Prison woodworking shop teaches more than carpentry

AUGUSTA, Maine – At Maine State Prison’s woodworking shop in Warren, inmates are busy producing bowls, model airplanes, cutting boards and other handcrafted items to sell in the popular Maine State Prison Showroom in Thomaston. Woodworking, and the prison system’s seven other industry shops, teach inmates marketable skills they can use after completing their incarceration. It helps them rehabilitate and reduces recidivism. (States that perform surveys show 4% to 25% lower recidivism rates for inmates that participated in industries programs versus the general prison population.)

“This is a program which helps these guys get back on their feet again monetarily, and they also learn team work,” said Maine State Prison director of industries Scott Reiff. “They learn to work with somebody next to them or with somebody they might not like, but they have to do it. That’s just the way life is.” One inmate told him, “I’ve been working here for two years, that’s the longest I’ve ever had a job in my life.” Said Reiff, “He was really, really proud of it, you could tell. It was as if he’d said, ‘I know how to work now. I know how to get up and go to work.’ ”

The shop program has gained nationwide recognition, and the wood shop recently received federal permission to sell its products across state lines. That requires an increase in both wages and revenues. To overhaul operations and increase efficiency, Reiff called on Maine Manufacturing Extension Partnership (Maine MEP). By training 80 wood shop workers in Lean efficiency, Maine MEP senior project manager Bob Doiron helped the shop dramatically shorten its lead time and increase product throughput.

“I didn’t really know what to expect,” said Doiron. “The vast majority of those who went through the training were very, very engaged in this whole process. They were good students.” Knowing the Lean process is another skill they can take elsewhere. A year later, workers continue to offer ideas for improvements, which has changed the entire tenor of the shop.

“It’s a perfect system because it empowers the inmates to make changes,” said Reiff. “Their self-esteem has changed, their attitude about working together in teams has changed. Every day they’re bringing the shop supervisor new ideas. I think the previous culture was to just focus on the task at hand, don’t cause any trouble and do your job.” The Lean improvement process is not only good for the product, but is good for the individual, too, said Reiff. “It’s amazing. These guys are all really excited about it.” Workers must apply to join the shop, which has a waiting list of interested inmates.

“We had one guy who spent 30 years in prison, and went from being a very mean-spirited, troubled and rebellious inmate to being our best woodworker,” said Reiff. “He developed his skills to where he managed the work in our shop for period of time, and was hired right out of prison into a local woodworking shop that he now runs.” Now he has been there over five years. “He turned his life around. He bought a car, recently bought a house. These are big events after spending 30 years behind bars.”

In praise of the partnership, Maine Department of Corrections Commissioner Dr. Joseph Fitzpatrick said, “We constantly seek ways to help inmates restore their lives and plan for their
futures. Through this program, they directly benefit from Maine MEP’s economic expertise.”

Muriel Mosher, Maine MEP president, agreed. “We know our Lean training really has made a difference. That’s good from a business perspective. We’re proud that it’s so good for the individuals, too.”

About Maine MEP
The Maine MEP is a program of the Maine Department of Economic and Community Development and an affiliate of the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) under the U.S. Department of Commerce. The national MEP system is a network of manufacturing extension centers that provide business and technical assistance to smaller manufacturers in all 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. Through MEP, manufacturers have access to more than 2,000 manufacturing and business professionals whose job is to help firms make changes that lead to greater productivity, increased profits and enhanced global competitiveness. For information on the Maine MEP program, please visit www.mainemep.org, or phone 207-623-0680.