

Larch prison pushes rehabilitation

LARCH MOUNTAIN — The “front yard” is a mess of tree limbs, but that’s cause for celebration here at the Larch Corrections Center in the Cascade foothills of eastern Clark County.

Larch, co-located with the Washington State Department of Natural Resources, is surrounded by DNR forestland.

It is a state-run prison with a difference, but it is a prison with restricted entry and fences topped with razor wire.

Larch is unusual. In a three-hour visit conversing with staff and offenders, I found felons with hard crime backgrounds of robbery, rape and other forms of violent crime talking politely to me and each other.

This minimum-security prison has dormitories, not high walls, guard towers and prisoners in cells. It has a staff of 116, including security, and 140 volunteers.

Its inmate population, all-male, can reach 480. Offenders in a variety of crimes serve the last four years of their prison sentences here. Escape is neither frequent nor attractive, according to Patricia Gorman, its superintendent for the last eight years. Unauthorized flight could add five years or more of jail time.

Another distinction is that Larch offers programs that can, if followed, return a felon to a decent and productive life.

Although just 20 crow-flight miles

from Vancouver, Larch is 34 miles by road, some of it tortuous and twisted. One route skirts Battle Ground and goes through Hockinson.

Larch is in the Yacolt Burn area of the state forest where a devastating fire in 1902 traveled 30 miles in 36 hours and destroyed 238,920 acres of timber, or 12 billion board feet. The Dole Valley fire in 1929 scorched another 153,000 acres. The big burns provided plenty of work for Larch inmates, including replanting. Just this year the “front yard” of the prison was logged, a half-century after Larch was established in 1956 and began planting Douglas fir seedling trees to bring life to a skeleton-snap forest.

Trained for service

Some 90 offenders at Larch are trained and certificated as fire crews, to put out hot spots in the forest.

That’s just the beginning. Inmates are organized in three community work crews to labor at schools, parks and other locations in the county, according to information provided by Nancy Simmons, community partnership coordinator for Larch. Graffiti is covered, parks cleaned and trails cleared, among other duties.

Education and skills training is contracted through the Department of Corrections with Clark College. The program includes adult basic education, vocational training and offender-

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changed classes, according to Barbara Kerr, Clark’s communications and marketing director. Training in auto service and brakes begins in January.

In a presentation last June, Clark adult basic education professor Shirley Moore, who works at Larch, told Clark College trustees only 20 percent of the inmates are high school graduates. Many consider themselves “educationally incapable.” When they complete GED training “it changes their perspective” and could lead to a crime-free life.

Research indicates correctional basic skills training returns \$11.09 for every dollar invested, she said.

Fifty-eight students received GED (graduation) certificates, and 46 were presented in computer applications. Bob Knight, Clark’s president, attended the June 20 graduation at Larch.

Knight and Clark students have played basketball with Larch teams three times.

The emphasis at Larch is on re-entry to a productive life. That includes a variety of programs, some involving the inmate’s family, and others linked to cultural diversity.

Of all programs, integrity training stands out. With the help of a counselor, offenders study the choices they made that brought them here — such as drug abuse — and hold each other accountable. Dressed in crimson shirts, they form a family.

It may be one of the best programs Superintendent Gorman has seen in her 30-year career.

Among the firs and fresh mountain air, an intense self-examination among offenders offers hope that recidivism, the rate of repeat offenders, will lessen, with clean and sober results.

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