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## Airway Heights inmates cut and deliver firewood to needy

Kevin Graman The Spokesman-Review



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Joshua Arps, left, and Jaycen Ness work on a pile of wood Thursday at the Airway Heights Corrections Center. Jesse Tinsley photo.

Things were looking pretty bleak for Cory and Jennifer Betts last fall until they got some help from an unlikely bunch of guys – offenders at the Airway Heights Corrections Center.

Just as the snow began to fly, the north Spokane couple and their six children found themselves with a cracked furnace and leaky oil pump.

“I walked into SNAP in tears,” Jennifer Betts said.

The economy had brought the family’s business, Creative Wood Floors, to a standstill. Even with her husband’s part-time job at FedEx and her disability check, they couldn’t make their mortgage, much less their utility bill.

By the time the Bettses asked the private nonprofit social services agency for help, the family was reduced to borrowing wood from friends to feed a wood stove, their only source of heat. Then “a miracle” happened.

“I had wood within a week,” Betts said.

The family was one of a record 367 Spokane County households to receive 455 cords of firewood courtesy of the corrections center’s woodcutting crew. At \$200 a cord, that amounts to \$91,000 worth of energy assistance to low-income families, according to SNAP.

Minimum-security offenders at the corrections center have been delivering wood to families in need for the past 16 years, said Ray Greenwalt, correctional sergeant in charge of off-site work crews.

Crew members only receive 30 cents an hour for cutting, splitting, stacking and delivering the wood gleaned largely from state lands. Greenwalt said it pays less because it’s a community service, but most would rather do it than the \$1-an-hour jobs other prison work crews are asked to do.

“The guys prefer it because it’s giving back to the community,” Greenwalt said.

This year, he said, seven nine-man crews cut 458 cords of wood, some of which ended up heating the sweat lodge at the corrections center.

Some people might have a problem with giving axes and chain saws to felons. But “we haven’t had an accident for the 3 ½ years I’ve been here,” Greenwalt said.

To be eligible for the crews, an offender can’t have created a victim in the community, can’t have had any violent infractions and can’t have attempted escape.

Crews start delivering in November to households designated by SNAP, and they finish sometime in March.

On Thursday, Robert Rotter, nearing the end of a 12-month term for violating a no-contact order in the Tri-Cities, was running the hydraulic splitter as the crew cut and stacked the last wood of the season.

Rotter, 46, volunteered for the job because “it helps the community and gives me something to do.”

While out on deliveries in the Spokane area this winter, he said, he saw some homes in pretty bad shape due to poverty and he’s glad he could help out.

Bob Hoagland, who coordinates the firewood program at SNAP, said that before the corrections center crews entered the picture, social service workers would gather the wood themselves and then dole it out 50 to 60 pieces at a time.

Households are eligible for only one delivery per season. Much of this year’s wood came from the city of Spokane, which still had trees to cut up that were removed in the controversial South Bernard Street improvement project of 2006, Hoagland said.

As for the Bettses, SNAP was able to replace their old furnace two days before Christmas. But Jennifer Betts said she was grateful to the Airway Heights crew for “a huge gift in a tremendous time of need.”