

## Bedford Hills inmates answer DMV calls; millions saved

BEDFORD HILLS — The soft female voices answering phones at the state Department of Motor Vehicles could belong to women doing hard time.

Under a program between the DMV and the state Department of Correctional Services, inmates at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, the state's only maximum security prison for women, are staffing a DMV Call Center set up inside the gates. Using minimally paid inmate labor at Bedford and at a second call center at the Arthur Kill men's prison on Staten Island saves taxpayers about \$3.5 million a year while giving those behind bars useful jobs skills, state officials said.

"This program benefits both offenders and taxpayers, providing offenders with valuable and marketable skills that help them during incarceration and prepare them for successful reintegration into the community, while providing immediate and recurring savings to taxpayers," state correction Commissioner Brian Fischer said in a Dec. 27 statement.

"We are happy to open a new chapter in our partnership with the Department of Motor Vehicles on a program that has been a success now for nearly a quarter of a century," he said.

Robin Melen, a longtime volunteer teacher with the Marymount Manhattan College program inside the 765-inmate facility, agreed that the call center constitutes an opportunity for the women as well.

"I happen to know one of the inmates in the college program was made a supervisor of the call center and she loves it," Melen said Thursday. "They think, 'Oh, when I get out, maybe I can get a job with DMV.' They look at it as a steppingstone to what is outside. Any kind of educational program is a benefit to the inmates. They want to do better, to make things better for themselves."

The center employs 39 women who can make up to \$1.14 an hour, including 31 full- and part-time customer services agents, six team leaders and two trainers. All must have a high school or equivalency diploma and commit to working there for a year. Prisoners don't have access to DMV computers or any license-holder information. And anyone convicted of a crime involving telephone, credit

card or computer fraud can't work in the center. Calls are monitored at random, state officials said.

The Bedford Hills call center and the one that has been in operation at Arthur Kill since 1988 together are expected to handle about 1 million calls a year, state officials say.

The call center at Bedford Hills replaces the original one that opened in 1986 at the medium-security Bayview women's prison in Manhattan. Bayview closed its center Dec. 3 because of declining population.

Bedford Hills, the largest state prison for women, dates to 1901, when it opened as the Westfield State Farm. It houses or has housed many notorious female convicts, including Pamela Smart, the New Hampshire woman convicted in 1991 of conspiring with her teenage lover to kill her husband; "Fatal Attraction" killer Carolyn Warmus, convicted in the 1989 slaying of Betty Jeanne Solomon, her lover's wife; Amy Fischer, the "Long Island Lolita"; and former girls school headmistress Jean Harris, who served 12 years at Bedford Hills for killing her lover, Dr. Herman Tarnower, author of "The Scarsdale Diet." She was pardoned 1992.

Call center workers use information from the DMV to answer basic questions, including office hours and locations, ID requirements and what customers should bring to a DMV office. Anyone seeking more in-depth answers is transferred to a civilian DMV employee. Some inmates work as mail and supply clerks and assemble so-called Ready Packs of DMV forms, which are mailed to the public upon request.

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"Our experience with similar operations at other New York state correctional facilities has also shown that such centers provide high-quality service to citizens who call with general questions about DMV transactions," DMV Commissioner David J. Swarts said in a statement.

It's a bit different from the cliché of prisoners making license plates — a partnership that lives on with the DMV in New York state but only at Auburn Correctional Facility near Syracuse — but a move some members of the public endorsed.

Patti Barbar was at the Department of Motor Vehicles in Southeast on Thursday afternoon, waiting for a friend to renew his license. They were surprised to see such long lines at the Southeast DMV. Maybe, she said, the state program with the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility will expedite wait times at local DMVs.

"I think it's a great thing," said Barbar of Purdys. "It gives them a skill, something to do besides stare at the four walls. Any port in the storm to save money."

Another DMV customer agreed the program sounded positive.

"I don't see any downside," said Mike Twitty, 58, a consumer psychologist from Katonah. "It seems like a good way of having them do something meaningful while saving the government money."

**Staff writer Marcela Rojas contributed to this report.**



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