

University prison program success

When the University of Alaska, Juneau began offering courses at the state prison in Juneau in 1973, few people dreamed it would blossom into a major new rehabilitation program adopted by all the prisons in Alaska.

In seven years, a few courses in welding and adult basic education such as reading, writing and math grew into a program, in Juneau, with an enrollment of nearly 40 students. Last year five inmates completed an associate of arts degree and 11 received high school diplomas.

The success of the UAJ program spawned a joint venture this year between UAJ's new Center for Educational Rehabilitation Studies and the Alaska State Division of Corrections. The program aims to develop and expand existing educational programs into a cohesive unit in all state prisons. This is the first time such an ambitious program has ever been undertaken in Alaska.

Dr. Randall Ackley, director of the UAJ center, said the purpose of the program is to "help prisoners become employable and raise their self-image, which helps keep them out of jail."

Ackley expects the program to curb the rising cost of prison operations, primarily by reducing the rate at which offenders return to prison because of new crimes.

"Offenders who sit in prison and wallow in their punishment have twice the chance of returning to prison after release compared with prisoners who attend school," Ackley said.

Ackley pointed out that building a new prisoner space costs about \$125,000 per inmate. "However, offering an educational program so that a prisoner can learn to function in society, or gain a skill so that he can get a job upon release, may cost as little as \$2,000 a year."

The program, funded by \$300,000 from the state and \$64,000 from the Comprehensive Employment Training Act (CETA), has five full- and part-time staff in addition to Ackley. The staff includes three Juneau artists; poet Shiela Nickerson, artist Jane Linden and actress-director Molly Smith. Five prisons have educational coordinators in the program, Ackley said.

The new program offers a variety of subjects with more scheduled to begin the first of the year.

Juneau, Fairbanks and Anchorage prisons offer high school equivalency programs, art and writing courses, career training programs, college courses and alcohol and drug abuse information programs.

The Juneau prison offers Native studies and associate of arts degrees in business and other fields. Anchorage prisoners can assist instructors or volunteer to teach classes. In the smaller prisons such as in Ketchikan and Nome, classes in art and creative writing will be offered along with the existing high school diploma program.

All programs will be broadened in the future, said Ackley, who envisions the day when most of the state's prisoners will be involved in some aspect of the program.

Jane Linden, state coordinator for the Arts in Prison program, said that "for many inmates, it's the first time they have ever finished anything like a college course or a painting, and have done well at it. That's a major accomplishment for them."

In addition to the courses in creative arts, other courses offer training in reading, language arts, math and other job skills to help prisoners find employment upon release.

Similar programs have proven successful in Folsom, San Quentin, and other prisons.