



Members of Post 201 gather for their regular monthly meeting, recorded to become a model at correctional institutions nationwide. Photo by Jeff Stoffer

## Model Prisoners

*Legion post in Idaho State Correctional Institution showcased as an example for others nationwide.*

BY JEFF STOFFER

American Legion Post 201 Commander Albert Ciccone has a saying that resonates with his fellow veterans inside the Idaho State Correctional Institution: “We serve our sentences, instead of just doing our time.”

On a late-November Saturday morning, about 40 members of the post and its Sons of The American Legion squadron gather in the prison’s spotless visitation room for their regular monthly meeting. Every detail is by the book. The colors, advanced. Allegiance to the flag, pledged. Chaplain’s prayer, done. POW/MIA chair, flagged and given its respects. Preamble to the American Legion Constitution, recited in unison. Business gets underway, with reports from officers, the

initiation of one new member and remarks from department officials.

This meeting, though, is different. Patrolling the perimeter of the room is a video crew led by Mary Hayes, chief executive officer of Workbay, a national company that connects career seekers and employers, providing online resources for a range of job hunters, including those making the transition from incarceration to life outside. Among Workbay’s clients are federal prisons and over a dozen state correctional facilities.

The company has come to the prison just south of Boise for interviews with veteran inmates, corrections officials and American Legion representatives who have spent more

than five years helping incarcerated veterans fulfill purposes inside that can ultimately help them return to the outside – and stay there.

Sons of The American Legion Squadron Commander Ryan Harrell reports on the post’s performance for 2022. “So far this year, we have nearly surpassed 5,000 hours of service projects, including COVID-19 prevention, poppies, crochet efforts and what-not. As of today, we are now officially over 27,000 hours since the inception of this post in service committed. You have decided to serve and better yourselves and the community as a whole. Thank you.”

Post and squadron operations also include restoration of bicycles for low-income children; management of a Legion-supplied shed filled with fresh clothes for newly released men; cleaning toys in the visiting area; sponsoring a Boys State participant; helping sponsor a Legion Baseball team; and crocheting blankets, mittens, socks, stuffed animals, hats and other items for State Veterans Home residents and mothers in domestic-abuse shelters, among others. Members raise the flag at reveille and lower it at retreat time each day, and are permitted to wear their Legion caps and pins on patriotic holidays. At the meeting, American Legion Department of Idaho Commander Matt Wrobel announces that a \$2,500 grant has been approved for the prison post to receive two special incinerators for flag-retirement ceremonies, some 12,000 of which Idaho Legionnaires perform a year.

During the pandemic, Post 201 gained national attention for sewing thousands of protective face masks and gowns when they were in short supply nationwide. The Legionnaires also worked around the clock to disinfect the facility to prevent the spread of the virus. “It was all voluntary,” says Jay Christensen, warden from 2018 to 2022. “The thing that was so great about putting them in charge of that is that I asked them to do it, and they covered everything else. They developed the schedule. They developed the routine. They studied all the sanitation equipment, how to properly use it, and trained

each other ... I didn’t have to worry about it.”

When Post 201’s Legionnaires wanted to install a U.S. flag and pole in a prison courtyard, the warden said he could not allow anything with ropes. “Every time they had a problem, they had a solution ready for me,” Christensen says. “They found (through Emblem Sales) a telescoping flagpole that we installed. It has no ropes.”

Because of the veterans’ willingness to solve problems inside, “each time we had a greater need, either in the community or in the facility ... these were the guys I called on,” says Christensen, who encouraged Hayes to look at the Legion post as a possible fit for her program.

Military veterans, the former warden explains, account for some 200,000 prisoners across the country. The American Legion has posts inside more than 30 facilities in at least 13 states.

Hayes thinks there should be more. “This is a story to be told,” she says, noting that the Workbay video presentation will be promoted in prisons that want to charter American Legion posts, and a version will be prepared for employers – particularly those with veteran-hiring initiatives – who can see the service, skills and work ethics of Legionnaires soon to get out.

