

The Real Costs Of Closing The St. Johnsbury Work Camp

Representatives of the Vermont State Employees' Association (VSEA) met recently with members employed at the Work Camp and the Regional Facility, and they shared their thoughts about what the facility's closure would mean to St. Johnsbury.

The workers agreed a closure would be a huge economic blow to the Northeast Kingdom, potentially costing the local St. Johnsbury community an estimated \$5 million. Primarily because the loss of low-cost work crews would translate into more money being needed to fund the services they once provided to the local community. Things like construction, road and building maintenance, brush clearing, painting, woodworking, masonry and foundation and roof work.

Other Work Camp benefits and savings include:

- Restorative justice for offenders, making them positive contributors in the community and helping them reduce their sentences by as much as half. For an inmate with a 10-year sentence, cutting it in half could save taxpayers \$500,000. VSEA has been advised that the recidivism rate for Work Camp inmates is 30% less than general population.
- Vermont Correctional Industries provides services to the community like building the Walden Fire House, the Albany Fire House and the Craftsbury Care Center. In addition, they have maintained local cemeteries and the Lyndonville Fairgrounds, put a roof on the local armory, painted churches and nonprofits, renovated public housing and local ball fields (installing backstops and dugouts), installed HVAC systems, and completed work on the St Johnsbury Rest Area (which saved taxpayers an estimated \$250,000). Offenders also pick up trash on 110 miles of Interstate, keeping our highways and byways clean and more appealing to tourists.
- One Work Crew in particular provides more than \$100,000 worth of mowing and maintenance work to the town of St Johnsbury. This is a greatly discounted rate, and if the town had to outsource the work, it would increase taxpayer costs by an additional \$100,000.
- The Work Crew provides maintenance to the NECF itself, and it's estimated those costs are around \$100,000.
- The Work Crews perform cemetery maintenance for \$35,000 annually. If this work is put out to bid, costs are estimated to rise 10 times, or the town could choose not to do the work at all.
- Work Crews currently clear lines for one local municipal electric company, and they perform the service at a fraction of a retail operation's cost. The estimated savings to the town's ratepayers is \$280/day versus \$16,000 retail for the same work. Ratepayers would be severely impacted.
- Work Camp offenders' process more than 600 cords of firewood per year, and it's used to generate heat for both the Work Camp and Regional Facility. If the Camp closes, firewood will have to be purchased, and based on the current fair-market rate of \$280/cord, the facility would incur an additional \$168,000 in costs. The Camp Also provides firewood to the state's Low Income Home Heating Program, and an additional 100 cords at \$280 means another \$28,000 of tax dollars that will be spent to replace the Camp's wood. A closure would immediately result in the Regional Facility needing to purchase firewood for their boilers, at an estimated cost of \$168,000.
- The Camp's wooden sign shop provides cedar wooden signs to the Department of Forests and Parks, and the state would have to spend \$100,000 if signs were purchased on the open market. The signs made in the shop would need to be purchased via RFPs and cost 10 times more than those produced on site, and there will be no transferrable skills imparted on inmates, thus destroying the opportunity to truly rehabilitate offenders.
- The Camp provides offenders with the work skills necessary to become productive members of society. Workers say that for some offenders, this is perhaps the first time in their life they are learning a trade, and this goes a long way to reducing recidivism and unemployment.
- For every dollar spent at the Camp, the State and local communities save \$2 in future budgets.
- There are 56 empty beds right now at the Camp, and because inmates are now being brought back to Vermont from out of state, it's an opportunity for lawmakers to fill the facility and spend our dollars in-state, where it will circulate back into the Northeast Kingdom economy, where it is needed.
- Because the Southeast State Facility in Springfield is going through a remodel (each of the 50-bed wings will alternately close and inmates will be relocated). Changing the statute governing the Work Camp would allow the State to save valuable resources by using St J. as a temporary facility while during construction.