

Manufacturers Turn To Prisoners For Work

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LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (AP) — Good help is hard to find, unless that help is doing hard time.

Two manufacturers are taking advantage of a program in which they develop factories in Arkansas prisons and put convicts to work at market wages.

The workers use their earnings to fund the program, pay child support, fines, restitution and build a nest egg. The companies have a captive labor force and a chance to expand their businesses.

Arkansas has lost a quarter of its production jobs over the past decade, going from 187,000 in 1999 to 137,000 in 2008, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The allure of cheaper labor abroad led to many of the job losses, a trend compounded by the recession.

Tony Moore, general manager of Glove Corp., which has 55 prisoners sewing firefighter and military glove components at the Pine Bluff Unit, says the state couldn't fill many manufacturing jobs if they came back.

"There is an element in the American economy that really doesn't see working in a production factory as work they want to do," Moore said. Arkansas went from having 5,130 sewing jobs in 1999 to 1,600 in 2008, a plunge of 69 percent.

Electronics manufacturer Actronix Inc. of Flippin employs 70 women at the McPherson Unit in Newport, where they make wire harnesses for MRI machines, among other things.

Executives with both companies say they were able to expand their "free world" factories because of the prison labor.

Actronix uses inmates to assemble parts made at its Flippin plant, where more than 250 people work. Inmates are laid off in slow times, while the Flippin plant stays at full strength.

"We use the prison as a safety valve on our business," said Mark Wood, Actronix senior vice president.

Glove Corp. has inmates make glove liners and shells, which are assembled in Heber Springs by workers who are able to go home at night.

At the prison shop, inmates in white prison uniforms sit at industrial sewing machines and use their fingertips to guide Kevlar and different varieties of leather — including elk hide from Finland — as the heavy-duty needles stitch the pieces

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together.

Rodney Stout, 35, serving what he hopes will be 21 years of a 30-year sentence for kidnapping, said he is putting his money toward child support.

Stout said he ultimately wants to earn enough to pay college tuition for his 14-year-old child.

"That's my plan, my goal," said Stout, who has been locked up for 10 years.

Moore was on the verge of narrowing the scope of work at the Heber Springs factory a few years ago. Then the Arkansas Economic Development Commission provided the company an incentive package and suggested the Private Industry Enhancement program, the delicate name for the behind-the-fence prison operation.

"I said, 'Let's have a look at it,'" Moore said.

After two years, Moore has had such success with the 55 inmates that he is moving this month to a larger space at the Grimes Unit in Newport. Moore said he will add 15 workers, more production lines and introduce a leather cutting operation. His current workers will move to the Grimes Unit, too.

"We have people who are going to turn up for work every day. They're not going to take Monday off," he said, looking at the inmates sewing away.

The inmates, who work 10-hour days, Monday through Thursday, moved quickly when their lunch arrived, but many had 10 minutes of their 30-minute break left when they returned to their work stations. Supervisors track production on whiteboards, where black numbers reflect that the line is meeting its quota. Red numbers mean workers have to sew faster.

Moore said the inmates' skills are difficult to master. The bulky materials they sew have to be within 1/16th of an inch in each line of stitching. Workers sewing glove fingers at times have to work blindly, as the bulk of the material bunches up and blocks the needle from view.

"When they finish a 10-hour day, they are pretty tired. It is an honest tired. It changes their outlook. They have an air about them now, they have their self-esteem," Moore said.

The inmates sew with Kevlar fabric and thread, use seam rippers, scissors, nippers and needles. Sharp items are signed out by the inmates and checked back in by a guard at the end of a shift. Then the inmates are strip searched anyway.

Discipline problems are few. Only three inmates have been kicked out in two years.

Calvin Harmon, 49, is six years into a firm 14-year sentence for domestic battery. He said he hopes to sew for the rest of his term.

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"Savings is the most important part; you have something to look forward to. It keeps the burden off your family," he said.

Stout was transferred to the Pine Bluff Unit after he qualified for the program.

"There are plenty of other guys (in the system) who can do work," Stout said.

Correction Department spokeswoman Dina Tyler said the prison system is open to expanding the program.

"Anybody is welcome to call us at any time," Tyler said, but noted not all businesses would work. "More than likely, we wouldn't be interested in a weapons manufacturer."

Actronix's Wood said that not long ago he spoke to a worker who had a week left on her seven-year sentence.

"She was one of our first employees. She's getting out with her child support and her victim restitution paid, and with \$15,000 in a savings account," he said.

Glove Corp.'s Pat McCurley, who trains and manages workers, said the program has other benefits.

"Last Christmas, it was touching. Some of (the inmates) were able to send their child a gift for the first time since they've been in," she said.

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