

**ARCHIVES****Gatesville prison system gears toward rehabilitation**

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By Jon Schroeder

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GATESVILLE – When most people think of prison, they don't think of men giving each other relationship advice. But that's what's happening at the Hughes Correctional Institutions Division.

It's called the CHANGES pre-release program, and organizers hope it's changing inmates' lives.

Jimmie Ferguson, a program facilitator at Hughes, said the goal of the program is not merely to change what criminals do but also to change who they are. CHANGES stands for Changing Habits and Achieving New Goals to Empower Success.

Putting off instant gratification is one of the first steps, but the program is designed to make criminals into productive members of society.

"You're not a human doing," Ferguson said. "You're a human being."

That means the program offers some basic training in job acquisition – creating a resume, interviewing for a job – but the meat of the program is teaching convicts to build positive relationships with others once they're on the outside.

In their CHANGES class on Monday, inmates discussed how they'd deal with a wife or girlfriend asking, "Do I look fat?"

Answering that question might not seem important, but it brings out the important trait of honesty, Ferguson said. The importance of telling the truth was brought into focus fast with the next question: What do you do when your boss accuses you of stealing?

"There are a bunch of people who are going to think you're nothing but a scumbag and a liar because you're an ex-con," Ferguson said. The best way for ex-cons to deal with that is to be more open and honest in all situations.

Several men in the class who had been in and out of prison knew what Ferguson was talking about. Three men said they'd been accused of stealing by a boss or a co-worker. Two of them said other people would steal from their workplace, knowing the ex-convict would be blamed.

Victor Jackson, who finished his last day of class Monday, wants to take the class again. He said the CHANGES program has benefited him in several ways, including teaching him how to balance a checkbook and other life skills.

Jackson stepped into Hughes for the first time in 2001. After he leaves the facility on April 22, 2009, he plans to go into the blueprint business. He said he is more prepared to deal with life on the outside.

The CHANGES program is not mandatory, but completing the 60-day course is a parole condition for many offenders. As a result, the class is always full.

Only one is offered at Hughes; by law, only 28 men can take the class at once, Ferguson said.

Since more than 2,800 offenders are housed in the Hughes unit, only about 1 percent of the Hughes prison population can take the class at a time.

Statewide, about 30,000 offenders went through the CHANGES program during the 2005-06 school year. About 15,000 more completed the Cognitive Intervention program, another 60-day program designed for inmates with disciplinary problems.

Other educational opportunities are available through the **Windham** School District, Texas' correctional education provider.

Regardless of what program inmates are in, the goal is to get offenders to "step up and do the tough things," Ferguson said.

It's not just a matter of building a good self-image, he said, although he covers those in class as well.

Instead, he's building something more important in Texas offenders. "It's an issue of character," he said.

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