a restorative justice initiative launched by the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services in 2008.

Community-based projects like cleaning Port Deposit afford offenders opportunities to invest themselves into the community they have harmed – a powerful and significant tool of rehabilitation. These offenders do respond positively when they're able to give back. "This is a blessing to help out," said one of the inmates during a day of manual labor in Port Deposit.

Whenever travelling the state and meeting municipal leaders, Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services (DPSCS) Secretary Gary D. Maynard personally pitches Public Safety Works.



DPSCS inmate crews help Port Deposit dig out after flooding in September 2011.

"I tell them, 'Show me your worst problem area, and we'll help you with it,'" said Maynard, the 40-plus-year veteran correctional administrator who introduced the Public Safety Works concept. "We're trying to give inmates skills, and furthermore, to give them projects that mean something to them, that they can really connect with."

Williamsport, a small western Maryland town, was one of the first municipalities to take advantage of Maynard's offer. Inmate crews painted town hall, helped restore an old barn and installed public restrooms in a park.

"Especially with the way the economy is now, there are things we just couldn't get done because we didn't have the manpower. The inmates filled in those slots," Mayor James G. McCleaf II said.

Public Safety Works crews cost about \$300, making them a cost effective way to staff special projects. But rather than replacing a municipality's budgeted public works or maintenance projects, PSW crews simply augment them on an as needed basis for projects not covered by the budget.

Mayor McCleaf encountered some concern about using inmates on projects around town, but it didn't last long. DPSCS offered the inmate work crews to the town after the massive blizzards of 2009 and 2010. "Those gentlemen dug everyone out who possibly needed help. After that, we never had another question about having them here, or about the safety factor," he said.

Inmates are carefully screened before they're assigned to a Public Safety Works crew. They are all on pre-release status, which means they are within 18 months of re-entry into the community. Participating in PSW projects puts them back into the community a bit early, strengthening those ties. Of the many inmates who have worked in Williamsport over the years, only a few – five or six – haven't wanted to work. Corrections officials immediately replaced them, McCleaf said.

Showing up to work each morning, reporting to a boss and dealing with co-workers are all important "soft skills" required for the jobs that offenders will need after release. Working as part of a Public Safety Works crew instills those principles. The actual work – painting, carpentry, etc. – teaches trade skills, giving offenders an advantage when they later seek employment.

The Public Safety Works workforce amounts to about 400 offenders across the state. Together, they logged more than 705,000 man-hours during the last fiscal year.

These crews are used for more than emergency response and small projects. DPSCS can partner with other government agencies, community groups and non-profits through Public Safety Works.

In the spring of 2010, pre-release inmates from Poplar Hill and Eastern Correctional Institution (ECI) hit the streets of Salisbury, removing trash, clearing alleys of brush, and concentrating on neighborhoods in the "Safe Streets" initiative. A cooperative partnership between the Mayor's Office, Salisbury Department of Public Works, DPSCS and the City's Office of Neighborhood Services and Code Compliance originated the project, in hopes of clearing areas that may harbor hidden criminal activity.

In October 2011, Sykesville officials unveiled a special PSW project: substantial brick "gateway" signs near the Warfield complex, at the redesigned intersection at Route 32 and Springfield Avenue which also serves as the gateway into downtown Sykesville. Pre-release inmates built the sign, using the masonry skills learned during their incarcerations.



PSW crew helps with maintenance work in Williamsport.

"We're so glad Secretary Maynard told us about these projects," said State Delegate Susan Krebs. "And we have lots of ideas on how to use these men's talents beyond this project."

Thousands of Marylanders directly benefit from one of Public Safety Works' newest projects. In the fall of 2011, PSW crews on the Eastern Shore began harvesting crops on donated land. More than 224,127 pounds of fresh fruits and vegetables have since gone to The Maryland Food Bank.

PSW crews in more urban areas are also put to work. In partnership with Baltimore City, crews work to restore and maintain Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard. The crews have cleared trash, repaired sidewalks and spruced up landscaping.

Much of the labor is related to Maryland's Smart, Green and Growing (SGG) initiative. In partnership with the Department of Natural Resources, PSW inmates have helped plant more than a million trees, planted bay grasses and grown oysters in an effort to sustain the Chesapeake Bay.

Over the past few years, in partnership with SGG's Marylanders Grow Oysters program, PSW crews have built 9,000 cages for a citizen growing program and worked directly with DNR at the Piney Point Aquaculture Center to support spat repopulation. During the last fiscal year, PSW crews cleaned 500 bushels of loose oyster shell, cut 69,000 feet of shell bag material, filled 17,250 bags of shells and contributed to a total of 25 million spat being planted under the partnership – reaching a total of 50 million since DPSCS began assisting DNR in 2010.

Matching inmates' backgrounds to particular projects is also the basis for PSW's partnership with the Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA), where incarcerated, hon-

orably discharged veterans tend the final resting places of their fallen comrades at the Crownsville, Cheltenham and Garrison Forest veteran cemeteries. Three former inmates are now employed by MDVA as caretakers. Employment is the key to a successful re-entry, and Public Safety Works provides the tools and makes the connections.

"I feel confident enough in some of these guys that I would actually offer them a job," said Mayor McCleaf of Williamsport.

As Public Safety Works expands, more inmates will have those opportunities. Secretary Maynard, corrections officials and others who believe in the program want to see new and varied PSW projects.

"I've gone to other towns to talk to them on behalf of Secretary Maynard," said Mayor McCleaf. "I know he was sticking his neck out on the line when he offered up inmate labor," added Mayor McCleaf.

For more information about Public Safety Works, call John Rowley at 301/729-7690 or visit the Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services website: <http://www.dpscs.maryland.gov/initiatives/>. You can also learn more about this program by visiting the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services' exhibit booth at MML's convention, June 24-27, in Ocean City. ■



▲ DPSCS inmates restore landscaping along Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard in Baltimore City during the summer of 2011.



▲ A landmark sign built for the Town of Sykesville by DPSCS prerelease inmates.