

Changing the world from behind bars



Washington Corrections [Follow](#)

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When disaster strikes or armed conflict breaks out overseas, it can hit communities hard. One of the privileges people in the free world have is to help with fewer restraints.

Rebuilding infrastructure. Medical supplies. Clothes. Monetary donations. The options are numerous.

People in prison typically can't do much to assist the world at large from behind bars. Nevertheless, hundreds of incarcerated individuals in the state of Washington are positively impacting lives across the globe.

The following is a sample of many humanitarian projects being spearheaded by incarcerated individuals here.



Incarcerated individuals who work in the Washington State Penitentiary's Sustainable Practices Lab assemble SafeTap water filtration systems (Washington State Department of Corrections photo).

Clean drinking water

Incarcerated individuals at [Washington State Penitentiary](#) are preventing waterborne illnesses, one glass at a time.

Crews inside the facility's [Sustainable Practices Lab](#) have spent the past year assembling filtration systems for developing nations that don't have access to clean drinking water. Inmates who work in the lab transform discarded materials into usable items for charitable organizations.

Andy Pierce, a former plumbing contractor, came up with the design following a volunteer humanitarian trip to Haiti after a deadly 2010 earthquake. He created the system after witnessing bacteria-ridden community water supplies.

The invention, called "[SafeTap.](#)" is a small, portable device made from pipes, fittings, and valves. Its filters contain hundreds of tiny straws made from a hollow fiber membrane that block bacteria. It connects to existing water filtration systems and filters up to three gallons of water per minute.

Pierce struck a partnership with the penitentiary's sustainable practices lab to have incarcerated individuals assemble the product. As of August 31, 2018, inmates had assembled 490 SafeTap units. Pierce's non-profit organization, [Project 41](#), has shipped the SafeTap systems to countries including Uganda, Zimbabwe, and Tortuga. Some arrived in Puerto Rico and the British Virgin Islands to aid with hurricane relief.

Another way the department supports clean water projects around the world is through the use of canned water at its facilities. As part of a statewide push among agencies to integrate more environmentally sustainable practices in its operations, the department has taken steps to [reduce the amount of single-use plastics](#) it uses at its facilities.

[Larch Corrections Center](#) in Yacolt replaced all of the bottled water it uses in vending machines with canned water. A portion of what the department spends on canned water at the facility is donated to the non-profit organization, [CannedWater4Kids](#). The organization's mission is to bring clean and safe water to children worldwide through projects such as digging wells, implementing water filtration programs, and education programs.



An assortment of quilts and baby onesies made by incarcerated individuals at the Washington Corrections Center for Women ready for shipment to Thailand (Washington State Department of Corrections photo).

Warmth and comfort

At [Washington Corrections Center for Women](#) in Gig Harbor, quilters make clothing and blankets each year for about 25 charities.

The [Sisters of Charity](#) consists of about 15 incarcerated women. In recent years, the group sent quilts and baby onesies for mothers inside Thailand prisons. The Dallas-based [Thai Christian Foundation](#) distributes the items. Similar to what is found in the Washington women's correctional facility [residential parenting program](#), mothers may live with and care for their infants in at least 15 Thai prisons.

The Sisters of Charity also created more than 200 hats for landmine victims in the neighboring country of Myanmar. Myanmar is one of the most heavily-mined countries in the world. Festering insurgencies have littered the border with buried landmines.



A completed wheelchair at the Stafford Creek Corrections Center in Aberdeen (Washington State Department of Corrections photo).

Mobility for disabilities

Incarcerated individuals at two Washington state correctional facilities are helping people with disabilities regain mobility.

[Stafford Creek Corrections Center](#) near Aberdeen and [Monroe Correctional Complex](#) participate in [“Wheels for the World.”](#) The prisons receive old, donated wheelchairs and refurbish them into like-new condition. Wheels for the World is run through the non-profit organization, [Joni and Friends](#).

Volunteers in the community collect wheelchairs and bring them to the prisons for the incarcerated individuals to restore. Stafford Creek and Monroe are two of only 15 federal and state prisons in the country that are part of the program. Stafford Creek inmates began restoring wheelchairs in the program in 2010 and Monroe joined the program in 2016.

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The program distributes wheelchairs to more than 100 [countries](#), including Uganda, The Dominican Republic, and the Philippines. In 2017, Monroe incarcerated individuals repaired more than 600 wheelchairs for recipients in Guatemala and Thailand. At Stafford Creek, incarcerated individuals restored 180 wheelchairs. And nationwide, incarcerated individuals restore around 10,000 wheelchairs per year.



A painting of a child wrapped in a flag was one of several pieces of art created by incarcerated individuals and donated to an auction to raise money for hurricane relief (Washington State Department of Corrections photo).

Helping hurricane victims

Incarcerated individuals in prisons statewide recently worked together to raise more than \$11,800 for the [American Red Cross](#) to provide relief to victims of Hurricanes Irma, Harvey, and Maria.

They [produced more than 200 pieces of art](#), ranging from oil and acrylic paintings, welded sculptures, beadwork, and pencil drawings. Department officials and community partners placed the art in an auction in February that raised money for hurricane relief.

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The initial idea came from two incarcerated individuals at [Cedar Creek Corrections Center](#) in Littlerock. They had seen footage of the devastation on television in one of the prison day rooms and were moved to do something to help.

The hurricanes were some of the deadliest and costliest on record. [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration \(NOAA\)](#) estimated the hurricanes caused more than \$265 billion in damages. Researchers at [George Washington University](#) recently [concluded](#) the hurricanes killed approximately 2,975 people in Puerto Rico alone.

Event organizers report the [auction's success](#) exceeded their expectations and they're open to doing similar events in 2019 with a planned beneficiary of [Habitat for Humanity](#).

Though these projects directly affect communities abroad, Department of Corrections officials say participating in projects like these has an indirect correlation to the [agency's mission](#) of improving public safety. Incarcerated individuals often learn empathy, teamwork, and organizational skills through these projects. When they leave correctional facilities with these skills, it helps reduce the chances they'll return to incarceration.

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