“You might have heard there are 11 million jobs right now and only 6.5 million people looking for jobs in America,” Hayes says. “Corporate America is definitely trying to find their future talent pipeline. One of the untapped and overlooked sources of talent are those who are returning to their communities. One in three people here will return to their communities in the next year.

“We want to tell this story to corporations and communities to understand that people who have served their country, have taken that brave step, had a misstep, but are stepping back into their communities soon ... how we can make that transition the best it can be.”

“If you bring The American Legion into prisons, you’re going to benefit the inmates, you’re going to benefit the prison, and you’re going to benefit the community,” says Charles “Abe” Abrahamson, adjutant for The American Legion’s Department of Idaho. “When these guys get out, they have such a head start on everybody else. That’s what they’re here to do.”

“If they could get that second chance, it would

change their lives so much,” says Area 7 Vice Commander Doug Huffman. “Even if they spend the rest of their lives in there, they’ve got a second chance to be a part of something that’s valuable.”

Abrahamson started the post in 2017, shortly after disabled Navy veteran Mark Person completed a 15-year sentence and was paroled. In 2014, Person was part of a 350-inmate transfer from the overcrowded Idaho prison to the Kit Carson Correctional Center in Burlington, Colo. There, he learned that a veterans group inside the facility could raise funds for good causes through cheeseburger sales and perform selected community-service projects. “All I could think of was cheeseburgers,” Person says. “Shoot, I’m in.”

He helped develop a veterans group that raised nearly \$40,000 in three years for a family center that helps low-income children. “The most she had received in a year was \$1,000. The next thing you know, we had purpose. We found something that we could do. Did we get some cheeseburgers out of it? Sure. But here we are – all of sudden, we’ve got a group of guys focused on doing something outside ourselves.”

Before he processed out, Person urged other veterans in the Idaho prison to keep working as a group. Meanwhile, on the outside, he longed for that same purpose-driven camaraderie. “I get out and I think, ‘What am I going to do with my life? How can I continue to serve?’ Someone said, ‘Hey, you ever think about joining the Legion?’”

Soon he learned that Abrahamson had started the new prison post – the first of two in the state system – and many veterans who had volunteered with Person while incarcerated were charter members. Person became an active member of Post 2 in Boise, rising to commander and district vice commander, and helping jump-start the Treasure Valley Legion Riders. He also became deeply connected to Post 201, attending meetings and launching the “Day One” program to assist newly released men.

“When I got released, there was no one there at the gate for me,” Person says. “Luckily, I had some VA compensation I could live on. Most do not. We call it ‘lint in your pockets.’ They have nothing. They walk out with nothing. Now what?”

Person created a checklist of steps for those who are released, and began offering them rides on their first days out and to important appointments: parole and probation offices, health and welfare agencies, providers of clothing, food, employment services, housing and, importantly, mobile phones. “There is no avenue to get a cellphone, but you have to have it in this day and age,” Person says. “People get released. If they are supposed to get a job within seven days, they’ve got to have a cellphone.

“It’s the most exciting moment of their life, and it’s the most overwhelming moment of their life,” Person says. “So I go pick them up and spend a whole day driving them around, getting

## Posts inside

American Legion prison posts can be found throughout the country. The Department of Indiana has 13, including Post 555 in Bunker Hill, which raises funds for The American Legion’s Operation Comfort Warriors program. National Headquarters does not have a separate list of prison posts, but department adjutants recently reported the following posts chartered in correctional facilities:

- **Delaware** Post 9
- **Florida** Posts 398, 403, 405, 413
- **Idaho** Posts 201, 202
- **Indiana** Posts 130, 198, 208, 306, 390, 398, 480, 503, 505, 512, 555, 608, 830
- **Louisiana** Posts 432, 433
- **Maine** Post 218
- **Michigan** Post 766
- **Nevada** Post 519
- **New Hampshire** Post 123
- **Oregon** Post 131
- **Pennsylvania** Post 110
- **South Dakota** Post 323
- **Virginia** Post 775
- **Washington** Post 23

