Inmate Gregory Demery works on a blue denim utility bag

About one million license plates are produced each year at the Angola plant

Prison industries profit not always monetary

By KAREN DIDIER
Baker-Zachary bureau

The number of prisoners incarcerated by the state is growing by more than 1,400 annually, and the cost of feeding and clothing them grows correspondingly.

Also, ways to keep the inmates busy must be found. Corrections officials consider inmate idleness a major cause of problems in penal institutions.

Through Louisiana Prison Enterprises -- a variety of 17 industrial and agricultural endeavors operated with inmates -- the state Department of...
The act lists the purposes of LPE as: To utilize the resources of the state, prisons, and other state agencies for the benefit of the state, to utilize the labor of inmates in the prosecution of a business, and to make the prisons self-supporting. The act also provides for the appointment of a deputy assistant secretary to manage the operations of LPE.

LPE is a division of the Department of Corrections. It is organized as the Office of Agricultural Enterprises and is responsible for the operation of the prison farms. LPE is responsible for the production of food, fiber, and other goods and services, as well as the provision of janitorial, medical, and other services to other state agencies.

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Incentive wages, Meades boasted. "This year, it's $594,000, and the trend being approximately $300,000 per year." 

Meades said that just last July, before the inmates had been informed and during a period where he had increased inmate hourly wages by 2 cents per hour, there were 1,600 inmates who had been working for 2 cents per hour. Meades now estimates that the state can save more than $300,000 per year in that cost. 

The department secretary has the authority to increase wages up to the legal limit, Meades said, adding where does that leave me? Where do I remove the additional revenue? 

One way, Meades said, is to do as a governor and open your face to the employee wages - raise prices. 

A different way, he said, is to "get a different philosophy on the business that we're in" and convince the inmate population. "We're not putting Louisianians out of the labor market," Meades said. "We're putting them in a position to make their labor a commodity." 

Meades said that, as the inmate population continues to grow, LPE will likely need to consider an incentive wage cost and continue to offer "incentive wages" to the inmate population. 

Incentive wages, Meades said, "have the potential to be very minute." 

Meades said that incentive wages have been "very successful," and that the inmate population has been "very interested." 

"We're trying to run a business," Meades said. "And we're trying to provide a product." 

Meades said that incentive wages can help to "generate additional revenue," and that the state can "capitalize on the trend being approximately $50,000 per year." 

"But, he's also set goals that we can't achieve," Meades said. "I'd have had to run a startup business to achieve that." 

"We can come up with many, many things that we thought we were going to do that we haven't been able to do," Meades said. "The fund for in order to meet our incentive wages..." 

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