



‘City INSIDE

At Bastrop federal prison, the hard work is aimed at turning lives around

THE Fence’

By Patrick Beach

You can't see much from the highway — just a sign saying Federal Correctional Institute Bastrop. About a half-mile up the entrance off Texas 95, visitors see a long, low series of beige buildings surrounded by formidable security fences, razor wire and towering lights. The facility, as is often the case with government buildings, sacrifices form over function.

The function is clear: Residents stay inside the fences. The institution about 6 miles north of Bastrop is a low-security prison for men. Spanning 163 acres, it has a little more than 1,430 inmates: about 1,235 inside the main prison and the remainder in an adjacent facility. Inmates here come from all over the U.S. and typically are held within 500 miles of where they are to be released. About half have drug-related offenses, 20 percent or more have sex offenses, and about 10 percent are serving sentences for weapons or explosives. Inmates at the satellite facility, called the camp, have minimum security classification, meaning they've had no history of violence or escape. Make no mistake: Those inmates have no more freedom than those in the main prison complex. The institution was originally intended as a state facility for youthful offenders, but the Federal Bureau of Prisons

bought it during its construction. It was dedicated on Aug. 29, 1979, and first housed some 450 inmates. It became a low-security prison in 1993. The minimum-security satellite camp opened that same year. Today, the prison has a staff of 251. Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative supplies power to the facility.

There is a barbershop, a commissary — ramen is a hot seller — a chapel, and, crucially, multiple vocational and technical training facilities. Inmates can learn to be dental assistants, take horticulture courses or learn basic home construction. They can get a GED or certification in several vocations, including electric work, welding and culinary arts. There is a drug-treatment facility within the prison, too.

A man could walk into the prison functionally illiterate and walk out years later with enough training to get a foot in the door of a job in his chosen field.

The Bastrop prison also partners with regional businesses — including Goodwill Industries, City of Austin and Greater Texas Landscape Services — that are willing to work with prisoners nearing their release date. The businesses hold mock and real job fairs.

“Eighty-five percent of these inmates are going to get out within 10 years and be somebody's neighbor. We want them to be prepared to get jobs and abide by the law,” prison executive assistant and spokesman Tom Barbee said.

Despite the opportunities for learning, this is still prison. A sense of discipline and structure is rigorously instilled. Beds — three to a cell — must be made crisply enough to pass muster with any Marine drill sergeant. Shoes must be under the bed. Personal items must be put away. No more

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Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative supplies power to the Federal Correctional Institute Bastrop. The prison uses about \$60,000 worth of power monthly, totaling about 786,000 kilowatt hours. Backup generators can continue to provide power for essential services if electric service is interrupted.



Photos by Sarah Beal

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than two rolls of toilet paper can be out. “Some of these guys, this is the first time in their lives they’ve made their bed,” Barbee said. “It’s about structure. These guys haven’t had a lot of structure.”

The lights come on at 5:30 a.m., 30 minutes before breakfast. Beds must be made and living areas prepared for inspection before going to work. Most inmates are at work by 7:15 a.m. in uniform — pants, boots, button-up shirt and belt. Every inmate has a job. They’re required to be in uniform until 4 p.m., unless cleared for recreation. At 10 p.m. it’s lights out. Visitors are allowed on Fridays, weekends and federal holidays.

That discipline migrates from the cell to work training and actual work. Some 350 inmates work in the auto shop under the supervision of a staff of 17, outfitting vehicles for the U.S. Border Patrol and other federal agencies. These are mostly pickups and SUVs. The vehicles come straight from the manufacturer and inmates paint and equip them with whatever the agency wants — custom wiring, cages, bedliners, the works.

The auto operation is a business within the prison, working with local and national companies. This specialized program turns out 175 vehicles a month, and the Bastrop prison is one of only three in the country doing such work. If you see a Border Patrol vehicle somewhere in Texas, there’s a good chance it spent time in Bastrop.

Inmates are paid a meager wage for this work, if they remember to clock in and out. But with hard work and many classroom hours, they can earn vocational accreditations.

Elsewhere, inside a large warehouse on prison grounds, inmates learn the basics of home construction. They essentially frame and build a house, then dismantle it. For more than two decades, prisoners have helped build projects for some area communities. The public gazebo in Veterans’ Memorial Park in downtown Elgin, for example, was built at the prison.

