CONNECTIONS

TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE

PURPOSE IN ACTION

The Cool Careers Powering TDCJ

Winter 2026

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Story Behind the Cover

Symbolism in the Tactical Response Team patch:

The wolf is known for discipline, communication and coordination.

Three wolves were chosen to signify that a wolf always functions in a group and never alone, similar to our team. Team over self; courage, overwatch and strength in cohesion.

Each wolf is facing a different direction to represent 360-degree awareness and coverage, reflective of the team's training.

"Those Who Dare" represents the willingness to enter a dangerous situation that requires courage, strength, restraint and professionalism.

"Respect All Fear None" reflects our guiding attitude. Every person we encounter – the public, inmates and staff – is treated with dignity, while we maintain our confidence in the team's training, in our mission and in each other.

The Tactical Response Team along with the Crisis Negotiation Team make up the Crisis Response Team.

PURPOSE IN ACTION

It is truly an honor and a pleasure to introduce you to the Winter 2026 issue of Connections magazine, my first issue as executive director of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. I could not ask for a finer legacy of leadership to inherit than one forged by my predecessors, or a more talented team to carry out our mission.

In this issue of Connections, we shine a spotlight on you, the extraordinary people that propel the agency forward. You'll read stories showcasing the depth and variety of corrections professionals, from tactical response to rehabilitation programming and facility management. These features highlight how individuals and departments step up to advance our mission in unique and innovative ways.

I truly hope you find these stories inspirational as you contemplate the ways in which your own career with the agency is a critical link in the chain of public safety and positive change. Your expertise, your commitment and the daily decisions you make are what allow TDCJ to fulfill its essential mission.

Look at the challenges you overcome daily, the skills you've honed and the many ways in which you're creating a safer environment. That is the core of what makes your job extraordinary. As we look toward the future, it is this collective sense of pride and understanding of our individual value that will continue to drive the agency forward.

Thank you for all you do,

Bobby Lumpkin
Executive Director

Cover photo: Tactical Response Team shoulder patch
Back cover photo: Wynne Unit License Plate Factory

THE DRIVING ENGINE:
HOW THE CLASSIFICATION & INMATE TRANSPORTATION DIVISION DRIVES TDCJ FORWARD

Approximately 141,000 incarcerated individuals are spread all around the Lone Star State between 104 units, and the Classification and Inmate Transportation Division (CITD) oversees the movement and placement of them all.

CITD manages all administrative aspects of incarceration from intake to release and is comprised of 21 departments within nine areas: Inmate Time Management, Classification Operations, State Classification, Mail System Coordinators Panel, Records, Fiscal, Disciplinary Coordination, Administration and Inmate Transportation.

Meet the Classification Inmate Transportation Division

"If the agency is a car, then CITD is the engine," CITD Director Richard Babcock said. He explained that the intake process is initiated when CITD's State Ready Department receives a penitentiary packet (or pen packet, as they are commonly known) from a Texas county jail. Pen packets contain the relevant information needed to assess an individual's needs to place them in the best facility, taking into consideration sentencing, psychological and health needs, the releasing county, and any rehabilitative programs required, such as substance use recovery programs.

Once pen packets are approved, inmates are scheduled for intake. The State Ready Department receives the packets by mail, fax or email, where each one is then screened. Inmates coming from county jails are transported to intake facilities, where they are photographed, have their property inventoried and are given educational, medical and psychological evaluations.

A significant portion of CITD's responsibilities is inmate transportation. There are a lot of moving parts and coordination as individuals are transported from county jails to TDCJ facilities, or for any unit transfers and medical appointments. CITD oversees an inmate's custody all the way through their incarceration. Understandably, these extra responsibilities add complexity to an inmate's journey. Each case is unique, as each inmate has his or her own needs to be met.

To better illustrate this, Babcock drew lines on the whiteboard in his office, with each line representing one part of a hypothetical inmate's journey while in custody: a long blue streak to represent a medical transport from Huntsville to Galveston, another line for the trek back on a different bus or van, a third to transfer him to a location with cool beds to meet changes in his physical health, and several more to represent other theoretical journeys and status and need changes. When he finally stepped back from the board, all the lines sat on top of one another like loose spaghetti strands.

Currently, these transports are done on an as-needed basis, which may cause inefficiencies such as not having enough drivers, fuel usage and more wear and tear on TDCJ transport vehicles.

"For example, when I was a lieutenant at the Allred Unit working at their motor pool, we put 90,000 miles on a transport vehicle in a short period of time," Caleb Turner, Chairman of CITD's State Classification Committee said.

For medical appointments, transportation drops inmates off at their destinations and then the officers return to their hubs. After their appointments, it is common for an inmate to wait for the next bus or van to arrive with a new group of individuals with appointments.

Babcock explained why this practice is so common.

