

## Prison without bars

### New Tucson unit reduces repeat offenders, save money by getting convicts ready for the outside world

By A.J. Flick, [The Tucson Citizen](#)

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A prison unit that saves taxpayers millions and cuts down on repeat offenders sounds too good to be true.

But the Arizona Department of Corrections is aiming to do just that with four new units, one in the Tucson prison.

At first glance, the Catalina Unit looks like any other correctional facility.

But a closer inspection hints this isn't a typical prison unit. There's a razor-wire fence, but there's only one, and it's much shorter than at most prisons.

Inside, there are no cells with bars. Instead, inmates sleep in three warehouse-size rooms with waist-high walls around their beds.

The Catalina Unit is Corrections Department Director Dora Schriro's "parallel universe" in action. Corrections officials nationwide have praised the concept of teaching inmates to behave in society and be productive.

The unit was built from the ground up in late 2004 at the state prison complex, specifically to get inmates who are about to be released used to living on the outside.

"The inmates are very carefully screened," said Deputy Warden Thomas Schaff. "These inmates have never been convicted of violent crimes."

Catalina and three other newly built units, two at Perryville and one at Douglas, helped put a dent in an overpopulated prison system by adding 1,000 beds. The Corrections Department hopes they also will curb a recidivism rate that tops 40 percent.

It's too soon to tell whether the units will cut recidivism, Schaff said.

The units were opened in December 2004, and the Corrections Department considers inmates who have stayed out of the system three years or longer to be successful.

Already, though, statistics appear promising. According to the Corrections Department, former inmates in these units are less likely to commit new crimes when they are released. Only nine of 790 inmates tracked up to 2006, or 1.14 percent, committed new crimes.

There are no plans to build more units, said Corrections Department spokeswoman Katie Decker. However, the Corrections Department is planning to expand the model set by these low-custody units to medium- and maximum-security units.

The need has never been greater. As the **Morrison Institute** for Public Policy phrased it in a 2005 report, "Arizona Policy Choices," "Arizona sends about as many residents to prison every year as it graduates from community colleges."

Tucson and Phoenix ranked among the top 30 metro areas out of 300 cities for serious crime, according to FBI statistics.

While Arizona ranks in the top 10 for states in incarceration rates, more than 40 percent of inmates who are released return within three years, the report said.

From the start, the four new units have saved tax dollars. They were built at a cost of \$2.5 million for 1,000 beds.

It would have cost \$13,000 per bed, or \$10.5 million more, to build standard units, said Decker. The annual saving per inmate is \$3,500 per bed, or \$3.5 million.

The average cost of housing an inmate in an Arizona prison is \$56.13 a day. The cost for inmates in Catalina and the other low-level units is \$47.30 a day. The cost for inmates in the medium custody units is \$53.61 a day, and it costs \$61.88 to \$70.11 to house inmates in higher security units.

The differences between the Catalina Unit and older prison units go much further than appearance or cost.

The 300 inmates in the Catalina Unit have more freedom than most.

Some inmates leave the unit every day for jobs in surrounding communities, where they are supervised by civilians, not corrections officers.

"All of them have such little time to serve," Schaff said, "so there's no incentive for running away."

Many of the inmates are in prison on drug offenses, and all of them have fewer than two years to serve.

Inmates must stay inside the unit after 8:30 p.m. and be at their beds or work stations for counts throughout the day.

Other incentives for staying in the Catalina Unit include air-conditioned buildings, as opposed to swamp cooling in other units.

Catalina is a new concept not only for inmates, but for officers as well.

"The staff and the inmates are exposed to much more interaction," Schaff said. "This is the first time in my career that I've had an open-door policy with inmates."

Officers are given special training that includes resolving disputes with inmates through discussion first. Inmate privileges are withdrawn for continued infractions.

Every inmate holds a job. Inmates apply for jobs, posted on bulletin boards, that range from working in the community, with Arizona Correctional Industries, on wildfire crews to janitorial jobs in the unit.

Inmates are encouraged to submit resumes, Schaff said. If they don't know how, they are taught. Inmates must then interview for jobs.

The highest-paying jobs are out in the community, Schaff said.

A current inmate, identified only by his first name, George, is studying for his general equivalency diploma, drives a shuttle around the prison complex and hopes to be a truck driver when he's released in eight months.

Those who have obtained a GED in prison are less likely to return, according to Corrections Department statistics. Inmates who have taken college and other post-secondary education are even less likely to return.

The city of Tucson and the Department of Corrections are nearing agreement on a contract for inmate labor, Schaff said. The Corrections Department encourages other employers to learn more about using inmate labor.

From 2003 through 2006, intergovernmental agreements put 2,834 inmates in 24 Arizona communities to work, according to the Corrections Department. Those inmates saved the communities \$27 million annually, the agency said.

Catalina Unit inmates do their own laundry. Meals are served in the cafeteria and are available for only an hour, which places the responsibility on inmates to show up during that time to eat.

"Everything is geared to show them real-world experiences," Schaff said. "A lot of inmates have never had real jobs. They didn't have stable home lives.

"Here, they're expected to get up every day, work and pay bills like they would in the real world."