

WORK RELEASE PROGRAM

Introduction

The Minnesota Department of Corrections (DOC) work release program was established by the state legislature in 1967 (M.S. 241.26). This statute authorizes the commissioner of corrections to permit carefully-screened inmates to work at paid employment or participate in approved vocational programming in the community.

From 1968 to 1972, work release inmates were transferred to county jails, worked in the community during the day, and returned to the jail after work. In 1972, with the assistance of a federal grant, the DOC opened a work release center at the Salvation Army in Minneapolis.

Increases to inmate populations created a need for more work release bed capacity, and the department began contracting with local facilities for work release placements as a cost-effective means of managing the growth of this program. This resulted in the close of the department-run center in 1982. The department continues to contract on a per diem basis for work release services. The current average daily population of male and female inmates in work release is 207 (fiscal year 2004).

Goals

The goal of work release is to enhance public safety by providing increased supervision and structure to offenders as they transition from prison to the community.

Criteria

In accordance with state law, inmates may be eligible for work release after they have served at least one-half of their term of imprisonment. Department policy further requires inmates to be within eight months of their supervised release date.

Before acceptance into the program, inmates must have a demonstrated need for transition services and show positive adjustment in work and school programming, treatment programming, or programs offered at medium and/or minimum-security facilities.

Inmates determined to be at high risk for re-offending are excluded from participation. This determination is based on current and prior criminal behavior, institutional adjustment, and chemical dependency history.

Components

The DOC Work Release Unit administers contracts with county jails, jail annexes, and community corrections residential facilities to house work release inmates.

The work release program provides a continuum of care by connecting offenders to appropriate resources in the community as a follow-up to institution programs. It is a transition to employment and stable residency for inmates with these needs. It is also a step toward the community from the controlled environment of the institution.

Upon recommendation of the Work Release Unit and institution program review teams, the department's Hearings & Release Unit determines whether conditional release will be granted to inmates to participate in work release.

While on work release, inmates are required to be fully employed and remain chemically free. Inmates are under close supervision while in work release facilities and subject to random urinalysis and breathalyzer tests to detect chemical use. Chemically dependent inmates are also required to participate in Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, or relapse prevention programs. In addition, inmates may participate in cognitive skills or other self-help groups offered in the community.

Work Requirement

Upon placement in a work release facility, the inmate is required to seek employment. If an inmate has difficulty securing employment, he or she is referred to a community program that assists in developing job-seeking skills.

The majority of inmates find employment within two weeks of their placement on work release. Inmates must pay a portion of their housing costs while in the work release facility and must pay court-ordered restitution, fines, or other assessments.

Two Levels

The work release program includes two levels to assist in the inmate's transition back into the community. Level one includes very limited allowances beyond the basic opportunity to work or attend vocational school. Level one work release inmates may qualify for a 12-hour weekend day pass if the inmate has been in the program for 30 days, maintained steady employment, and had a positive adjustment. Offenders may qualify for three overnight furloughs in the 30 days preceding their supervised release date.

Level two, which is designed for the lowest-risk offender, offers a number of privileges beyond the opportunity to work or attend vocational school. Level two work release inmates are eligible for evening activity passes after they have secured employment and demonstrated a positive adjustment. In addition, they are eligible for weekend overnight furloughs. After a period of adjustment, level two inmates may be eligible for home detention under the surveillance of electronic monitoring. Within 60 days of their supervised release date, eligible inmates may be placed on home detention status with surveillance by residential facility staff.

Strict Rules

Inmates participating in work release must adhere to strict rules as established by the department and the contracting facility. Inmates may be terminated from the program or lose privileges, depending upon the severity of any rule infraction. The commission of a misdemeanor or felony results in immediate termination from the program and return to prison.

Some basic facts about work release...

- For several decades, work release has served as one of the fundamental elements of Minnesota's state and local corrections systems. Work release is an excellent method of helping offenders make successful transitions from prison to the community.
- Empirical research suggests a positive association between employment and an offender's decision to not commit additional crimes.
- Less than three percent of offenders on work release committed new offenses while participating in the program.
- Work release is cost effective. Offenders reside in community-based correctional facilities for an average cost of less than \$48 per day versus the cost in a correctional institution, which averages \$76.80 (fiscal year 2004).
- Offenders on work release help offset other costs. During fiscal year 2004, offenders on work release paid \$444,960 in room and board and \$57,238 in restitution to crime victims.

Further Information

For further information about the department's work release program, contact:

Thomas Drobac
Work Release Director
1450 Energy Park Drive, Suite 200
St. Paul, Minnesota 55108-5219
651/642-0350

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Minnesota Department of Corrections
1450 Energy Park Drive, Suite 200
St. Paul, Minnesota 55108-5219
651/642-0200
TTY 651/643-3589
www.doc.state.mn.us

