

Arizona Daily Star

\$500K grant to fund job-training for Pima County jail inmates

- By Carmen Duarte Arizona Daily Star

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The governor addresses public education during his State of the State speech in Tucson.

A nearly \$500,000 federal grant has been awarded to Pima County to develop a job center and training program for minimum-security jail inmates.

The program, which will have a staff of three, is expected to begin recruiting 150 inmates in March, said India Davis, corrections bureau chief for the Pima County Sheriff's Department, which runs the jail.

The U.S. Department of Labor funding would establish the job center to provide services and training to prepare inmates for the job market in hopes that they would not return to jail, Davis said.

Criteria for the inmates — both women and men — to be accepted into the voluntary program includes that their sentence cannot be for more than 180 days.

The services and job training are aimed at those close to finishing their jail time and will prepare them to re-enter the work force, said Regina Kelly, county director of the Grants and Data Office.

Inmates' needs would be assessed, including their skills for employment, education or job training.

Staff members would work with them on attaining their GED, enrollment in classes at Pima Community College or job programs, said Kelly.

The county is partnering with nearly a dozen other entities to help inmates transition into the community and work force. In addition to PCC, the agencies include the county's Department of Community Services, Employment and Training; Arizona's Wagner-Peyser Employment Service and Vocational Rehabilitation programs; Tucson Urban League Pre-Apprenticeship Construction Training; and the Community Food Bank's Caridad Kitchen.

Inmates would be released to attend job interviews and be provided with travel to and from the interviews, Kelly said.

A judge would look at the inmates' progress and could release them to their homes, where they would be monitored by GPS, Davis said.

Once the sentences are completed, the program will offer support services such as housing, health services, continued training through the county's Sullivan Jackson Employment Center, PCC or other job programs. Areas of study could include construction, manufacturing trades, culinary arts or computer trades, including cyber security.

Staff would be looking for prisoners who are "compliant, cooperative and willing to change to improve their lives," said Davis. They also could take part in counseling and substance-abuse treatment.

The Department of Labor would analyze the program to see how what effect it has on recidivism rates.

Depending on the outcome, the department could support funding similar projects nationwide, said Davis.

Meanwhile, the county is committed to continuing the job-training and employment center in the jail, Kelly said.

“We have the commitment of the Sheriff’s Department to absorb those workers into the system, including the office space and infrastructure to maintain the program,” she said.

“We have to invest in new programs rather than invest in building a new jail,” Kelly said.

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