



Turning education into jobs for formerly incarcerated people



Washington Corrections

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For Darin Armstrong, getting a job in December was a win. What made it even more significant is that he was released from the [Cedar Creek Corrections Center](#) only a month earlier.

The [Washington State Department of Transportation](#) hired him as a natural resource technician.

Armstrong, a previously incarcerated individual, is one of the people who benefited from a state interagency partnership that taught him the skills he needed to land a job.



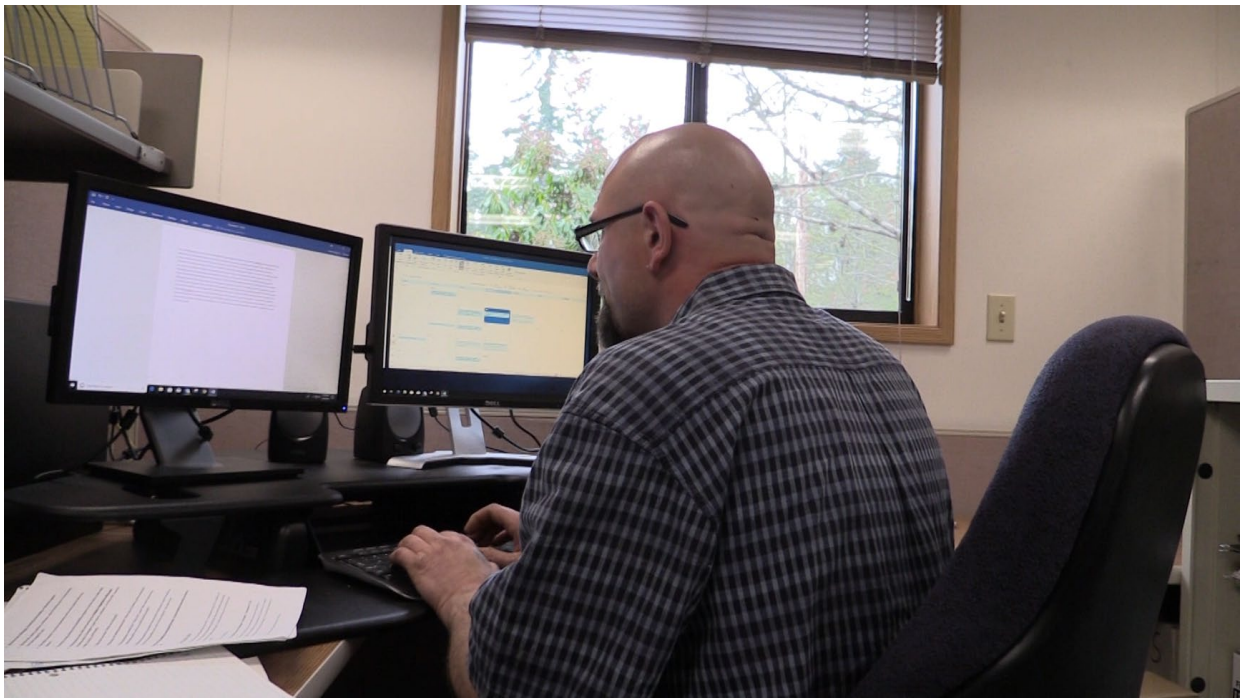
Armstrong speaks to a group about his experience with the sustainability program and how it led to his employment with a state agency. (Department of Corrections photo)

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For the past year, the [Department of Corrections](#), along with the [Evergreen State College](#), teamed up with the Department of Transportation to give people being released from prison a chance to work for the state. This was possible through a program called the [Sustainability in Prison Project](#).

Gov. Jay Inslee has long supported re-entry efforts. He signed an [executive order](#) in 2016 that requires agencies to work on specific actions that will positively impact someone re-entering the community. This can include facilitating connections to services, providing access to educational opportunities during incarceration time and helping individuals find employment. Partnerships like this help the department in its [mission](#) to improve public safety.

