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Jail's organic garden cultivates change

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Sustainable prison initiative takes root with Inverness inmates



by: TRIBUNE PHOTO: JAIME VALDEZ - Inmate Caren Sargent of Raleigh Hills pauses while working on the Multnomah County Inverness Jails organic garden. The garden is part of the county's Sustainable Jail initiative.

<http://portlandtribune.com/pt/9-news/154849-jails-organic-garden-cultivates-change>

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Caren Sargent plucks a carrot from the soil of a raised garden bed and chomps away.

“This is the best inmate food I’ve ever had,” she says.

Sargent is one of the lucky few inmates at Multnomah County’s Inverness Jail allowed to perform work duty at the jail’s new organic garden.

The pilot project — 12 raised beds planted just outside the jail walls near the lower parking lot — is one of many endeavors in Multnomah County’s Sustainable Jail Project, launched a couple years ago.

With an average jail stay of just two weeks, most inmates won’t remain long enough at Inverness to see the plants grow from seed to food on the table. However, some 40 percent of them are subject to county supervision for probation, parole or other terms after their release. Jailers and staff from the county Office of Sustainability hope they are “planting a seed” among those who participate in the garden project.

“Teaching people how to garden, that’s very empowering,” says Dan Bravin, who oversees the garden and the county’s CROPS Farm in Troutdale.

The initial round of Sustainable Jail Project initiatives, including reusing water at the jail laundry and recycling inmate sandals, saved an estimated \$400,000 a year, while reducing the environmental footprint from the self-contained complex near Northeast Airport Way and 122nd Avenue.

The new organic garden isn’t designed as a money-saver like the other sustainability projects. Jail officials call it part of a “social equity” piece that is also essential to sustainability principles.

Jail staff hope it reduces recidivism — the return rate of inmates into the corrections system — and helps make incremental changes in inmates’ lifestyle and behavior, says Byron Moore, who manages special programs for inmates at Inverness.

“I find gardening is therapeutic for myself,” Bravin says. “I’m sure it’s therapeutic for everyone here.”

A full-blown farm?

Studies show gardening has a calming effect on people, says John Wasiutynski, resource conservation coordinator for the Office of Sustainability. “Even seeing pictures of nature gives people a more relaxed state of being.”

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Though officially still a pilot project, the early success of the garden since its creation a couple months ago suggests it will become a permanent fixture at the jail, says Lt. Steve Alexander, public information officer for the Multnomah County Sheriff's Office.

Sargent has done gardening before, including rooftop gardens in Chicago. That didn't detract from her enjoying the new work duty.

"Being out here reminds me of what I can look forward to in the summer," Sargent says. "Being outside for me, it's like connecting to earth. I love animals and I love nature."

She's finishing her fourth week at Inverness for a probation violation, and pledges to enter a drug treatment program once she's released.

Tyffani Zirk, another inmate working at the garden last week, says it's a great transitional assignment for people about to be released.

"It's like stepping back into real life," says Zirk, who is serving a five-month sentence for failure to pull over for a police officer. "I begged them to come every day," she says of the garden assignment.

The jail also recently started offering inmates a new five-week gardening class, Seed to Supper, sponsored by the Oregon Food Bank inside the jail walls.

Jail staff established the garden outside the jail perimeter because that was a space with the best access to sunlight and water. Jail staff built the raised wooden beds, and the city of Portland donated the compost. Inmates supply the rest of the labor, with the produce mostly getting donated to the Oregon Food Bank. Bravin figures the beds will produce 150 pounds of carrots, 150 pounds of beets and 40 pounds of cabbage, in six weeks, plus some arugula.

He hopes the inmates can replant the garden and have two to three growing cycles by summer's end, plus another round of crops for the winter. The site could easily double in size, Bravin says.

Eventually, some county staff dream of creating a full-blown farm tended by Inverness inmates, but that's a long way from reality, Alexander says.

Washington saves money

The state of Washington, with a helping hand from staff at Evergreen State College, has gained national attention from its sustainable prison initiative. Multnomah County, encouraged by County Chair Jeff Cogen and Sheriff Daniel Staton, has learned from Washington and become a leader in taking the idea down to the local jail level.

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Inverness Jail has slashed its use of water and energy at the laundry, cut down on the use of plastic to wrap folded laundry, replaced throwaway cups with reusable rubber cups, and created flexible pens to replace stubby pencils issued to inmates. Inmates had routinely tossed the pencils into the trash when done, going through 1.2 million pencils a year. The jail estimates it will need 18,000 pens a year to replace them.

In a newer round of sustainability initiatives, Inverness recently shifted its inmate library into digital form, which is expected to save paper and money. In the past, inmates often tore pages out of the law volumes that pertained to their cases, causing an enormous expense to replace the entire set of law books.

The jail recently installed new sub-meters to track water and sewer use throughout the jail system, Wasiutynski says. Water and sewer are the jail's most costly utility bill, and officials hope they will get new insights on where water is being wasted and how to save more of it.

Within the next month, the jail will embark on another pilot test: sorting through the jail's garbage to reduce the amount going to the landfill. Inmates will go through each bag of trash, sorting some out for composting, some for recycling and some for the landfill. Tests have shown some inmates toss sandals, cups and socks into the trash, and those will be reclaimed, Alexander says.

It's definitely "outside the box," Alexander says, but there's a similar operation at Washington's Cedar Creek Corrections Center. "I saw it in use up there. It worked."

Inverness hopes the project will provide some inmates with useful job skills, as well as cut down on wasted resources. Oh, and Washington reportedly saves \$50,000 a year from its operation at just one prison.