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Talking Trash

On a dreary August day, the Wallkill Correctional Facility of New York State looms large against the overcast sky. Approximately 80 miles north of Manhattan, Wallkill is a medium security, 500-bed men's facility that opened in 1932. Designed by renowned architect Alfred Hopkins, the building's gothic structure is impressive. The main building, surrounded by razor wire, sits on acres of corn and soybean fields and is adjacent to a maximum-security facility that backs into a horse farm for retired thoroughbreds. Inmates from Wallkill tend the horses as part of their offender workforce programs.

Though known for the manufacturing of eyeglasses, the Wallkill facility boasts a robust recycling program that functions as one of eight regional Hub Recycling Centers throughout the state corrections system. The program was started in 2011 in order to comply with [Executive Order No. 4](#) which was issued by Governor Andrew Cuomo. This Executive Order established a State Green Procurement and Agency Sustainability Program, and directed state agencies, public authorities, and public benefit corporations to "green" procurements and implement sustainability initiatives.

The New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision ([DOCCS](#)), Division of Industries or "Corcraft", runs the recycling program. Over the last three fiscal years, the statewide program has processed over 39 thousand tons of recycled materials which resulted in approximately \$5 million in cost diversion for waste hauling and tipping fees by diverting the waste from landfills. The sale of recycled materials on the open market during that time generated \$1.6 million dollars in revenue, which was returned to Corcraft's "enterprise account" to specifically support the continuation and growth of recycling throughout the New York DOCCS.

Inmates are employed in the daily recycling of paper, cardboard, metals, and textiles. They run machines that shred paper or crush plastics, tin, and aluminum, compress them into bales, catalog and document the materials and tonnage, and drive forklifts to move the bales to a storage warehouse before they are sold and shipped. On par with other offender workforce programs, the inmates are paid .26 - .45 cents an hour for their work. The enterprise account pays for this salary as well as necessary equipment and other correctional personnel.

Recycling Work(s)

Wallkill's Superintendent Tim Laffin's experience and authority is understated, but demonstrated as an inmate rushes to tuck in his shirt when he sees the Superintendent approach. Mr. Laffin has successfully imbedded recycling into the culture of the Wallkill facility. Every inmate plays a role and has a personal responsibility to separate their waste into compostable and recyclable materials. Inmates may be cited for failure to separate waste, though the citation is rarely necessary. One of the highlights of the program for Mr. Laffin is the real-world training that the recycling program provides offenders. "We used to have a dairy operation on the farm, but when you teach an inmate to milk a cow and then send him back to Brooklyn, there's not a

lot of opportunity for employment.” Inmates who work in the recycling facility gain experience with transferrable skills such as driving a forklift, working in a warehouse, and operating other machinery. One inmate who was to be released in the near future indicated that he had a construction job lined up on the outside and had been able to leverage his experience in the recycling program for that position.

Bob Kennedy, Assistant Commissioner of Correctional Industries and Accreditation for the DOCCS is one of the creative forces behind the recycling program. Kennedy is a dynamic leader whose vision of recycling as an income-driven industry is key to the program’s success. According to the

[National Correctional Industries Association:](#)

Correctional Industries are the work programs in correctional facilities that provide real world work experience to inmates, teaching them transferable job skills and work ethic to help them prepare for post-release reentry and employment. They are the only self-funded reentry support program in corrections – no appropriated funds are required for their operation since they rely on revolving funds from the income generated by the sale of the products and services they produce through the program.

Kennedy says, “The recycling program fits the Industries model due to the revenue generation, and providing job skills to inmates who have met educational and other programming needs while incarcerated.”

Challenges

At the Walkill facility, the recycling program is housed in buildings “outside the fence,” meaning that

the inmates who work on recycling, though they are still on the grounds of the correctional facility, are literally beyond the barbed wire security fence in an unsecured area. This limits the number of inmates who are eligible to work there. Each individual worker must have a High School Equivalency diploma or be enrolled in a High School Equivalency Program and must meet specific security requirements before being considered as a potential employee.

The recyclable materials themselves are another source of concern. Tim Bender, Assistant Director of Industries Resource Recovery who oversees the statewide recycling program laments the loss of the market for recycled mattresses. “They stopped taking them because they were overwhelmed,” he says of the facility that had been purchasing the collected mattresses. “We have to ship them to Arizona now, and that’s not cost effective.” They are in the process of identifying a new buyer for this lucrative material. Additionally, he says that the markets for some types of plastics and cardboard have fallen off because [China is no longer buying them in previous quantities](#). Corcraft consistently bids out the sale of the recycled materials, searching for the highest market value, which is key to the program’s continuation.

What’s next?

When asked to predict the future of recyclables and where he is putting his money, Mr. Bender says, “Cardboard, paper, and plastics are the meat and potatoes. I don’t see that changing anytime soon. For corrections, a lot of the food vendors are moving away from tin and metal packaging because of the safety issues and are starting to use plastic pouches. The challenge with those is that they are hard to clean, but they are a safer option.” No materials can be recycled if they are soiled, so as part of the process, inmates wash and dry all plastics and metals before they

are added to the recycling waste. This creates an opportunity for correctional facilities to drive the market by encouraging vendors to create packaging that is safe, but also recyclable.

Though recycling in correctional facilities is not news, New York's DOCCS has figured out how to make the program income-driven while offering a practical workforce training option for offenders. The program not only removes trash from landfills, but also saves taxpayers millions of dollars each year. Having the program run by Corcraft puts it in the hands of administrators whose directive is to run a successful business. In this case, success is defined by the program paying for itself, and reaching Governor Cuomo's goal to reduce 50% (by weight) of waste generated across all government departments. When asked if they have been able to achieve that goal, Mr. Bender grins and says, "Not yet. But we're getting there." With last year's total recycled tonnage at more than 13,000 tons, even if that's not quite 50%, it's an accomplishment many state correctional systems would be happy to report.