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Washington Corrections Center continues plans to support food banks, community needs during pandemic

SHELTON – The Washington Corrections Center in Shelton donated 27,652 pounds of produce to local food banks in 2019. As part of the Department of Corrections’ Hope Gardens project, the facility is preparing to continue the tradition this year, recognizing food banks face greater need and a reduction in donations due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Benri Deanon, Grounds/Nursery Services Specialist at the facility, has a master’s degree in agriculture. He leads a team of 36 incarcerated gardeners. In 2019, the facility grew 46,732 pounds of produce. They donated 60 percent of it to eight local food banks and retained the rest for the facility kitchen to provide fresh produce to the men incarcerated there. The facility has donated more than 112,000 pounds to the community since 2014.

In March of 2020, WCC started an Incentive Garden program for incarcerated individuals at the facility. Cedar Creek Corrections Center provided a truckload of compost, and staff donated their time for classes. The facility provided recycled chain bags for the gardeners to plant up to eight different plants. Individuals started their gardens from seeds planted in egg carton planters in their cells.

Incarcerated individuals interested in participating must have no violent infractions for 18 months and no serious infractions for 12 months. They applied for the program and were required to take an Introduction to Gardening class. If they were still interested, they paid a fee of \$7 to cover their materials.

Once they committed, participants attended additional classes on sustainability, composting and garden cycling. All participants signed a garden contract, committing to follow the rules—and in return, they will be able to consume any produce they grow.

“This is a new and evolving program,” said Karin Arnold, Corrections Program Manager at WCC. “Some individuals have stated they have never eaten vegetables that didn’t come out of a can, and are excited to share their new knowledge with their families.”

The Washington Department of Corrections has garden expansion projects underway at [correctional facilities](#) all across the state. The garden expansion gives more incarcerated individuals an opportunity to garden while allowing facilities to increase the amount of produce to donate to local food banks and community kitchens. The department started planning in early March, at the beginning of the growing

season, when it became clear facility gardens could help communities facing food shortages due to the COVID-19 crisis.

“The Corrections Hope Gardens give individuals incarcerated in Washington correctional facilities an opportunity to give back to their communities at a time when it’s needed the most,” said Corrections Secretary Stephen Sinclair. “It also gives them a chance to get outside and learn about gardening, a skill they can use when they return home to restart their lives.”

The [WA Food Fund](#), a relief fund created to support food banks and pantries across Washington, reports 1.6 million people are at risk of not having enough food to eat. That’s double the number of people than before the virus outbreak. The organization also reports a 70 percent reduction in donations due to the pandemic.

Building on its existing gardens of nearly 19 acres across the state, the department put another 100+ acres into production this spring, allowing facilities to increase the amount of produce shared between their correctional kitchens and local communities.

Working with the [Sustainability in Prisons Project](#), corrections staff and other partners, incarcerated gardeners grew more than 246,700 pounds of food in 2018. They then sent it to facility kitchens and food banks. Throughout the year, facilities donate food to local community food banks, nonprofits, elementary schools and childcare centers. The massive garden expansion will allow them to produce exponentially more.

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About the Washington Corrections Center: The Washington Corrections Center houses the state’s Reception and Diagnostic Center, general population and an Intensive Management Unit. The Reception and Diagnostic Center is the receiving unit for all male inmates sentenced to prison in Washington state. The facility houses up to 1,268 men in Medium, Close and Maximum Custody settings.



Incarcerated individuals apply to participate in the incentive gardens program, where they can grow their own produce. (Washington Corrections Center)



Incentive gardens give incarcerated individuals the opportunity to grow up to eight different kinds of produce. (Washington Corrections Center)