The prison’s culinary program, in partnership with Austin Community College, allows inmates to learn about the restaurant business and gain kitchen experience that can lead to certification. Some participants help produce food for prison staff. The prison turns out more than 4,000 meals each day — more palatable than you might think. “You don’t see a lot of



Prison spokesman Tom Barbee shows the warehouse where inmates learn to build a house, then dismantle it. Inmates have also helped build projects for some area communities, such as the public gazebo in Veterans Park in downtown Elgin. (Sarah Beal photos)



30-inch waists here,” Barbee said.

Other inmates’ needs are more pressing. A high percentage of Bastrop prisoners have a history of drug abuse. For some, there is a residential treatment program in a separate building within the prison’s fences. Last year, 89 prisoners completed treatment, which typically lasts nine months, and were then released to halfway houses scattered across the U.S.

Some men enter the prison with the functional equivalent of an elementary school education. Inside the walls, they can earn a GED, the equivalent of a high school diploma. Sixty-three inmates took that exam last year, and almost 2,500 have completed the program since the institution was dedicated nearly 39 years ago. The number of Bastrop prisoners earning that GED is high for a federal prison, Barbee said.

The Bastrop federal prison is part of the community. Barbee describes it as “a small city inside a fence.” The staff contributed about 2,500 pounds of nonperishable food to the Bastrop County Emergency Food Pantry last year in June, July and August. The prison runs an annual drive for new backpacks for area schoolchildren.

The facility has an education library and a loan program with the Bastrop Public Library, trading 5,000 to 6,000 books a year.

Near the prison, there’s a “re-entry resource center” for inmates nearing their release. And the Beyond the Bars speakers’ program lets men who had been prisoners in Bastrop or elsewhere come talk to inmates about the transition to life on the outside.

It’s not all work and lockdown at the Bastrop prison. There is recreation, including organized softball, flag football, soccer and basketball games. Inmates can paint — portraits of family members are popular; so is Al Pacino in “Scarface” — or do leatherwork they can send home.

When inmates realize they can create meaningful and useful keepsakes, it can boost their self-esteem, both behind bars and after their release.

The programs lay the groundwork for a better life, post-prison. The better a prisoner is prepared to rejoin society and resist past temptations and trespasses, the better the odds he can avoid another prison stint.

As Barbee put it, “These guys have given up their freedom, but they haven’t given up the right to be treated like human beings.”

3 notable inmates over the years



SAM HURD: A former Dallas Cowboy and Chicago Bear wide receiver, Hurd was sentenced in 2013 to 15 years in the Bastrop prison for drug charges. While with the Cowboys, Hurd caught quarterback Tony Romo’s first pass in the NFL.



RICHARD CAUSEY: The former Enron executive was indicted in 2004 for wire fraud and conspiracy while with the Houston energy company. He pleaded guilty in exchange for testifying against fellow Enron officials Kenneth Lay and Jeffrey Skilling. He was released in 2011 after serving more than four years.



CHRIS LAMPRECHT: A Texas computer hacker who may have been the first person banned from the internet. He was sentenced not for computer crimes but for money laundering. Because he was known to be a hacker, he was banned from the web or other networked computers. He was released in March 2000. Lamprecht’s internet ban expired when he was no longer under supervised release.

Working inside, training for outside

Every inmate at the institution has a job, often one that includes training toward a possible career upon release. These include:



ELECTRICAL: Inmates can earn a certificate of completion from the institution. They learn to read wiring schematics and complete wiring diagrams. They also can receive certification in wire soldering.



WELDING: Prisoners can receive certification from the American Welding Society after completing written and practical exams. That is one of four certifications available to inmates, who must work, on average, more than five hours a day, five days a week for about six months to earn an accreditation.



DENTAL ASSISTANT: Inmates can complete 2,000 hours in this program to earn apprentice certification from the U.S. Department of Labor.



CULINARY ARTS: Inmates who complete this vocational training class receive 720 continuing education units from Austin Community College.



BUILDING TRADES: Inmates who complete this class receive a certificate of completion from the prison, which translates to 360 education credits from Austin Community College. Prison officials are working to get the course accredited through ACC.



LANDSCAPING: Inmates who complete this training class receive a certificate of completion from the prison. Inmates are also eligible to become certified as Master Gardeners by Texas A&M University by passing exams the school administers at the end of the class.

Source: Tom Barbee, executive assistant and prison spokesman