

## Uptown inmates: Bad rap?

### Prerelease center plays integral role in services, jobs in Butte

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The Butte Prerelease Center housed just four inmates when it opened on Christmas Eve in 1983.

In the past 30 years, the center's parent company has poured millions of dollars into rehabilitating a blighted area of Uptown. It now boasts 120 beds for men transitioning out of the criminal justice system. The center employs about 40, has opened a Women's Transitional Center, occupies several 100-year-old buildings that might otherwise be vacant and is often a leading contributor in community fundraising efforts.

And the center is still suffering from an image problem. At public meetings in the past several months, Butte residents have said the presence of convicted criminals Uptown tarnishes the area and threatens grand plans for revitalizing the city's core.

But community leaders say the center is getting a bad rap and will play a vital role in Uptown's future.

"I personally don't think they're an obstacle," said Jim Smitham, director of Butte Local Development Corp. "I don't see them as an impediment."

No businesses that deal with Smitham have voiced complaints, he said. And the criticism? "That's totally unfounded," he said.

Still, stereotyping is a problem, said Mike Thatcher, chief executive officer of Community, Counseling and Correctional Services, which started with the Butte Prerelease Center and has since grown to 16 programs.

"Thirty years later, I would hope some of that stigma is gone," he said.

At a recent meeting on plans to expand mental health services Uptown, such as the center's neighbor Silver House, residents voiced concerns about housing convicts in the same area. In response to a Standard story, one online commenter simply stated, "I will not go Uptown until the prerelease is removed."

Butte-Silver Bow Chief Executive Matt Vincent said he's heard the complaints.

But the reality is the CCCS has hundreds of employees in Butte-Silver Bow County and all over Western Montana, and I could hold them up as one of the measuring sticks others could follow in being a community partner," he said.

"I have yet to go to a nonprofit fundraiser or a citizen benefit where they haven't been one of the lead contributors as far as donating. They are a real strong community partner in giving back to the place.

Not only is the prerelease center a major employer in Butte, but its residents also make up much of the workforce in restaurants and other businesses around town, Smitham said. Butte Local Development Corp. has used center residents as workers.

"I have no qualms at all about having them in our community," Smitham said. "They are part of our community and have been for a long time."

And Thatcher aims to keep it that way.

"We don't have any plans on leaving," he said.

"There would be a void if we were to walk away from our five or six buildings in Uptown Butte," Thatcher added.

The men's and women's centers occupy a handful of 100-year-old structures, which were once motels and apartments. The dining area across the street is in the old bus depot.

Each center resident volunteers for 20 hours of community service, Thatcher said. Thousands of hours are performed yearly at places such as the Butte Civic Center, local schools, summer festivals and thrift stores.

"That free labor is huge," Thatcher said.

The program also helps re-acclimate inmates into society. During the average six-month stay, residents attend meetings and classes on an array of topics from parenting to chemical dependency to anger management.

As soon as they walk through these doors, we're working on getting them out six months later, said center administrator Jay Grant.

Everyone at the center must pay \$14 a day for room and board.

"They are dedicated to reintegrating people back who have obviously made some mistakes and teaching them what they need to know so they don't make mistakes again," Vincent said. "The prerelease and corrections industry is something that is operating in every community, whether they know it or not."