"It grew over time. At one point, when there were fewer units, there weren't as many facilities that offered specific programs or that did intake or release. It sprawled across the state and our transport routes sprawled along with it." He continued, "Now, multiply this concept by more than 100,000 inmates who all have their own histories and needs, and you see the picture more clearly."

The road doesn't end there, however; as he explained the ongoing process to modernize procedures through regionalization. The vision for CITD will bring more treatment and rehabilitative programs to regions across the state, decreasing the number of transfers an inmate makes while in custody and the number of staff needing to be pulled away from their units. CITD's regionalization has been an effort in development for the last nine months, working with the Rehabilitation and Reentry Division and creating new programs at more facilities.

For an inmate coming in from a county jail, the road starts with arriving at intake.

Intake's job is crucial because the information collected is added to their classification profile – things such as security risk level, previous assault history or escape attempts are vital for the safety and security staff.

The information gathered is what the State Classification Committee uses to make decisions on custody levels, trusty eligibility and an inmate's unit of assignment or transfer.

State Classification Committee's Impact

Adding to Babcock's earlier sentiments about CITD, Turner said, "If CITD is the agency's engine, then SCC is its electronic control unit."

The SCC is a team of 15 highly skilled individuals

with tenured experience in classification, many of whom were previously unit chiefs of classification. Turner likened their role to a game of 3D chess.

“They are the chess masters, playing a game of 3D chess with additional layers and many variables to consider simultaneously. They are playing with 104 chess boards and more than 141,000 game pieces,” Turner said. “It’s up to the 15 of them to strategize and make the right moves for the right people at the right time.”

Turner also described the SCC as a team of dedicated problem solvers.

“They care, and they never complain. There are many times they will be here long after 5 p.m.; they don’t leave until the job is done because they understand the cascading effects of their roles and decisions. They are driven and understand the impact their work has on public safety, and I am always learning from their expertise.”

He added that CITD’s progress towards regionalization will greatly impact the SCC.

“It’s all about efficiency. The current system is old and has many manual entries and several different Micro Focus screens to reference for each decision.” He said, “Mr. Babcock has been working very closely with the Office of Strategic Initiatives and Modernization (OSIM), developing programs such as one for trusty reviews. In the past, the SCC must go searching for eligible inmates out of the entire population and would find a couple hundred after many hours of manual searches. OSIM can perform a data pull based on SCC specified criteria, which gave us an initial list of 5,300 eligible inmates, 1,100 of which we were able to approve in a fraction of the time it would take manually, and with a larger pool.”

Turner continued to describe the SCC’s current workload. “We have, for example, 800 inmates coming in from the county jails that we must find placement for, so the team goes to work on what facility to send them to. Then the units call and let us know that they can only take so many of the ones we want to send due to factors like cool bed availability or how close the unit is to being at capacity – so then it’s back to the drawing board.”

He adds that capacity is always a concern. “We can only house 96 percent capacity legally. Some units on the smaller side could be 10 beds away from being at capacity. Others could be a couple hundred.” Turner continued, “If the SCC team miscalculates and sends 40 inmates to a unit that has already met its capacity, that is now 40 people we must find accommodations for. This is why sometimes you’ll see cars in the parking lot here at 6 or 7 p.m. at night.”

Next Stop – Modernization

The effort towards regionalization would provide a much-needed tune-up to the proverbial engine – bringing more rehabilitative programs to more facilities in each region, consolidating individuals with similar needs or conditions, resulting in fewer vacant seats on busses while being better equipped to meet transportation demands.

In conclusion, the path forward on the road to modernization has different implications for everyone affected by the CITD’s changes. For inmates, regionalization means the programs and medical accommodations they need would be in the region they were convicted near – close to home, their families and community, which is crucial for reducing recidivism rates. For intake and release staff, it means working with a population that is originally from or near that region and will be released into a nearby county – improving logistics and streamlining workflow. For the hardworking men and women within CITD, it means gaining the upper hand in their ongoing 3D chess match and ultimately being one move closer to a job well done.

The cost saving benefits of CITD’s plan for regionalization cannot be understated. Bringing more programs and services to every region means the division will be able to transition from a large fleet of high-capacity busses to eventually smaller fleets of vans and will decrease the number of hours security staff and inmates must travel, not to mention the cost of fuel and vehicle maintenance. Developing software applications to assist in finding and grouping those with certain eligibility or demographics together means modernizing the work of the SCC – driving efficiency and the Texas Department of Criminal Justice forward.

INSIDE THE CRISIS RESPONSE TEAM

CRT members are taught that each event is unique and that critical thinking skills are highly valued.

When emergencies strike, the response must be swift, skilled and strategic. That is especially true in a correctional environment. At the heart of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice's Crisis Response Team (CRT) is a group of highly trained professionals who specialize in tactical operations and crisis negotiation.

Christopher Helmig, Training Sergeant and Region II Tactical Response Team (TRT) lead over Region II, began his career with TDCJ in 2016. He came to the agency looking for the same sense of camaraderie and family he was familiar with from being in the Army. In 2022, when he was given the opportunity to join the newly formed CRT, he jumped at the chance.

