



# CABINS IN KANSAS OFFER MORE THAN JUST LODGING

By Nick Dorman

industry: community builders

**T**he Kansas Department of Corrections is giving their inmates a unique opportunity to put their time to productive use. At the Norton, Hutchinson, and Ellsworth Correctional Facilities, inmates may participate in a program that provides them with valuable technical training in the construction crafts, as well as providing lodging for visitors to Kansas state parks. The program, launched in 2006, is the result of a partnership among the Kansas Department of Corrections, the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks, the Southeast Kansas Education Services Center and the Kansas Wildscape Foundation—a non-profit citizens group dedicated to funding conservation and outdoor projects in Kansas.

The program, which enrolls as many as 55 inmates at a time, teaches them all the skills necessary to construct the 33-foot by 16-foot cabins—from framing, plumbing and wiring to the construction of the cabinetry and furniture that goes in the cabins. Using NCCER's curriculum, the inmates receive classroom and hands-on training. Upon successful completion of the program, they earn NCCER credentials that they receive when they leave prison. The inmates work five days a week on the cabins, specializing in a particular craft or crafts. Once the cabins are constructed, they are then transported by truck to the parks, where they are placed on sites prepared by the Department of Wildlife and Parks. To date, more than 50 cabins have been placed at 21 parks around the state.

The program provides a positive outcome for everyone involved. The Department of Wildlife and Parks receive the

cabins for park visitors—a welcome addition to their parks. Visitors to the parks had been requesting some form of lodging for many years, and the cabins have been met with an overwhelming occupancy rate. For the inmates the benefit is even greater. The training they receive is tremendously valuable in helping them start off on the right foot once they are released, offering both career and educational opportunities. “All the inmates that successfully complete an NCCER program are entered into the NCCER National Registry and receive the corresponding portable credentials,” explains Kathie Harris of the Kansas Department of Corrections. “We also have an articulation agreement with some of the colleges here in Kansas. If an offender completes 15 hours of coursework, then any NCCER work they have successfully completed and have a transcript for will be transferred into college credit at no cost.” (This is made possible by the fact that the Kansas Department of Education has recognized the NCCER Curriculum as a core curriculum for state community colleges and technical programs.) It is well documented that the sort of technical training in this program leads to a lower recidivism rate, Harris says, which is a positive for the state, too.

“This program is a great motivational tool for the inmates,” says Duane Kruger of the Southeast Kansas Education Services Center, an NCCER Accredited Training Sponsor. “It gives them the drive and enthusiasm, along with the training and experience, to get out in the community and get into the workforce once they have completed their sentences. It is truly a light at the end of the tunnel for these inmates.”

Given all of the benefits to everyone involved, it isn't hard to see why the program has been so popular statewide. Unfortunately, due to substantial budget cuts, the program isn't able to accommodate all the inmates who would like to participate. “All the programs that we do through the Department of Corrections are funded through state general funds,” Harris says. “But the Department of Corrections has been very vigilant in trying to preserve this program and trying to make sure it continues. We have faced some serious budget cuts, and we have lost some other programs, but we have been able to maintain this because we understand the benefits for the offenders and for the community.” ■

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