

# Prison program helps inmates practice sustainability



Inmate Juan Carlos Bonilla stands behind a few of the hundreds of teddy bears and stuffed toys made in the Sustainable Practices Lab at Washington State Penitentiary. Hundreds of the hand-made toys find their way into children's hands after being given to charities and other organizations. Photo by [Andy Porter](#).

By [Andy Porter](#)

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A prison program all about sustainable practices is sustaining itself pretty well.

Housed in what two years ago had been a vacant building, Washington State Penitentiary's Sustainable Practices Lab continues to be a center where things from bicycles to bedsheets find new lives.

"When we started out, Correctional Industries were on their way out and we were on our way in," said Kieth Parks, one of the lab's inmate instructors. That was in the summer of 2012 when changes in the state's correctional system caused the prison's sign shop to be shuttered and the garments factory to be moved to Coyote Ridge Correctional Facility.

The change caused the loss of about 60 offender jobs as well as at least five staff jobs. The Sustainable Practices Lab was developed to replace those jobs with employment that allows inmates to develop skills to benefit themselves and the community while also recycling goods and materials that might otherwise go to waste.

Today the Sustainable Practices Lab and correctional industries box factory in the same building employ 139 inmates, with hopes to increase that number, said Robert Branscum, the correctional specialist who heads the program. Using donated material, equipment and resources, the workers, who have to earn the privilege to participate in the program, continue to turn out a surprising range of products that benefit people both inside and outside the walls.

Branscum said he gets five to 10 requests a week from charities for products produced in the sustainable lab shops. "We sent out more than 750 items last month," he said. "Everything from carvings to quilts to bicycles."

Parks recalled how the fabric re-use shop "started with about 15 sewing machines, all which were donated and some which were broken down." The shop now makes literally hundreds of items ranging from hand-sewn quilts to teddy bears, which are donated to nursing homes, shelters, charitable organizations and others.

Other programs still going strong are bicycle repair, furniture repair and restoration, electronics repair, a wood shop where the motto is "you name it and we fix it," a vermiculture shop where an estimated 9 million worms turn food waste into soil enhancements, a sign shop and a box factory.

Another new feature is an aquaponics section combining an indoor fish farming operation with a hydroponics farm that will raise vegetables for the penitentiary's kitchens. At present, it is a "proof of concept" operation, but when and if it reaches full operation "we're hoping to be putting out about 700 heads of lettuce a week to the main institution," Branscum said.

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**Sustainable Practices**