Potential team members undergo 240 hours of rigorous training, including physical conditioning, tactical scenarios, riot response and crisis negotiation.

"We identified a need for niche skill sets in tactics and negotiation," Helmig said. "Whether it's managing high-profile inmates, responding to riots or de-escalating a crisis, our team is trained and ready to act."

Brian Sifford, state commander for the TDCJ Crisis Response Team.

There are two sides to the Crisis Response Team: the Tactical Response Team and the Crisis Negotiation Team.

While commonly referred to as hostage negotiators, the more accurate term is crisis negotiators.

"A crisis doesn't always involve a hostage. It could be any emotionally charged situation, even something that may seem small to others – like the death of a pet – but is life-altering to the individual involved," Helmig said.

The negotiation team is trained in de-escalation techniques, psychological insight and effective communication, which can defuse a highly charged encounter and negate the need for a tactical response. They are not only deployed during emergencies but are also involved in training presentations across the agency, helping staff better manage tense encounters.

Brian Sifford, the state commander for the Crisis Response Team said, "The long-term goal is to have 72 tactical members and 36 crisis negotiators, distributed regionally across the state."

Each region will have 12 tactical officers and six crisis negotiators, with local team leads overseeing readiness and training.

Before reaching the state level, team prospects train extensively with their regional teams. Once they demonstrate consistent proficiency in core skill sets, such as riot formations, hostage negotiation and command presence, they are recommended for participation in state-level events.

Importantly, all team members, not only the designated leads, are trained to step into leadership roles when necessary.

Sifford noted, "We want everyone to be capable of taking command if the situation demands it, but at the same time, they have to be able to step back from their role as a leader and become a follower."

The team is coached to understand that decision-making in high-stress environments isn't black and white. Whether it's choosing a chemical agent or selecting words or tone during a negotiation, context is everything.

"We purposely don't train them on what they should or should not do in a particular situation," Sifford said.

CRT members are taught that each event is unique and that critical thinking skills are highly valued.

"Say we tell them to avoid mentioning someone's mother because it's a known trigger, but what if, in a real situation, mentioning their mother builds rapport with the hostage taker? Then it becomes a tool," Sifford said. "So, we train them to think critically, not just follow scripts."

The team has gained recognition beyond state borders, particularly through participation in the annual Mock Prison Riot event in Moundsville, West Virginia, a global showcase of emergency response capabilities.

This event attracts teams from around the world, including countries like Colombia and Senegal. The TDCJ CRT has competed twice, placing seventeenth in their first year and an impressive ninth in their most recent showing.

Three of the current negotiators are now Level 3 certified, enabling them to handle a wide range of crisis situations from managing inmate disturbances to resolving hostage scenarios. This training also qualifies them to certify Level 1 and 2 negotiators.

In addition to tactical events, the Mock Prison Riot has begun expanding to include negotiations competitions, and Texas's Level 3 negotiators have been invited to help facilitate training next year.

Having hand-picked most of the members on his team, Helmig said, "When someone expresses interest in joining the team, I always ask them one question, 'Why do you want to be here?'"

The correct response can be almost anything as long as it's rooted in passion, commitment and perseverance.

"I look for perseverance. You have to be able to push your body to the limit – beyond what you believed it could go – and then give a little bit more. If you can't, the reality is it could be a life and death decision."

Helmig wants to see enthusiasm and alignment with the team's mission.

He emphasizes that team members often train and work beyond normal hours, investing significant time into readiness. He said, "We don't stop at the end of the day. This team is on our minds 24/7."

While the team trains in extreme scenarios, the ultimate goal is to never be deployed, "If I never have to go in for a hostage rescue that I've trained my entire career for, that's success!"

If you're a correctional professional interested in joining the CRT, experience within a facility and a willingness to be coached are key. CRT is not just a badge; it's a commitment to tactical excellence, professional growth and saving lives under pressure.

If you are interested in joining the Crisis Response Team, contact your warden.

Christopher Helmig (left) and Tshiamala Yongo scan the edge of a woodline during a training scenario, looking for a role player simulating an inmate on the run. In the back seat passenger side is Scott Kruszewski.

DESIGNING THE FUTURE OF TDCJ
ENGINEERING A NEW FRONTIER OF CORRECTIONS

From the Piney Woods of the east to the mountains of the west, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) facilities span all corners of the Lone Star State. With more than 100 facilities to manage, it is important that the structural integrity of these buildings is maintained to keep inmates, staff and the community safe.

The Facilities Division's engineering and architect teams are tasked with this vital responsibility.

"The agency's mission is to protect the public. Those facilities are critical, and you want to make sure they are maintained properly for the health, safety and welfare of everyone. We are here to make the agency better – to make these facilities better," Architect III Robert Putnam said.

