



PRESS RELEASE

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MDOC Proposes Restitution Center in DeSoto County

Hernando, Miss.—The Mississippi Department of Corrections (MDOC) today announced a proposal to operate a Restitution Center in DeSoto County, Mississippi. The proposed facility affords Circuit Court Districts an alternative to incarceration for minimal risk offenders who need a more structured environment than standard probation. The program concentrates on behavior modification, addressing educational needs, alcohol or drug dependency, developing work ethics and financial responsibility.

“We have found that offenders who are placed in a restitution center are more likely to successfully complete their sentence in a setting that encourages and supports rehabilitation and gainful employment at little expense to taxpayers,” said MDOC Commissioner Robert L. Johnson. “Offenders sentenced to a restitution program are provided more supervision, treatment services and made more aware of the consequences of their actions than regular probation.”

Circuit Court Judge George B. Ready, whose 17th Circuit Court District includes DeSoto County, expressed his support for such a facility, which operates under the same concept as work release centers in Memphis, Tennessee. Judge Ready’s support is not only that of a judge who can utilize the incarceration alternative but as a citizen.

“Foremost, I am interested in having a facility for placement of non-violent, low risk offenders to work to pay for their upkeep, court costs and restitution to victims instead of sentencing them to a prison bed that places another burden on taxpayers,” said Judge Ready. “As a citizen this expands the potential employee base for employers who are having a hard time obtaining low wage employees.”

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Offenders who are classified or sentenced directly by a judge to a Restitution Center must meet the following criteria:

- Be a first time offender
- Be convicted of a nonviolent offense that constitutes a felony
- Be free of serious drug, alcohol or emotional problems that would impair the ability to meet the obligations of the restitution sentence
- Be in good mental and physical health
- Be employable
- Have a sincere desire to participate in the restitution program

Offenders are expected to perform 40 free hours of community service spread over the period of their stay, as well as work 40 hours a week in the community for at least minimum wage. Money earned is given to the center's bookkeeper and dispersed for restitution, court costs and fines, and room and board. After taxes, the remainder goes to the offender's family or a holding account. The offender get a \$25.00 weekly allowance and is charged \$7.00 per day room and board, beginning the first day of employment.

MDOC Correctional Officers are on duty 24 hours daily. If an offender leaves the center or job site without permission a warrant is issued and local law enforcement are notified. If the offender fails to comply with the rules, they are terminated from the program and taken to the sentencing judge for a revocation or loses points for minor infractions. In addition to having gainful employment and completing the required community service work, offenders must earn a minimum of 10,500 points as one of the conditions for program completion. Points are given based on the offender's work performance, general attitude, personal hygiene, program attendance, cleanliness of the living area, and financial responsibility.

Two businesses in the Jackson, Mississippi area that employ offenders sentenced to restitution centers are Dennery's Restaurant and Luvel Dairy Products. Dennery's has participated in the program for four years. Owner John Dennery heard about the program from a seafood supply house that viewed the employment opportunity as a win-win situation.

"Most of the offenders receive minimum wage and start out on the dishwasher," said John Dennery. "If they can handle that, they get moved up. One offender who worked for us ended up going to Hinds Community College to get a culinary arts degree and is now attending Tougaloo College on a sports scholarship."

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Luvel Dairy Products has participated in the Restitution Center program for close to eight years. Several offenders have stayed on in full-time positions with Luvel after completing their sentences.

“Over the years I have developed a good relationship with Commander Robert Hughes, Director of the Hinds County Restitution Center,” said Luvel Dairy Products Office Manager Tammy Hollis. “He knows that if someone is about to complete their sentence he had better find me a replacement quick. We actually have a couple of positions we keep open just for offenders.”

MDOC currently has four restitution centers located in Hinds, Jackson, LeFlore and Rankin Counties. The average restitution center population at the end of FY2001 was 233. The total disbursements from offender earnings was in excess of \$2.3 million dollars, including more than a million dollars in restitution payments to crime victims, fines and court costs. Close to 40,000 hours of free labor was performed by the restitution center offenders in these communities. At minimum wage, the free labor totaled more than \$204 thousand dollars.

John Dennery admits some individuals may be leery of offenders working for him, but he has seen the benefits employment at his restaurant has meant to the men and women who made mistakes and truly desire to change.

“I’ve been really pleased with the residents who come to work for me,” said Dennery. “Most of them just need a momma and a daddy to look after them and keep them on the right track.”

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