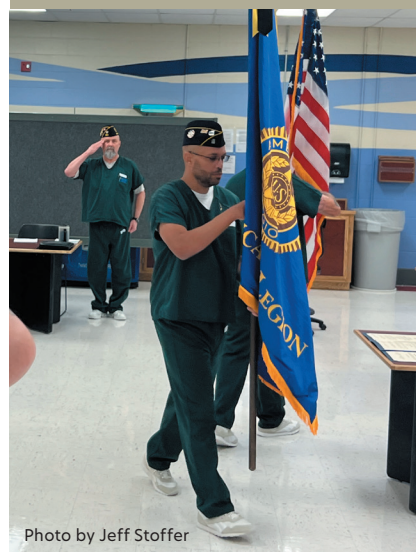


Photo by Jeff Stoffer



them to all the things they need, connecting them to the resources. I do in one day what would normally take somebody walking in the cold, no coat, weeks to do.”

Christensen says that kind of support is vital to prevent recidivism. “The No. 1 thing someone can have when they get out is one constant supporter in their life,” he says. “The more constant supporters they can have, the better their chances are of not coming back to prison.”

Recidivism declines sharply for parolees associated with veterans groups like The American Legion, says Abrahamson, who adds that Legionnaires maintain contact – somewhat like a Buddy Check – with newly released members who may need help. He has also assisted some inmates with discharge-characterization upgrades, which can be vital in applying for VA health care or GI Bill benefits.

Ciccione says “it’s humbling” that the post has been identified as a national model. “People come into the facility to visit family members, and they get to see The American Legion is represented here, and that there is value.”

That value, says Hayes, can inspire more Legion prison posts and help veterans find jobs when released. The digital media project, she explains, “is about the American Legions in judicial settings across the country, and it’s promoting that across the country because the outcome is that The American Legion is building, practicing, instilling, rewarding, envisioning all of the very best things about us being human and community, and every workplace is a community. There’s an absolute alliance between what is practiced here and what employers are seeking in their workforce.”

“It’s not just what Idaho is doing,” Christensen says. “It’s what we can do everywhere, but we are going to give you the roadmap to get there.”

“We’re just a few guys here in Idaho trying to do what we can to positively impact society, still be productive members,” Ciccione says. “For (others) to come in here and say, ‘You’re doing it right, and we want to take this to other vets’ ... what greater purpose is there?” 🌿

*Jeff Stoffer is editor of The American Legion Magazine.*



*Legionnaire Mark Person explains the origins of the prison post’s crocheting*

*program. Photo by Jeff Stoffer*

## Crochet for convicts

While serving his sentence, Mark Person called his sister from prison and asked what she was doing. “Teaching your daughter how to crochet,” she replied. He said he knew of a crocheting program inside the walls.

“What I didn’t tell my sister was that it was definitely not a cool guy’s sport. They offered it, but nobody was doing that.”

Soon, he got a package with a big bag of yarn and a copy of “Crocheting for Dummies.”

Person called his sister. “Hey, what in the world are you doing?” he asked.

“She got pretty stern and said, ‘I don’t care if it’s cool or not cool, you’re going to do this for your daughter. This is a connection you’re going to make with her.’ I couldn’t argue.”

Late at night – “my roommate sworn to secrecy” – Person would turn on his lamp, study the book and learn the craft. “The first thing I made was a pair of slippers for my daughter. And shoot, it was cold in here, so I made a pair for myself.”

Then came a fire drill. “I forgot I even had them on. Next thing I know, I’m out of my cell, and I’m surrounded by all these tough guys ... They all asked me, ‘Hey, where’d you get those slippers?’”

“Fast-forward about four months. We had one of the gang-unit sergeants come onto our tier and he says, ‘I need to know what’s going on on this tier .... Why is every guy sitting on their bunk right now crocheting?’”

Person’s initiative has become a major component of American Legion Post 201’s program. In addition to the State Veterans Home and a shelter for victims of domestic abuse, major gatherings of the American Legion Department of Idaho offer crocheted items from the prison for sale, and proceeds are used to sponsor programs like Boys State and American Legion Baseball.