

WINDHAM COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

# THE LIBERTY MILL JUSTICE CENTER

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A NEW APPROACH TO JUSTICE

PO BOX 266  
NEWFANE, VERMONT 05345

# OUR COMMUNITY

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## BELLOWS FALLS

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Located along the Connecticut River, the Village of Bellows Falls holds a population of 3,500 residents and is the largest population center within the Town of Rockingham. Historically, Bellows Falls has been a major paper mill center for the region with its proximity to the railroads and the Connecticut River and at one time boasted one of the largest paper mills in the world. The village has been the seat of town government since 1869 and has long been the civic, commercial, and cultural hub of the community. Incorporated in 1909, Bellows Falls has since been overseen by a Board of Trustees elected by residents of the village.

With the closing of the paper mills in the 1960s, Bellows Falls is one of the most impoverished communities in the region with over 19 percent of residents living under the poverty line. The community is a high poverty census tract community defined as a FY Opportunity Community by USDA which is 75 percent eligible for community facilities grants.

# VERMONT'S JUSTICE SYSTEM IN CONTEXT

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## HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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The state of Vermont's justice system has its origins in 1777 when the Republic of Vermont established its first constitution and appointed constables and sheriffs to protect its people and property. These local law enforcement officials were in charge of operating their own county jails to hold local convicts and oversee their punishment set by the judiciary. In almost all cases, imprisonment was accompanied by hard labor.

Vermont joined the United States of America in 1790 and statewide corrections in Vermont began with legislation in the year 1807 to build the Vermont State Prison. Its purpose being to relieve the State's counties of long term prisoners, the Vermont State Prison began construction in 1808 and lodged its first inmates two years later in 1810. The traditional county jails continued to handle District Court detainees and short term inmates even as some of these convicts were housed at the state facilities. The Vermont State Prison was expanded over the years and was eventually joined by the Vermont Reform School (1865), later becoming the Weeks School, and the State House of Corrections (1876) which became the now defunct Women's Reformatory.

Probation was first implemented in Vermont in 1898 as specifically a county function. Probation decisions (granting suspensions of sentences, modification and/or revocation of those suspensions) were the responsibility of the Courts, as was the monitoring of offenders for compliance with the probation conditions originally. In 1910, probation began operating statewide with a fully established probation and parole system in place in 1937.

By the 1960s, the State recognized that a large portion of County jails had fallen into disrepair and no longer met their safety requirements. The Department of Corrections took over operations of all County jails in 1969 which resulted in the closing of many and the building of new prison facilities.

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## CRIMINAL JUSTICE IN VERMONT

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On average, Vermont holds a prison population of 2, 248 inmates every day. According to the Vermont Department of Corrections, holding male individuals in prison costs the State \$55,000 a year per inmate with women costing Vermont \$70,000 a year per inmate. The DOC spends around \$111.3 million a year to maintain the current prison system, making Corrections one of the largest single expenses in Vermont.

The majority of crimes committed today in Vermont are largely nonviolent with the two most common types being larceny and destruction of property. Substance abuse has been a major issue among those who have been incarcerated with the most abused narcotics being heroin and opiates. The Courts have few alternatives for offenders to carry out their sentences with the vast majority of those convicted of crime spending time in prison.

The capacity of corrections institutions to house safely the full demand for incarceration was exceeded in the late 1990s. While crime rates statewide have relatively stayed the same, the prison population has more than doubled since 1996 from 1,058 to 2,123 inmates. The housing shortage in Vermont has been a leading contributor to the problem as upstanding inmates have had to stay in prison past their minimum sentence due to a lack of safe living environments. This has resulted in crowding in prison and Vermont's use of out of state prisons to house their inmates.

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# OUR THEORY OF CHANGE

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## SUPPORTING THE COMMUNITY'S MOST AT RISK

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The Liberty Mill Justice Center's philosophy on criminal justice reform starts with three basic assumptions:

- ❖ Keeping people out of the legal system entirely is the best possible option. Allowing individuals to receive mediation and other services to proactively solve problems has the potential to keep people from ever entering the system.
- ❖ For those who do enter the legal system, the goal is to keep them from being incarcerated. Seventy-five percent of those incarcerated are nonviolent offenders and would be better served outside the prison system.
- ❖ For those who are, or have been incarcerated the goal is to help transition them back into their communities upon release with support needed to best serve the individual and the community.

Entering the legal or prison system often creates a downward spiral of poverty and continued incarceration thus reducing the likelihood that people will become fully functioning contributive members of their community. High risk of recidivism also affects the economics and stability of families and ultimately the entire community.

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## FACILITATING DESISTANCE

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Our program is centered on the concept of desistance which is understanding the factors that influence individuals with a criminal history to stop committing crime. We focus not only on the decisions individuals make, but also on why the person made those decisions. This involves understanding past history, learning style, and the context behind why the individual made a decision that lead to crime.

The Liberty Mill Center strives towards facilitating services and opportunities to help increase the likelihood of desistance. The Center carries out an in depth individual assessment on each individual participating in the program and from the data helps create a personal strategic plan that will be followed by the participant in helping them with their reintegration back into the community.

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## HOW THE PROGRAM WILL WORK

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Pre-sentenced individuals and those transitioning out of prison will be eligible for residency and support at the Center. The specific individuals placed here will be determined by the Court, the State's Attorney's Office and the Sheriff. Participants of the program will receive: an individual assessment, case management, and supportive services.

Upon entering the program they will have stable, transitional housing in micro apartments. They will be assigned a case manager who will guide them through the process. Case managers conduct an individual assessment that will involve a screening for neurocognitive mechanisms of decision-making, learning style, current capabilities, life interest, and mental, health, and substance abuse history.

From that assessment the individual will create a personal strategic plan that will include appropriate educational and supportive services. Case managers and the supported services will all be located at the Center. The assigned case manager will continue to work with the individual long term throughout the entire process and help facilitate connections to support services in the individual's home community as they prepare to leave the Center.

The Liberty Mill Justice Center sees itself as a revolving door of support within Vermont's justice system. Participants will be involved in our programs before entering and after leaving the legal system. Graduating participants of the program are always welcome back for more support and care if needed. We understand that life is uncertain and constantly changing and can, at many times, be challenging and unstable. Our doors will always be open to those struggling to get by and our support services will always be available to those community members who have normally relied on crime to survive.