

Some inmates are staying busy volunteering in the community

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ALTONA -- Volunteering is a staple of North Country living, even for inmates in area prisons.

Some inmates at Altona Correctional Facility are paying off their debt to society by volunteering in communities across Clinton County.

Since the beginning of this year, a handful of inmates from the medium-security prison have spent nearly 3,000 hours giving back to community by doing everything from stocking shelves at food banks and cleaning area parks to helping with local waterfront projects.

They're closely supervised during their outings, and officials say both the inmates and communities benefit from their work.

Mike Lira, deputy superintendant of programs at the Altona facility, said the inmates get "a sense of accomplishment and a sense of community," which can help them cope with life behind bars and also steer them toward a more successful re-entry into society.

"It's about showing them that there's a better way of life out there," Lira said.

Volunteer programs and other rehabilitative services, such as substance-abuse counseling and parenting classes, help inmates overcome their past and be more able to achieve success in the future.

Department of Correctional Services spokesperson Erik Kriss said that by volunteering the inmates "are doing something productive and learning work skills and hopefully getting a positive sense of helping fellow citizens.

"One thing we hope to do through all of our programs and rehabilitation through the Department of Correctional Services is to help people who commit crimes change their way of thinking (and actions)."

As for the communities, Lira said, they save thousands of dollars in labor by having inmates perform necessary tasks, such as helping the waterfront project in the Village of Rouses Point and cleaning up after the Clinton County Fair.

"The cost avoidance is a huge benefit for the community," Lira said.

Rouses Point Mayor George Rivers said that in 2007 inmate crews helped clean the railroad station, and they returned this year to clear brush along the waterfront.

And the projects they've helped with, Rivers said, were tasks the village "normally can't do because we don't have the labor to do it."

He said their help "is a nice resource to have available to the community. We'd like to get them back, if we can. We have more work we'd like to get done along the waterfront."

Clinton County Fair Manager Glenn Gillespie said the inmate labor has been a beneficial service through the years.

"We're non-profit, so all the help we can get from the prisons is great. It saves us from hiring people to do the work, and it really helps."

Both before and after the annual fair in July, inmates spend hours getting the Morrisonville fairgrounds ready by painting buildings, digging ditches, cutting grass, cleaning out the cattle barns and picking up debris.

Gillespie said prisoners from other facilities have also volunteered in the past, though the Altona inmates are the steady helping hand that fair officials count on each year.

"We've been using them for quite a few years, and they've been a tremendous help."

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