Putnam, along with Deputy Director Dale Cox, drive collaboration between these teams to ensure that the agency's facilities not only comply with state and federal building laws, but more importantly keep the public safe.

Cox said the process for designing a prison facility is the same as any other building; however, there are unique needs and requirements that must be met. To accomplish this, Cox and his team work closely with other agency divisions and partner companies to ensure that their project needs are incorporated into the overall design.

"Collaboration is an important part of our work, because what we do is more than just strictly follow codes and do the engineering design. We have the security factor, so we work closely with the Correctional Institutions Division (CID) and consider what their needs are, what they require for a facility and incorporate that into our designs, which is above and beyond what the national codes require," Cox said. "We also consult with other divisions on their needs and how they're going to use

what is being installed. We integrate all those needs into the design."

TDCJ is unique from most other state agencies and corrections departments because it houses its own engineering and architect department. Putnam explains that having in-house teams like this is important due to the security components and familiarity of the facilities.

"We're trained to look at those factors – to determine if the structure is stressed beyond its capacity and what updates need to be made. That's the important part we play to keep the public safe. You don't want these facilities to fall apart," Putnam said.

One notable project that both Cox and Putnam have been a part of is the new Bryan Collier Leadership and Training Center in Huntsville. The agency broke ground on the new 64,000 square-foot facility earlier this year and it is set to be completed in 2026.

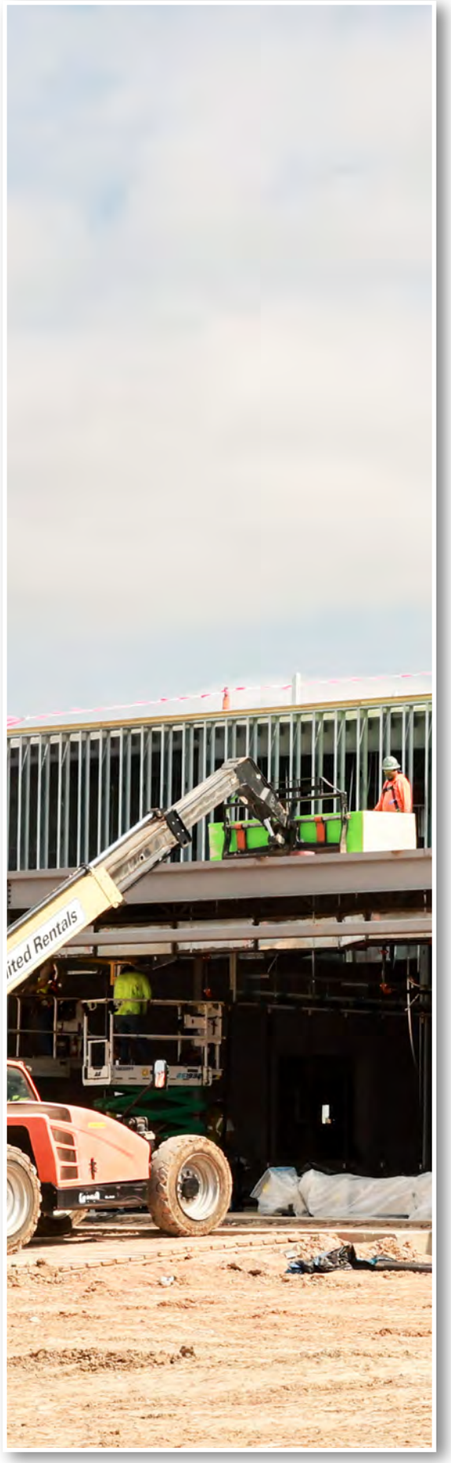
It will be comprised of a 43,000 square-feet training center; 11,500 square-feet living quarters; and 9,500 square-feet firing range. This new state-of-the-art facility is the agency's first significant new build in the last 30 years. Cox explained the design went through three revisions since the project first began to meet the needs of all divisions within TDCJ.

"Adaptability and flexibility were the key components of the training facility, and a lot of that was driven by the users and how they are going to use the building. It was a lot different than designing a detention facility, because we know what the users of that building are going to need," Cox said.

The training facility is another tool to help the agency in its mission of keeping the public safe. It is a center that provides all agency divisions with a place to train their staff and enhance their skills by using innovative technology and training capabilities.

"I think that's a key component of this building. It's not just a physical space, but there is a technological part to it. There's a virtual reality and recording room, the building can also broadcast live meetings. There's a lot of aspects of the training facility, but I think that's one that brings the vision all together to meet those 2030 goals," Cox said.

The training facility is one of many examples of how Putnam, Cox and their teams are blending the vision for the agency's future with the current needs of the staff and the incarcerated population. Through their work, they are not just designing and engineering new and current buildings but forging a brand-new era of correction.



THE VOICE FOR INMATES
COUNSEL SUBSTITUTES

Everyone has the right to due process – the right to gather evidence, present their case and attempt to showcase their innocence. What about when they're an inmate, and are told when and where they can and can't go, and who they can and can't talk to? How is a person expected to defend themselves when they can't gather their own evidence. The inmates need help, and that comes from the counsel substitute.

