

A success story

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CCCS starts with one program and 13 employees 23 years ago; and now it boasts 11 services with 450 employees

Josh Lefthand says he's finally learned the value of staying sober.

Unfortunately, it took his seventh drunken driving charge to learn that lesson.

Lefthand, of Polson, is one of several people with multiple driving-under-the-influence offenses being treated at the WATCH facility at Warm Springs.

It is one of 11 programs in the region operated by the Community, Counseling, and Correctional Services Inc., or CCCS, headquartered in Butte.

The private, non-profit CCCS started in Butte 24 years ago. Its diverse programs house and treat offenders with drug- and alcohol-related convictions, prepare inmates to be released from prison, and deal with troubled juveniles, among other services.

CCCS Chief Executive Officer Mike Thatcher would consider Lefthand one of the WATCH's success stories.

After his seventh DUI arrest, Lefthand was facing more than a year in prison. On Friday, after six months in WATCH, Lefthand was four days away from being released. He said the program helped him change his life.

"I know I'm an alcoholic, I know it's a disease. But I've learned here that I have a choice not to put that stuff in my body," he said.

Economic impact

Other CCCS programs continue to grow, including the six programs it operates in southwestern Montana. This includes the Butte Pre-release Center.

The center, located at 68 W. Broadway St. in Uptown Butte, was CCCS's first program, initiated in December 1983. CCCS has since expanded operations in Butte to include the Women's Transitional Center in 1992 and the Connections Corrections Program in 1998.

CCCS also has facilities in Washington and North Dakota.

Over the years, the CCCS has made a significant impact on the regional economy, Thatcher said. The group's six local programs employ about 350 people in Butte, Anaconda and Deer Lodge, he said. Overall, CCCS has about 450 employees, according to its Web site.

"The lion's share of our employees are Butte people," Thatcher said.

The programs have also been responsible for purchasing an estimate of \$6.9 million in local goods and services in the last fiscal year, according to records provided by the CCCS.

Thatcher said the programs generated about \$20 million last year.

The pre-release and transitional centers take qualified adult men and women inmates out of prison and give them a chance to serve a shorter sentence. The centers provide a less institutionalized environment and offenders are allowed temporary leave to work.

"The idea of the center is to prepare offenders for the outside world," Thatcher said.

Employers' response Bud Walker, owner of the M&M Cigar Store, a historic bar and cafe at 9 N. Main St., said he's been employing workers from the pre-release center for years. Not only have these people worked well for him, Walker said they have been essential to his business.

"We need them. There are times where we couldn't function without them," Walker said.

The Montana Standard hires pre-release inmates in its packaging department. Publisher Janet Taylor said the pre-release hirees come already screened for drugs, which "is really convenient for us." Packaging department employees work around heavy equipment in the wee hours of the morning, and being drug-free is integral to the job and its safety requirements, she said.

Walker said he often needs them when one of his regular employees fails to show up for work. He said center officials are accommodating to his needs.

"If I call right now, I can have somebody down here in 15 minutes," he said.

The walk-aways

Thatcher said offenders, with permission, may leave the center to work, but must return after their shift ends.

Sometimes offenders don't always follow the rules. Thatcher said "walk-aways" are rare, but acknowledged that sometimes happens. The most recent two walk-aways were captured shortly after leaving the center and face felony escape charges.

Thatcher said those who violate the CCCS rules take the chance of returning to prison.

"Offenders are held accountable here (at the center). Some people think you go to pre-release and smoke dope and hangout, but we have zero tolerance for any violations," he said.