“One of the most significant public safety investments we can make to improve the lives of individuals and the safety of our communities is to do more to prepare people leaving our criminal justice system for a successful re-entry to society,” Inslee said.



Armstrong works at the Dept. of Transportation now as a natural resource technician. (Department of Corrections photo)

Research shows that people released from prison and jail who hold jobs in the community are less likely to return to incarceration, especially when they earn more than minimum wage.

Some of the most recent data showed that 40 percent of eligible individuals got jobs within six months of their release, according to DOC. Research has found that stigma associated with incarceration is a major barrier to employment.

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Inslee [signed the Washington Fair Chance Act](#) (commonly called the “ban the box” bill) in March 2018. The act states that employers can’t ask about an applicant’s arrests or convictions before the employer determines if the applicant is otherwise qualified for a position.



A gardener walks next to the meticulously cultivated Lifer Garden at Stafford Creek Corrections Center. (Photo by Ricky Osborne/courtesy of The Evergreen State College)

During his incarceration time, Armstrong got hands-on work experience thanks to the SPP. Armstrong learned about aquaponics, turtle rehabilitation and release and woodpecker nest research through an SPP program that came out of Evergreen State College. The chance to be a student then propelled him into the professional world.

“Some of these things can be taught, and there are a lot of people who are willing and they need the opportunity to show that they can learn,” Armstrong said. “Just because people make a mistake and they end up in prison doesn’t mean that they’re a bad person and that they can’t learn.”

SPP supports incarcerated individuals who want to change by bringing nature, science and environmental education into prisons. Some programs even offer certifications. These programs are open to all individuals regardless their convicted crime. However, some prisons have a condition that inmates remain infraction-free for a set amount of time.

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The hard and soft skills that Armstrong learned through these programs came in handy when he applied for the state job.

“I worked with several diverse groups of men and worked as a team rather than individually, which a lot of people in prison do,” Armstrong said. “I kind of put myself out there to take these programs and the opportunities to learn rather than just sit back and do my time.”



Two community service crew members from Mission Creek Corrections Center work in the GRACE Project garden. The GRACE Project is a new initiative from the Kitsap Conservation District and stands for Gardening for Restoration and Conservation Education. In the first year of the program, MCCCW grew about 11,000 lbs. of produce for area food banks. (Photo by Keegan Curry/courtesy of The Evergreen State College).