"Counsel substitutes are advocates for the inmates' rights within the prison system," said Hannah Abbott, a counsel substitute at the Torres Unit in Hondo.

When an inmate is served a disciplinary, it can either be minor or major. The minor disciplinaries are usually managed by the correctional staff, but when they are served a major disciplinary, the counsel substitute comes to assist. They start by receiving the disciplinaries from the staff, and they are the ones who inform the inmates of the impending disciplinary. At that moment, the inmates are welcome to make a statement in defense, and the counsel substitute becomes the voice of the inmate.

"They will obtain additional statements, witness statements and documentation that is needed for the case," said Megan Lewandowski, the program supervisor over the Counsel Substitute Department. "The inmate's request it, and it's the counsel substitute's responsibility to go get it."

Hannah Abbott discussing a case with an inmate.

The evidence can also include things such as surveillance camera footage and even bring in witnesses, such as an officer or other staff.

After the evidence is gathered, the next step is the disciplinary hearing. The case is read, and then the inmate can decide to defend him or herself through the counsel substitute. While it might seem as though the counsel substitute is a defense attorney, they are not.

"Counsel substitutes are not the enemy nor are we the savior," Abbott said. "We're here to make sure that whatever happens in here, it's a fair situation."

They are simply a voice for the inmate by showing the evidence that the inmate requested while also being their advocate.

"During mitigation, when it is time for me to speak on behalf of the inmate, I'm going to ask for leniency," Abbott said. "I'm not defending, but if found guilty I will ask for leniency."

While this plays out, a disciplinary hearing officer (DHO) will make the final decision whether the inmate is guilty or not of the disciplinary.

The DHO acts as a fact finder or, going back to the court analogy, a judge.

The Counsel Substitute Department works through a little over 200,000 disciplinaries a year, which, assuming the department is fully staffed, equals about 150 grievances a month for each counsel substitute.

The actual total assigned every month for each counsel substitute fluctuates on many factors, including the size of the unit. While the bigger units get the more disciplinaries, the smaller units are always willing to help the bigger units and that is where the department shines and shows their teamwork.

The role of the counsel substitute is very important, not only in ensuring in-house disciplinaries are fair.

By policy and legally the agency must allow the due process to ensue.

"Counsel substitutes are important to assist in that balance and keeping it fair," Abbott said. "The agency must give the inmates a chance to defend themselves in a fair hearing, before any sanctions or punishments been given," added Lewandowski.

As part of our agency mission, we strive to promote positive change in offender behavior and reintegrate offenders into society. Providing clear, organized and consistent procedures for participating in major disciplinary investigations demonstrates to staff and inmates alike that TDCJ is committed to its mission, to supporting staff and to assuring inmates that they have a voice in the disciplinary process and in their own opportunities for positive change for when they release back to their communities.

Megan Lewandowski

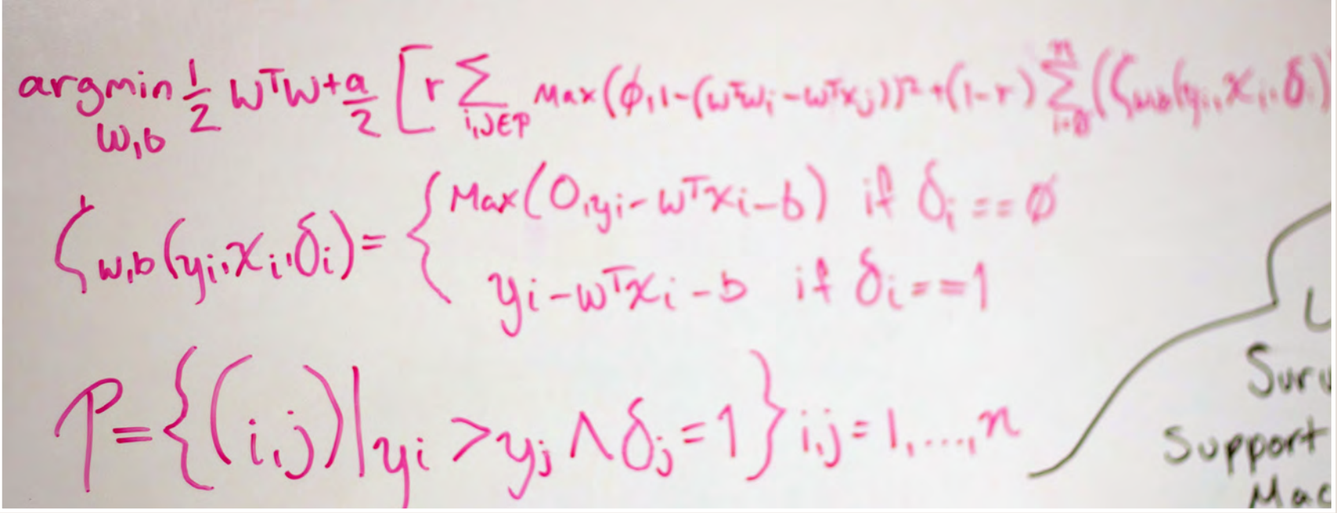
ONE TEAM, ONE PURPOSE:
THE OFFICE OF STRATEGIC INITIATIVES & MODERNIZATION

Employees of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) go to work and collaborate agencywide to keep the public safe. The Office of Strategic Initiatives and Modernization (OSIM) works behind the scenes daily to ensure the success of each of those people, including frontline staff.

