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Building a future Women inmates build a home, learn carpentry skills

SPRINGFIELD — How's this for a prison role reversal? The women built the house and the men made the cookies.

Almost two dozen female inmates from the Southeast State Regional Correctional Facility in Windsor helped build the new modular home at the corner of Eaton and Summit Avenue in Springfield.

Local and state officials who helped them do it gathered Wednesday to applaud their efforts and say, in essence, "Let's do it again."

The female inmates were participants in a Vermont Works for Women's prison program that teaches construction and constructive life skills.

According to some of the inmate carpenters, they learned about "mudding" a nail hole and installing plumbing as well as working as a crew.

For some, it was their first work experience.

Genevieve Hodgeman, 20, of Petersburg, N.Y., is serving time for retail theft. But Wednesday, she was proudly showing off the work she did at the new ranch house and Hodgeman, who gets out of prison next week, says she plans to continue her trade immediately by working for her uncle on a construction project.

"I put 'mud' over all of them," Hodgeman said, searching for finish nail holes in the trim around the bathroom door during a tour of the new house.

The one-story clapboard and shuttered house, which is now owned by the Springfield Housing Authority, will be sold to a qualifying Springfield area family. It is one of seven houses the authority is hoping to have built in the neighborhood.

"I'm so proud of you," Jennifer Litch of Rutland told her former fellow inmates during the tour. Litch now works in construction in Rutland for Engleberth Construction. Litch worked as a carpenter before her seven-month prison stint

on drug charges.

She said the program earned her a higher-skilled job and higher wages and hope for an even better job. "Now I'm looking for a leadership job, a safety officer or a lead carpenter.

The house was recently appraised at \$170,000, according to Jeff Staudinger of the Rockingham Area Community Land Trust, which will actually sell the house to the successful couple for \$130,000.

Hodgeman and Michelle Watson, originally from Springfield, Mass., were part of the prison program that taught them vocational skills. The house was actually built inside a warehouse at the Windsor prison and then trucked to the Springfield site. The finish work was done by a prison crew with security clearance, according to Tiffany Bluemle, executive director of Vermont Works for Women, the group that ran the program.

Bluemle said that there is already a plan for the female inmates to build a second house for the Springfield Summit-Eaton neighborhood. She said the program could really only build one house a year. The actual out-of-pocket costs of the house were \$117,000, she said.

Bluemle said two-thirds of the women inmates are unemployed when they are arrested and the vast majority of the others are just earning minimum wage.

"They came with absolutely no experience," she said of the vast majority of the inmate carpenters.

Douglas praised the program and said it solved several problems at once: It provided affordable housing and it gave Vermont's increasing population of women inmates new skills and a better future once they get out of jail.

"This is a great partnership with the Department of Corrections," Douglas said.

Cindy LaWare, secretary of the Agency of Human Services, said that male inmates have a chance to learn similar vocational skills at the state's prison work camp.

Jayne Sheridan of Vermont Works for Women said her hope was for inmates to build a correctional home on the grounds of the Windsor prison that could serve as a home for mother and child prison visits.

"I just want to plant that seed," she said, addressing her comments to the governor, state officials and other legislators on hand.

As for those cookies at the reception? The chocolate chip and oatmeal raisin cookies were made by the inmates at the 350-bed all-male Southern State Correctional Center in Springfield.

"They're actually quite good cooks," one Springfield prison guard said.

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