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## Environment

Monday, July 6, 2009

# Frugality and trust are litter's lessons

### Crews of Del. inmates clean up roads, saving money for cash-strapped state

BY ESTEBAN PARRA • THE NEWS JOURNAL • JULY 3, 2009

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Nicholas Wanamaker was picking up trash along a Bear road when he spotted a pile of shredded plastic at an intersection.

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Unable to collect it with a litter grabber, the state Department of Correction inmate bent over and picked it up by hand.

"We have to get up all the pieces of trash that we can," the 31-year-old New Castle native said. "It's just trash, but we all have to pitch in and help out. I love what I'm doing. ... It's a lot better than sitting in the Webb [Correctional] center."

Wanamaker, who is serving a six-month sentence for hitting his wife, is one of about 100 Delaware inmates who can be seen Monday through Friday in blue scrubs and yellow reflective vests collecting trash along Delaware's more than 12,000 miles of highways. They also help maintain cemeteries and public grounds on weekends.

Besides keeping roads cleaner, prisoner road crews save money for the cash-strapped state, which shells out about \$650,000 a year for cleanup workers on the Department of Transportation payroll.

"Bottom line is that, pretty much, we use them equally as we use our staff," said Darrel Cole of the state Department of Transportation.

Collectively, the inmates and DelDOT workers last year gathered about 34,000 bags of trash.

"Without the ability to use their services, we would definitely be worse off than we are, as far as litter on our roadways," Cole said.

Earlier this week, eight inmates quietly stepped out of a DelDOT bus along Bear Road and began picking up empty plastic bottles, discarded paper cups and even cigarette butts. The aluminum cans were left for 35-year-old John Tanzilli of Wilmington, who is serving a year for violating probation.

"I'm collecting all the cans," he said as he stepped on a Bud Light can. "We recycle all the aluminum that's out here and we're helping keep Delaware clean."

Following the prisoners were two DelDOT trucks that encouraged motorists to be careful and offered the inmates cover from oncoming traffic.

Inmates assigned to road crews put in more than 54,000 hours over the past year, collecting items ranging from plastic bottles to car parts to couches. The crews, usually eight to 10 inmates watched over by an armed correction officer, must notify officials if they come across contraband such as cigarettes, alcohol or weapons.



The News Journal/ROBERT CRAIG

Besides keeping Delaware's roads cleaner, crews made up of Department of Correction inmates help the state save money that otherwise would come from the budget of the Department of Transportation. (Buy photo)



The News Journal/ROBERT CRAIG

Inmates from Delaware's Department of Correction pick up trash Tuesday along a roadside in Bear. (Buy photo)

#### HOW TO HELP

The News Journal is asking readers to beautify Delaware by helping to find and clean up litter. If you see unsightly piles of trash in your neighborhood or elsewhere, e-mail us a precise location. Better yet, send us a photo. We'll try to find out who is responsible and ask what can be done to clean up the mess. Results will be published periodically. E-mail your suggestions to Assistant City Editor Tim Konski at tkonski@delawareonline.com. Be sure to include your name and a phone number for verification purposes.

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Their hours also count toward community service that they were ordered to complete at sentencing.

ADVERTISEMENT "Most of the guys that I bring out ... don't have a lot of time left on their sentence," said Cpl. James Herman, who has been with the department three years. "They're not really trying to be a pain in the butt. They just want to get by until they go home."

Inmates who refuse to work are sent back to prison, where they serve additional time for not completing their sentences.

"We don't get a lot of that," Herman said.

### Chain gangs a relic of the past

Unlike what's seen in the movies, Delaware inmates are not chained up or watched over by a small army of shotgun-wielding guards.

That's because only inmates who are not considered dangerous are selected for service.

Delaware road crews never include extreme cases such as convicted murderers or sex offenders. Instead, they are made up of inmates who qualify for work release, meaning they can leave prison for jobs on the condition they return after work, said Lt. Jeff Henson, a 27-year correction department veteran.

Henson, who supervises New Castle County road crews, said the state would not use Level 5 inmates, prisoners convicted of the most serious offenses who are behind bars all day for safety reasons.

"First off, there is not enough security," he said. "You get eight or 10 Level 5 guys, they are going to be running off."

Inmates who were caught after escaping are barred from road crews. Those allowed to participate include inmates convicted of offenses such as drug charges, misdemeanor assaults and violating probation.

Evelyn Bush of the National Institute of Corrections, which offers training for prison systems, said road crews evolved as prisons got away from warehousing and began trying to rehabilitate prisoners.

"We went from punitive to a little more redemptive," Bush said. "How do you redeem yourself? Well, one of the ways is you should give back."

Originally, prisoners were placed in chain gangs during the years after the end of slavery.