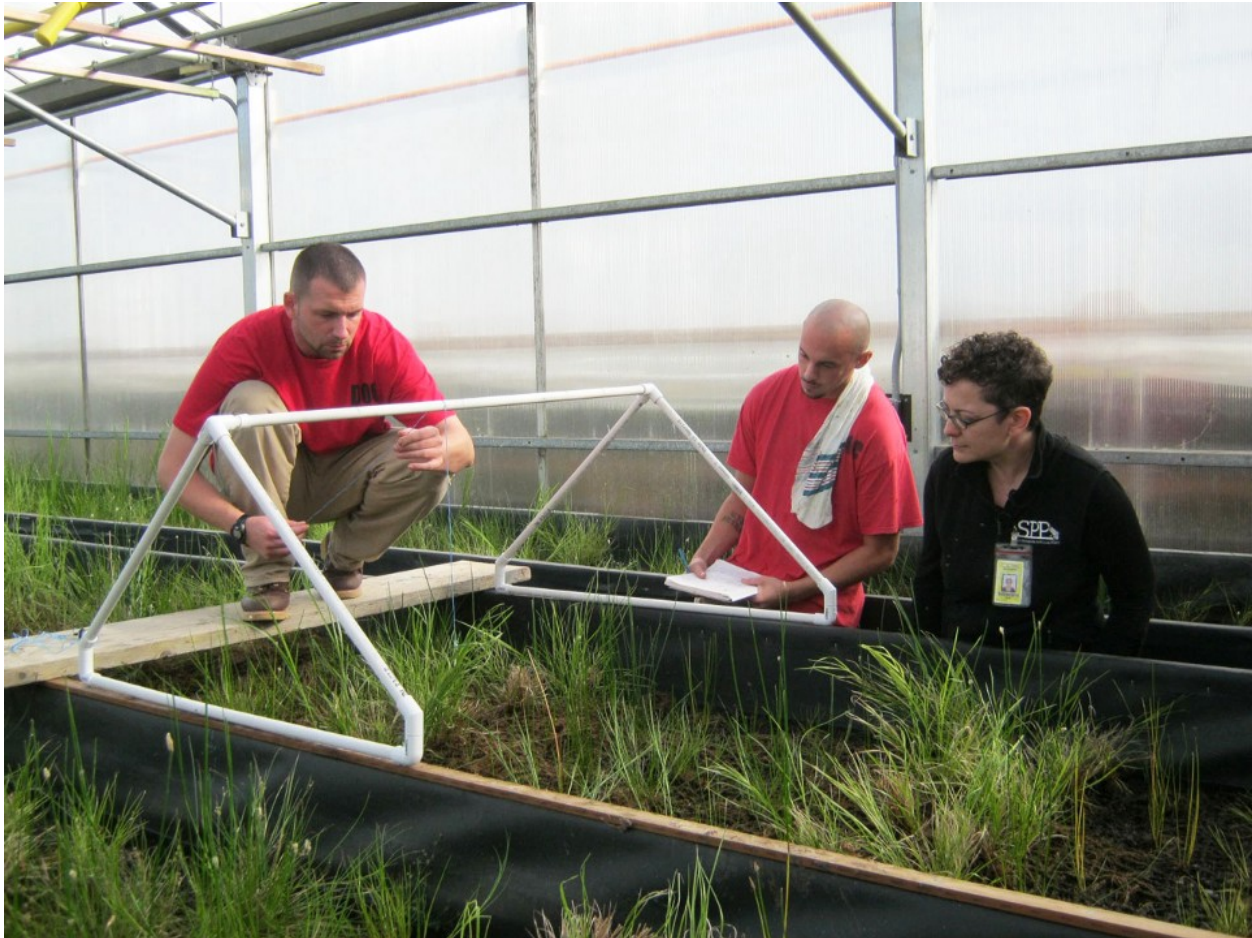
Alvina Mao, WSDOT’s workforce development manager, said that Transportation Secretary Roger Millar wanted to focus on forming re-entry programs to give the population returning into the community a second chance.

WSDOT staff began visiting correctional facilities and connected with those working in [Correctional Industries](#) and the SPP. Their goal was to find potential employees through the program. Mao said the partnership was great from the beginning.

“We just dove right into it and started meeting people,” Mao said. “The technical training that they were learning behind bars was amazing.”

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While Armstrong was incarcerated, he worked with WSDOT and SPP staff and learned how to write cover letters and create a resume that showcased his new skills. He also learned to translate these skills to appeal to state jobs. Armstrong encourages those who are still incarcerated to not take their time in prison for granted.



Emergent Vegetated Mat incarcerated technicians collect data with graduate student Amanda Mintz. The research they do contributes to her thesis for environmental studies. (Photo by Carl Elliott/courtesy of The Evergreen State College)

“If people start to take things seriously and figure out enough is enough in life, and they want the opportunity to grow, the opportunities can start in prison,” Armstrong said.

Mao said she values the partnership for bringing trained and eager employees like Armstrong to WSDOT. Introducing hardworking people like Armstrong to new possibilities reminds her that these programs touch lives.

“Our message is that we are open to hiring people who were previously incarcerated, as long as that person is motivated and willing to learn something,” Mao said. “It’s an exciting opportunity for both the previously incarcerated person as well as our agency. It’s going to be a win-win in the end.”

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