OSIM is a new department in TDCJ made up of 25 employees who come to work every day with a shared purpose: to serve and enhance the agency's experience. Their efforts range from improving internal processes to launching initiatives such as the Bartlett Innovation Unit. It is comprised of three different sections – traditional research, advanced data science and records retention, to help make new ideas a reality.

Two of the many integral jobs in OSIM are the roles of the director, Andrew Barbee and the data scientist, Frank Benton.

As the director of OSIM, Barbee uses his role to give a voice to employees of all ranks and positions across the agency and to positively disrupt established practices while challenging the "way we've always done it"



mentality. He takes everything he hears and learns, then brings it back to leadership and his team to determine feasible changes that will improve the agency.

Trying to redefine how people work isn't easy, but Barbee believes in the purpose.

"I've gotten my fair share of pushback when talking about the concept of revisiting how we do things to see if there is a better way. Much like Tom Brady does in the off season after his Super Bowl runs, as an agency we owe it to ourselves and the staff to look in the mirror and say, 'I can still be better,' even at the top of our game," Barbee said.

An example that highlights the purpose of Barbee's division is the Correctional Retention and Wellness (CReW) survey. The survey was developed to allow officers of all ranks to provide candid, anonymous feedback that is shared with leadership. It provides the right people with the opportunity to support accountability and growth within the agency. It also shines light on the areas where things are going great, allowing the agency to learn from the departments and locations where they are getting it right and improve across the state.

Two major changes that have occurred as a result of the survey are increased equipment purchases, including tasers and body cameras deployed to 23 maximum security facilities, and enhanced training for officers.

"The survey is illuminating needs and concerns for the agency. It has a tangible impact on TDCJ investment decisions, approaches to leadership development and improvement on how we hold people accountable," Barbee said.

Another major focus in OSIM that impacts the entire agency is the effort to significantly decrease, if not eliminate, paper-based processes. Benton, an OSIM data scientist, is a driver of this goal. His role is to focus on keeping everything with the agency future-facing where things like reports, technology and processes can constantly evolve and be dynamic to capture information that the agency didn't have before. This includes incorporating technology, where possible, to enhance efficiency of TDCJ processes.

"How many emails do you get per day where you're like 'this report again?' or you're constantly checking your email for a response with data that you need. My goal is to take technologies such as Power BI and other dashboard systems and use them to automate manual reports, so you have real-time access to pull the data or grab a graph without having to wait," Benton said.

Previous page: The staff of OSIM. Standing (left to right): Andrew Barbee (Director, OSIM) / Kimberly Lewis-Smith (Research Specialist V); Sitting (left to right): Edward Weckerly (Deputy Director, OSIM) / Dr. Wesley Smith (Deputy Director, OSIM) / Frank Benton (Data Scientist, OSIM); Above: An example of the type of equation OSIM is piloting to use in their risk assessment modeling; Right: Andrew Barbee.

The survey is illuminating needs and concerns for the agency. It has a tangible impact on TDCJ investment decisions...

Significant changes in an organization like TDCJ can be nerve-wracking so it is no surprise that one of the biggest challenges in Benton's role as a data scientist is also challenging the "it's the way we've always done it" mindset.

One of Benton's favorite parts of his job is that he gets to go out and talk in-person to the people that the decisions based on his data could impact.

"Going to units or visiting departments and understanding their struggle, then helping them overcome it is one of the best parts of my job. I like setting them up with current information to help them do their job efficiently and free them up to focus on their priorities," Benton said.

Efficiency, transparency and experience are the themes of why OSIM is working to shake things up. They help leadership make well-informed, data-driven decisions for the overall success of the agency.

"OSIM is here to serve all divisions in TDCJ. We will always give our honest feedback and do everything in our power to directly aid in solving a problem or to give our best advice," Barbee said.

If you have a process or a project that you need feedback on to make it efficient or effective, reach out to OSIM. They excel at developing simple, near-term solutions that are practical and, in many cases, won't need money or vendor support.

"We are here to help. That is what we do. The best ideas for the agency come from the field," Barbee said.

One of the first significant tools developed by OSIM was a risk assessment for inmates likely to engage in self-harm. In 2021, the annual rate of attempted suicides was 192 per 100K inmates.

