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Dental Work Provides Hope for Ex-Prisoners Looking for Employment

SANTA FE - Twenty-two ex-offenders are getting a second chance to make that first impression, as part of the New Mexico Corrections Department – Education Bureau Career Pathways grant. The \$871,000 grant, from the Edward Byrne Memorial, is funding an ongoing study to determine if dental repair makes ex-offenders more employable. “This was a valuable project that boosted self-esteem and employment prospects for all the participants,” says Gail Oliver, Corrections Department deputy secretary of prison reform and reentry.

The Corrections Department partnered with the U.S. Department of Justice and the University of New Mexico Dental Clinic to develop a pilot project to assist former prisoners with major barriers to employment, including appearance. Corrections contracted with the UNM Dental Clinic to served 22 clients with serious dental issues related to drug abuse. The 18-month-long program enabled some offenders to receive major constructive surgery that changed their lives. The future of projects like this one is dependent on additional federal grant opportunities.

Ninety-five percent of offenders leave prison and return to New Mexico communities after finishing their term of incarceration. “It’s hard for employers and community members to give these folks a second chance,” says Oliver, “but without that second chance we are limiting their options.”

Over the past year, the Corrections Department has begun the process of revamping its prison programs to better equip inmates with marketable job skills. The department has also improved coordination between the prisons and Probation and Parole, which strengthens the process of reintegrating ex-prisoners back into their communities after being released from prison.

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