The News Journal/ROBERT CRAIG

Besides keeping Delaware's roads cleaner, crews made up of Department of Correction inmates help the state save money that otherwise would come from the budget of the Department of Transportation. (Buy photo)



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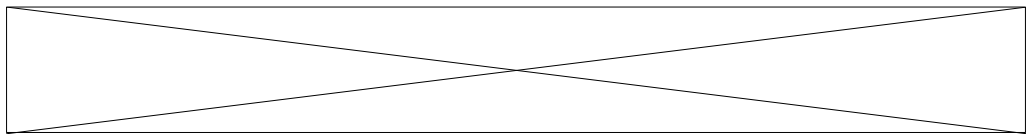
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"A lot of that emanates from whether or not you were an agricultural society or an industrial society," she said. "In the South, they predominantly used them to replace slave labor."

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There also was no discretion used in determining who was put in chain gangs, resulting in murderers being chained to burglars.

"You treated them equally," Bush said. "Because they were all doing time, as they say."

When inmates are seen in the community now, it's almost like a perk, Bush said. Today's road crews also are made up of lower-level offenders who begin to get a feeling of re-integration with the community.

"It's also a way to give them accountability to being responsible and also have the community understand that they want to give something back," she said.

Melvin Dillard, who has been in prison six years, was allowed to take part in last week's road crew because he's nearing the end of his seven-year sentence.

"It's different," the Wilmington native said about what he sees of the community while working the crews. "When I went to jail, all those buildings by the Wilmington Train Station -- none of that stuff was there. There's a lot of new things out there."

### Drug paraphernalia, alcohol

Dillard, 35, said he's run across a lot of drug paraphernalia and alcohol while collecting trash and is eager to pick it.

"It's good to get it off the streets so the kids won't come around and see it or pick it up and put it in their mouth," he said.

Tanzilli, who was collecting aluminum cans, said he is waiting to get a job while on work-release and enjoys working on the road crew in the meantime.

"It keeps you occupied," he said, adding that he's enjoyed walking about five miles a day during the pickups. "It makes your day go quicker."

He also enjoys the camaraderie among crew members.

"You bond with the other guys," he said.

For some inmates, the cleanups remind them of things they should not do.

Daryl Carter, 38, of Wilmington, who is serving a six-month burglary sentence, said he doesn't mind picking up trash, partly because it gives him second thoughts about littering.

"I used to be one of them throwing the trash out myself," he said. "It wises you up -- cleaning after yourself."



The News Journal/ROBERT CRAIG

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The responsibility and trust given to inmates also helps them learn right from wrong.

After picking up the shredded plastic, Wanamaker was about a block from the road crew -- alone. Although still within sight of the others, Wanamaker could have had a head start, had he chosen to run.

"I have a goal set in my mind, and that's of getting out of here the right way," said Wanamaker, explaining that he wants to return to his family. "I would never risk running off and getting about 15 years for escaping. Never."

### WHO TO CALL

To report illegal dumping or other environmental concerns, call the state's Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control at (800) 662-8802.

To report debris on Delaware's roads, call the state's Department of Transportation management center at 659-4600.

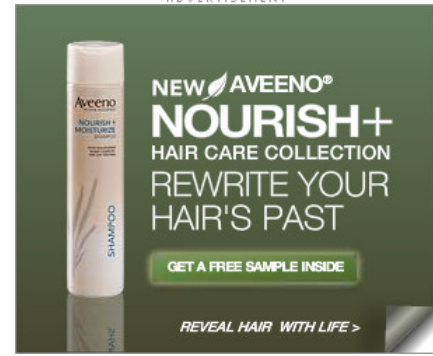
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claymonter75 wrote:

Replying to gettowork:

*If you really want to make a dent in the needs of the state; trash collecting, ditch digging, window washing, whatever; I HAVE AN IDEA! In addition to having prisoners work off their debt (i.e. the room and board provided by the state) have the welfare sucker do the same. Working folks receive a check for the fruits of their labors. Welfare folks receive a check for the fruits of the working folks' labor. Soooooo have the welfare folks work so that they can also understand the definition of working for what one receives.*

AMEN BRUVVER!!!!

7/3/2009 3:36:37 PM

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garvix wrote:

Ok...I think it's a great program to get prisoners out there, welfare recipients, and kudos to the adopt-a-highway program! How about everyone who needs to serve community service, not just prisoners. Those folks were lucky to keep their butt out of prison if they agree to do community service, so let them walk the talk and clean up. Everyone will appreciate the work done and they will fulfill their hours. It shouldn't be optional, unless physically unable.

7/3/2009 2:14:48 PM

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wheresthejustice wrote:

Replying to gettowork:

*If you really want to make a dent in the needs of the state; trash collecting, ditch digging, window washing, whatever; I HAVE AN IDEA! In addition to having prisoners work off their debt (i.e. the room and board provided by the state) have the welfare sucker do the same. Working folks receive a check for the fruits of their labors. Welfare folks receive a check for the fruits of the working folks' labor. Soooooo have the welfare folks work so that they can also understand the definition of working for what one receives.*

Yes !!!!! Agreed -- and these same welfare and medicaid suckers should also have to pass drug testing in order to collect their benefits. Enough of this something for nothing attitude that plagues these people, they grow up on it and then expect it. I don't have a problem with the less fortunate receiving these benefits, but they should have to do SOMETHING in order to collect them. There are plenty of things that need to be done.

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gettowork wrote:

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