The self-harm risk tool, launched in March of 2021, flags inmates at risk of engaging in self-harm so that interventions could be delivered. The 2024 annual rate of attempted suicides was 72 per 100K inmates, a reduction of 63 percent..

CUTTING-EDGE GRAPHICS:
THE HOBBY AND TORRES PRINT SHOPS

"Working in the Print Shop is the most adult job I've had..."

The Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ), through Texas Correctional Industries, has three high-tech printing facilities located at the Hobby, Torres and Wynne units. They print business cards, brochures, pamphlets, letterhead stationery, calendars, generic business forms, books and manuals, parking tags and stickers, security decals and more. They offer all types of printing from black and white, multicolor, to full color in a variety of styles and sizes on many different mediums.

The print shops are equipped with the latest versions of computer design programs and can accept pre-formatted jobs electronically. Customers include city, county, state and federal agencies, public schools, public and private institutions of higher education, public hospitals and political subdivisions. The Torres Print Shop produces primarily black and white items for TDCJ and other state agencies.

Wynne Graphics has the capability to produce large items like foam core posters and pull-up banners. Wynne Graphics also produces business cards, lots and lots of business cards, note cards and envelopes, pharmacy certificates, banners, laminated window graphics and vehicle wraps. Wynne Graphics also prints official agency leadership portraits like those you see at all the administrative offices, district parole offices and units.

Hobby Print Shop

Susana Toledano was 19 when she began her sentence in 2004. A native of Illinois, she moved to Texas when she was young to live with her grandmother and uncle. The most significant job she had ever held was in fast-food restaurants. Now she is the newest member of the "A-Team," the group of six women of the pre-press department at the Hobby Unit. They do all the typesetting and graphic layout for Hobby Unit Print Shop color assignments.

For one of her first assignments, she was trained on Adobe InDesign by her mentor, Candra Applegate; they were busy working on the layout of the previous issue of Connections magazine, "Community."

Toledano got her first job at the Hobby Print Shop in 2008 as a clerk in printing operations. She quickly became proficient running all the print shop machines, the presses, cutters, sorters and binders, when she caught the attention of assistant plant manager, Charles Beck. From his glass-walled office, he can see most everything happening on the production floor and get a good's eye view of inmates working there who may be good candidates for pre-press. Toledano was one of those.

"Working in the Print Shop is the most adult job I've had. I like the stability, the routine. I know what to expect every day," Toledano said. She is thankful that the pre-press unit took her under their wing.

Toledano said, "Before, if you asked me how to run a printer, I would tell you I don't know how, and I don't want to learn. Now, I work on a really big printer and I train people how to work on a really big printer! I am so thankful for these skills and for this opportunity."

In conjunction with the Windham School District, the A-Team also helps teach an apprenticeship class in graphic arts. Anyone on the unit can sign up for the class if they meet the qualifications.

"We set up the students on computers and pair everybody up. The students go through the book, and we teach them what we know. We help them with the book and assign them independent projects. The projects? We came up with them on our own," Applegate said.

The class teaches students about color theory and how to recognize colors that do and don't go together.

They learn about spacing and margins and what will make a compelling product.

One of the projects the team works on are area high school football programs, and they take a lot of pride in their work.

"A lot of our heart goes into those football programs, because we design all those ads," Applegate said.

The ads are spotlights of students and programs at the school. They are allowed to create portfolios of their work and send them home. Having a ready portfolio when they release can lead to good jobs in printing.

Working in the print shop gives the team an opportunity to mentor younger inmates.

"We get to teach them about a good work ethic," Applegate said. "We teach them about time management, being responsible and being trustworthy."

Toledano added, "When I'm mentoring someone new, I help them to be dependable and reliable, but also to have good sense an awareness, because safety precaution is a

Candra Applegate watches as Susana Toledano works on the Summer 2025 issue of Connections.

big deal. I want to know, 'Are you willing to learn? Are you wanting to learn?' There is a lot going on in here; there are all the machines and presses and all the different types of paper, and everything happens in a sequence."

Toledano and Applegate never considered themselves to be creative, now they see a part of themselves they've never seen before.

"I've learned that that's a part of myself that I've never seen before. It's allowed me to open an outlet!" Applegate said. Toledano added, "I never knew I could be mechanically inclined. At my graduation, my grandmother and uncle got to come to the unit and see what I have been doing, and they were blown away!"

With years of work experience from printing and publishing companies behind him, Beck started working at the Hobby Unit in 2011. He transitioned quickly, working on a variety of printing equipment alongside inmate workers. One of those workers was Toledano.

"Toledano was a wild kid; she was in trouble all the time, but she was a good worker. I knew she was smart, because she was good on computers. She caught on pretty quick. The older she got, she started changing," Beck said.

