



Washington State Auditor's Office

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Correctional Industries

Program background

More than 95 percent of the people serving time in Washington's prisons will be released back into the community. Many however find the prison gate turns into a revolving door, returning to prison within a few years of release. Looking for a job can be challenging, and many offenders were not employed before incarceration. The Department of Corrections tries to break the cycle through its Correctional Industries (CI) division, which helps inmates gain employment upon release by teaching them marketable skills and instilling a positive work ethic.

CI operates more than 40 service, manufacturing and agricultural industries at 11 of the 12 prisons in the state. CI's mission is to maintain and expand offender work-training programs, instill and promote a positive work ethic, and reduce the tax burden of corrections. In 2016, about 2,300 inmates participated in CI work training programs. CI has a goal of increasing the number of inmates who participate in the program to 3,100 by June 30, 2017.

State law requires state agencies to purchase goods and services from CI in part to save those agencies money, while patterning CI's operations after the private sector. State law also mandates that CI should have a minimal impact on businesses in the state.

Several studies have found that CI's participants are more likely to get a job and less likely to reoffend than other former inmates when they return to the community. Research by the Washington State Institute for Public Policy in 2015 showed a \$4.30 benefit for each dollar spent for CI.

While these studies have highlighted the benefits of the CI program, recent media investigations claimed that CI has not been able to increase inmate participation for several years, has cost the state money due to industry failures, and that CI competes unfairly with private businesses, while overcharging for its products and services. The *Seattle Times* asked the State Auditor to conduct a performance audit of CI's work training programs.

The audit will seek to answer the following questions:

1. How effective is CI in maintaining and expanding offender participation in its work training programs?
2. Does CI price products in such a way that it meets its legal requirements and goals?

Timing

We estimate audit results will be released in the spring of 2017.