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Trained for success: Corrections program promotes rehabilitation, sustainability

Formerly incarcerated at Cedar Creek, Washington man now oversees the prison's wastewater plant



Larry Vene operates the wastewater treatment plant at Cedar Creek Corrections Center, the very prison where he was once incarcerated. While incarcerated, Vene received the training needed to work in wastewater treatment, and now he helps train men currently incarcerated at the prison. (Washington State Department of Corrections photo)

LITTLE ROCK — When Larry Vene went to prison 15 years ago for a drug conviction, he didn't expect the path to his dream job would be through sewage.

But thanks to the training he received through [Cedar Creek Corrections Center](#)'s wastewater

<https://medium.com/wagovernor/trained-for-success-corrections-program-promotes-rehabilitation-sustainability-7bcb1ba2ae39>

treatment plant program, he became a plant operator after his prison release. It's a job he's had for 10 years — the past four and a half of which were at the very prison where he was previously incarcerated.

"I wanted to come back to give back," Vene said. "I get a lot of satisfaction knowing that I do more for the environment every day than most people do in their lifetime."

Vene ensures the plant is in top condition to filter and process an average of 40,000 gallons of wastewater daily.

He also trains nine incarcerated men who help run the plant and the prison's on-site compost facility.

Compost is used in gardens to grow food that is donated to local food banks as part of the [Sustainability in Prisons Project](#) (SPP). The project is a partnership founded by [The Evergreen State College](#) and the [Washington State Department of Corrections](#) that allows incarcerated people to lead science and environmental sustainability projects at state correctional facilities.

"These education and training programs not only support good environmental stewardship, but also invest in individuals to help reduce recidivism and improve community safety," said Kelli Bush, co-director of SPP.

Training offers a competitive edge for good-paying jobs

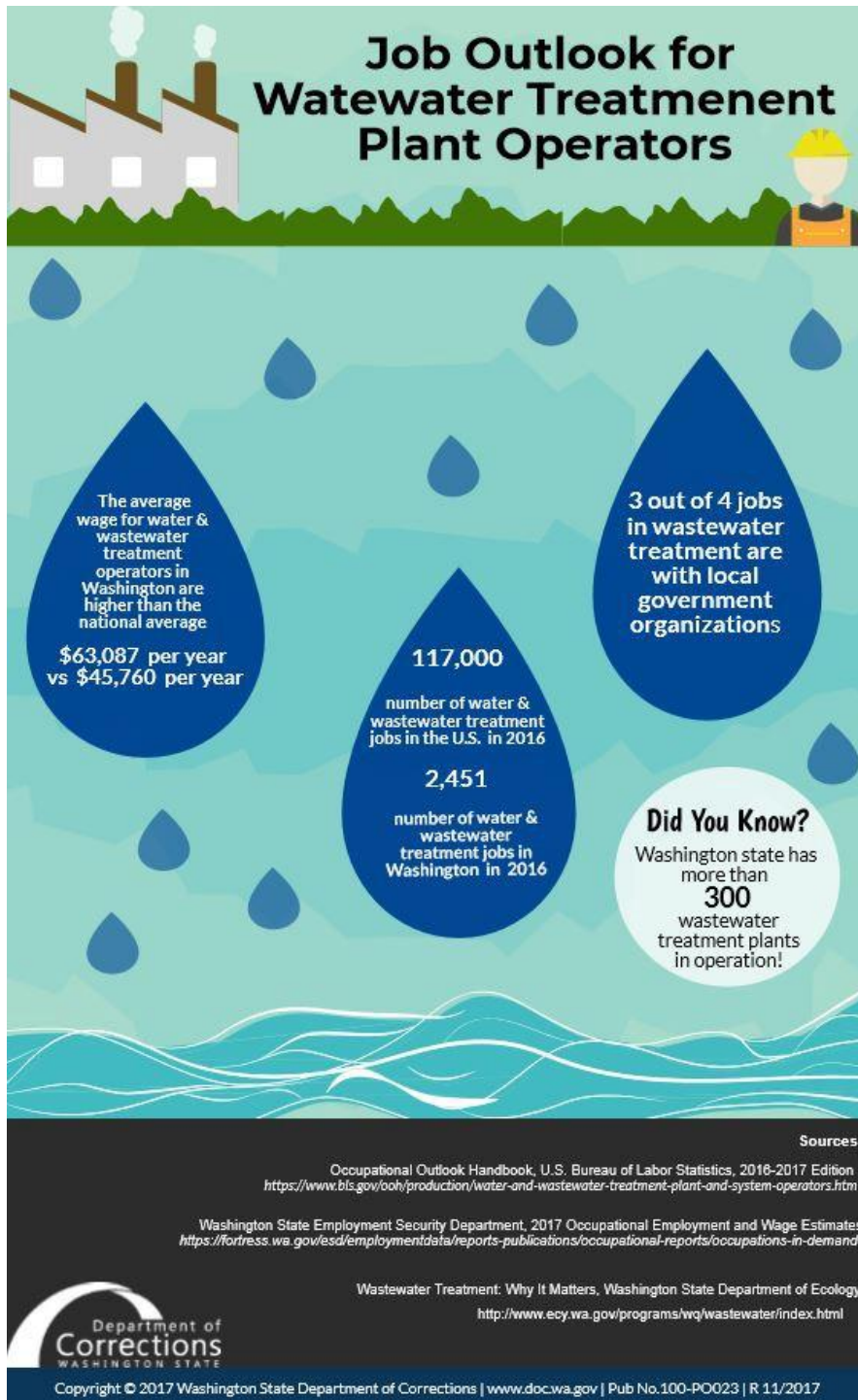
Four men's correctional facilities in Washington state run on-site wastewater treatment plant operator programs. The program is not available at other state prisons because wastewater at those facilities is processed by local municipalities. Incarcerated men who learn the trade have the potential to earn a good wage after they are released. In [Washington state](#), wastewater treatment plant and system operators earn an average of \$63,087 annually.

