

# PART I: Exploitation or opportunity?

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There are no private prisons in Oregon, and while protesters hit the streets of downtown Portland on Friday, Sept. 9, by and large, Oregon's inmates showed up for work like any other day.

Two prison officials who oversee inmate work programs within the state both said they received no reports of inmate workers protesting or causing disruptions on the day of the nationwide strike.

Several fringe media outlets reported that Oregon State Penitentiary was on lockdown that day and that inmate workers in the kitchen at Deer Creek Correctional Institution in Madras either went on strike or were put on pre-emptive lockdown, depending on the source. The Oregon Department of Corrections, however, denied any participation in the strike within the walls of its institutions.

"There were not any disturbances related to the national prison work strike in September, or otherwise," wrote Betty Bernt, DOC spokesperson, in response to an inquiry about those reports.

Oregon's prisoners work in four different capacities: for the Department of Corrections in jobs needed for a prison's daily operation, such as in the kitchen or janitorial; in a variety of work-training programs; on DOC-run work crews that primarily perform landscaping or cleaning duties on publicly owned lands; or for Oregon Corrections Enterprises.

Oregon Corrections Enterprises is a semi-independent state agency that was created to help the state's prisons come into compliance with the requirement that all able-bodied inmates be put to work.

It operates a network of 28 businesses inside 11 of Oregon's 14 state prisons.

It operates five laundry facilities and seven "contact centers," or call centers, as well as a garment factory that makes the blue jeans prisoners wear; welding shops; sign fabrication, printing, scanning and mail service shops; upholstery, sewing and embroidery studios; and a furniture manufacturing business.

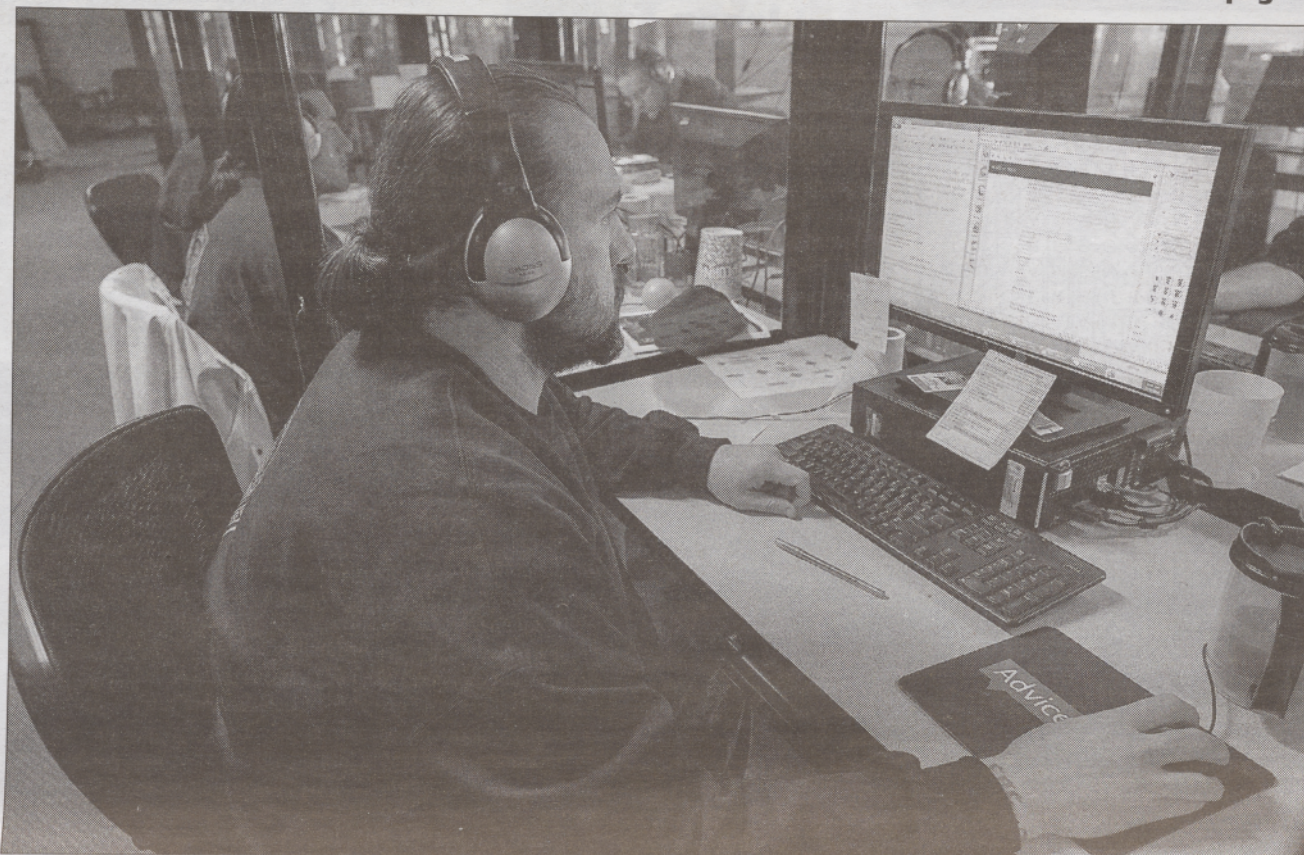
But more inmates work in the laundries and contact centers than all of Oregon Corrections Enterprise's other operations combined.

