



The hidden workforce

A partnership between the Department of Public Safety and NC State University's Industry Expansion Solutions is helping to correct the manufacturing sector's skilled-labor shortage.

CEOs cite the shortage of skilled workers as one of their most pressing concerns, so Director of N.C. Correction Enterprises Karen Brown is eager to get the word out: She knows of a highly trained, highly motivated group ready to get to work. They are ex-offenders, released from prison and sent back to their communities for a chance to start productive new lives. Of the 2,000 or so inmates released every month, 45 to 60 of them worked and trained in one of Correction Enterprises' 31 manufacturing facilities across the state.

"In Elizabeth City, we do embroidery, as well as specialized sewing, like safety vests for Department of Transportation," says Brown. "In Nashville, N.C., we make eyeglasses for Medicaid patients." The mission of her organization is twofold: to produce quality goods for the state, and to teach both hard and soft skills — such as interviewing techniques and effective communications — to the inmates it employs.

Beginning in 2016, selected inmates working in 12 of those plants also started to receive specialized training through a new partnership with NC State Industry Expansion Solutions (IES), the client-focused extension unit of the College of Engineering. An IES improvement specialist worked closely with Correction Enterprises staff and inmate employees to train them in "Lean" — a set of principles that teaches workers to identify and eliminate waste and improve processes, resulting in high-quality, low-cost products.

Phil Mintz is the executive director of IES, and says that Lean has delivered huge profits to his organization's clients. "Just in

the period of 2012 to 2016, 81 clients have reported about \$93 million total in economic impact and more than a thousand new or retained jobs," he says. According to Mintz, Lean strategies are frequently used in health care and government as well as manufacturing, when organizations want to streamline processes or score higher on customer satisfaction.

Brown says that the Lean Manufacturing Certificate that participants earn can make the difference between landing a job and not; unfortunately, ex-offenders who don't find work are three times more likely to return to prison than those who

are earning wages. She asks business owners to try hiring just one of Correction Enterprises' graduates. In addition to the Lean thinking they'll add to their workforce, she says, they also can take advantage of federal tax credits and free federal bonding.

"We want to give ex-offenders a chance to be successful," says Brown. "We want to give them a chance to prove themselves — to make themselves into contributing citizens for the state of North Carolina."

— *Miranda Volborth is a professional writer based in Hillsborough.*



Correction Enterprises offers journeyman welding apprenticeships at its metal products plant in Polkton, NC.