Incarcerated men who want to become wastewater treatment plant operators spend \$115 of their own money to enroll in a [University of California](#) correspondence course and purchase course materials.

While completing the correspondence work, they receive hands-on training at their prison's wastewater treatment plant.

They learn to collect and test water samples, compile and interpret data, and operate and repair equipment. They learn about the chemical process required to disinfect and deodorize water. They also develop communication and management skills by directing and coordinating other plant workers.

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Additionally, they can use what they have learned to earn certifications from the [Washington State Department of Ecology](http://www.ecy.wa.gov). Since 1998, 305 incarcerated men in the state have earned a wastewater treatment operator Group I certification or higher, which requires at least one year of associated experience.

‘It changed my life’

Vene said earning a wastewater treatment plant certification was crucial in helping him convince employers to hire him, despite his criminal record.

Vene struggled to find consistent work after his release in 2006. For more than a year, he got by with odd jobs in Grays Harbor County — hauling appliances, factory work, and a service job at a low-voltage cable company.

Once, he made it through a first screening for a job at a treatment plant in Thurston County. However, the hiring manager ultimately didn’t hire him because “he said his superiors didn’t think I had enough time on the outside to prove that I was not going to reoffend,” Vene recalled.

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Larry Vene operates the wastewater treatment plant at Cedar Creek Corrections Center, where he was once incarcerated. He chose to work there to give back to the place where he received his wastewater treatment training, and to help other men succeed. (Washington State Department of Corrections photo)

Corrections Center retired. Vene applied for the job.

“I felt by coming back, I could utilize my experience to help others,” Vene said. “Had I not had the experience I gained at Cedar Creek, I might still be a criminal. It changed my life, and I knew I could benefit other inmates.”

Later, he interviewed for a job at the wastewater treatment plant in Shelton. His potential boss had a meeting with the crew to see how they felt about working with someone who had been incarcerated. A week later, he got the job offer.

“Man, was I in heaven,” Vene said. “All I was really looking for was somebody to give me a chance, to let me show them what I could do and not just look at the stigma of being a felon.”

During Vene’s tenure, the City of Shelton’s plant received a series of multimillion-dollar upgrades and construction. He said it helped him strengthen his skills by mastering many emerging technologies in the wastewater treatment field.

Vene planned to work at the Shelton plant until retirement. But in 2013 the wastewater treatment plant operator at Cedar Creek



(Washington State Department of Corrections video)

Follow link to view the video: <https://youtu.be/TzqNpCf3Pk>

Healthy and safe communities

To ensure agency and public safety, Corrections examines several factors when considering hiring a formerly incarcerated person. The agency looks at a person's entire criminal history, including the type and severity of the crime committed. The agency also considers the length of time that has passed since the conviction and a person's age at the time of the crime.

The applicant also undergoes the same background checks required of all state employees. Once hired, the applicant receives the same safety and security training required for all correctional staff.

"Larry was highly respected, valued and recommended by his trainer and previous employers," said Cedar Creek Corrections Center Superintendent Douglas Cole. "He's clearly motivated to do an outstanding job and continues to be a positive role model to inmates and staff. He displayed an outward desire to return to Cedar Creek and give back to the facility that changed his life."

Vocational education programs like wastewater treatment are an example of measures Corrections is taking to support Gov. Jay Inslee's data-driven [Results Washington Initiative on Healthy and Safe Communities](#).

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The Wastewater Treatment Process



The department has a goal of increasing employment for adults released from incarceration from 30 to 40 percent by the end of 2017. As of the end of 2016, the most current data available, the percentage of people employed after being released was 35.4 percent.

Researchers with the National Institute of Justice have found recidivism rates among incarcerated people who participate in correctional academic and vocational education programs are often reduced.

“We provide educational, vocational and job readiness skills prior to release,” said Jim Harms, Corrections’ reentry systems administrator. “Having a job can lead to stabilizing factors such as housing. If someone is able to find employment after release, the chances of him or her reoffending drops significantly.”

Vene says becoming a wastewater treatment plant operator is the best thing that ever happened to him. He saved enough money to buy a house. He improved relationships with his

two adult children and 16-year-old son. He has also seen several men he trained find meaningful jobs following their incarceration.

“Nothing satisfies me more, nothing gives me more joy, than to have an inmate tell me their life is awesome due to the program,” Vene said. “This program is invaluable to me. To be where I am now, it taught me all the things I needed. It brought me back to reality and it got me away from drugs. I knew this was my niche in life and where I would be happiest.”

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