## Oregon Corrections Enterprises

Street Roots visited Oregon State Penitentiary in Salem. It's a maximum-security prison housing 2,000 of the 14,700 inmates living in Oregon's state-run correctional institutions.

It also houses Oregon Corrections Enterprises' largest laundry and second-largest contact center.

In an expansive carpeted room that stretched from one end of the building to the other, the contact center's rows of identical cubicles sat beneath fluorescent lighting and exposed air ducts. At each desk sat an inmate wearing a navy blue T-shirt, jeans and a headset watching a computer monitor, reciting his personalized sales pitch. Aside from the casual dress code and



Inmate Jon Meyer at his desk in the contact center at Oregon State Penitentiary.

PHOTO BY JOE GLODE

see-through walls of the cubicles, it was like any other office.

Like most mornings, inmates were contacting businesses in an attempt to get the person on the other end of the line to agree to accept an informational email about a business product, such as a software upgrade.

As easy as this sounds, anyone who's ever worked in telemarketing will tell you: It isn't. Inmates typically get a "yes" just two or three times a day.

"There is high turnover," OSP contact center manager Bruce Potts said. "Not everybody likes telemarketers, and they can be very rude to people. These guys are told 'no' on a constant basis, so that's a struggle."

Potts had 85 inmates on staff that day, but said he'd like to be at full capacity with 110 agents.

For inmates who are successful, Potts said, a job in the call center is one of the most beneficial career opportunities that Oregon Corrections Enterprises offers. It's also one of the best paying, with inmates typically earning about \$150 to \$200 a month. That's almost enough to buy a 13-inch TV or acoustic guitar from the prison commissary after one month of full-time work.

It's also more than double what many other full-time inmate jobs in Oregon's correctional institutions pay.

"A lot of the skills that they learn in here can transition to any kind of job and can help them in their day-to-day life too. They have to learn how to communicate, how to talk and how to take rejection," Potts said, adding that many call centers on the outside are "felon-friendly."

Dick Withnell, former owner of Withnell

Dodge in Salem, said he's hired several former inmates who had worked in the prison's call center. He said they've been able to transfer the sales skills they learned telemarketing to selling cars at his dealership.

Withnell, who describes himself as ultra-conservative, chairs Oregon Corrections Enterprises' Advisory Council. He said he believes inmates are learning the soft skills they need to be successful on the outside — skills such as punctuality and work ethic.

"The past 10, 20, 30 years, there's been a change of philosophy for the end goal of lowering recidivism, and so instead of locking someone up and throwing the key away, it's to teach and to give skill sets inside," he said.

But to work, there have to be employers willing to hire former inmates after their release.

"To hire re-entry people, I believe you have to build the reason why," Withnell said. "One is the transformation of an individual, but there is also a hard return on investment because once a person is hired and rebuilding himself, the recidivism rate drops significantly."

When inmate Jimmy Kashi, 37, first came to Oregon State Penitentiary, he said he worked as a "table wiper" in the kitchen for the Department of Corrections. Now, nearly a decade into his life sentence, he's found stability and a job he said he enjoys in the call center.

He said initially the higher pay attracted him, but he also liked having the opportunity for advancement. In the four years he's worked there, he's reached the highest position available to inmates as one of the six trainers in the center, earning about \$265 a month.

"Being able to reach out to people in the outside world from in here is definitely a godsend in my position," he said, "because I am going to be incarcerated for a while. The ability to have conversations with people from all over the nation is absolutely exciting."

Before Jon Meyer was incarcerated, he was a manager at Wal-Mart and also worked as a bar manager, a bouncer and a truck driver. He doesn't plan on finding call center work when he's released in three years.

He said working in the contact center helps him support his kids with the \$150 per month he expects to earn. Luckily, he said, the mother of his children is financially stable.

While prison wages may be enough to buy items from the commissary, inmates we spoke with said it's difficult to support their children or save enough money to have a substantial nest egg to help them get on their feet after release.

But for Meyer, going to work is like leaving prison.

"The environment is really awesome, the staff is really cool, so I enjoy it," he said. "Outside of a job like this, inside these walls you tend to stick to your people, or people that you're comfortable being around. So being out here, it expands your mind."

Since the contact center at OSP opened in 2011, its only client has been Advice Brands, a Nashville, Tenn.-based marketing company that previously contracted with overseas call centers. Slowly, it began filling positions at OSP instead — so the call center isn't competing with local jobs — and that's important.

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