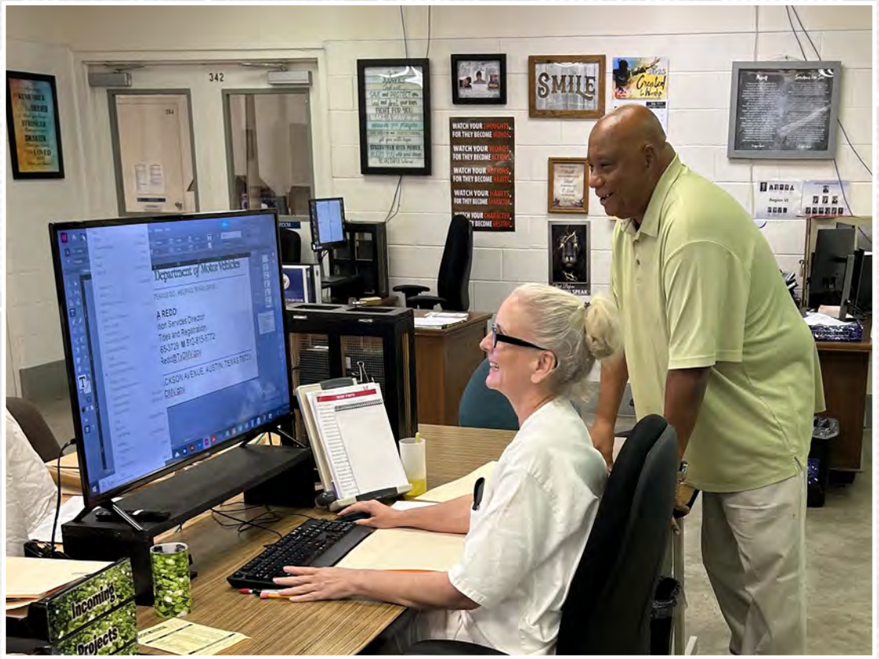
Toledano wanted to get into the design work, and when she finally got her chance, Beck said, "She's a completely different person."

Beck is driven by his spirituality. Over the years he has seen many women, such as Applegate and Toledano, change their behavior and their outlook on their lives. He sees himself as a role model and sets as best an example as he can.

He said, "I try not to miss work, and I am usually early for work (he arrives at the unit at 5:30 a.m.), because I want them to be like that when they get out: dependable, trustworthy and responsible."

The women of the A-Team will tell you they love their jobs. They work as a team, they are driven to be creative, and they are continually challenged to produce and improve. They hope to continue this kind of work when they release to their communities.

"To me, that's the best part of it. There are jobs out there that pay more, but this is rewarding really," Beck said. "To see people change, see them get out of here and get good jobs and make good money. They call back a lot. They say, 'Mr. Beck, I'm doing this and I'm doing that.' Some of them ask for advice. It means a lot!"



Left: Charles Beck works with inmate Jenny Eisenman on a design project. Far right: L to R: Michelle Bearnth, Candra Applegate and Susana Toledano.

Torres Print Shop

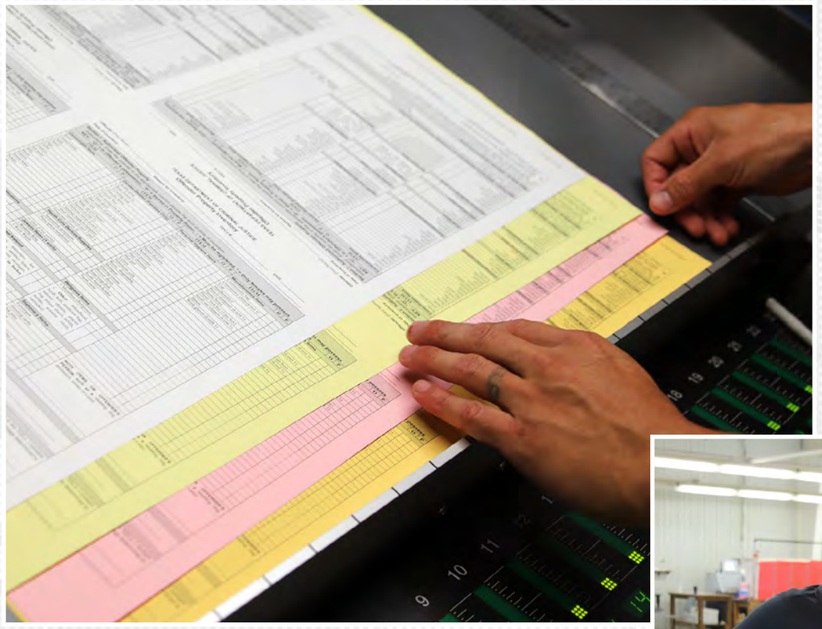
While not quite as large as the Hobby Print Shop, the Torres Print Shop is a beehive of activity. Torres is mostly a black-and-white shop, specializing in manuals, multiple copy documents, like the Inmate Property Inventory form and other forms, such as the agency's vehicle Monthly Use Report and the I-60.

The print shop supervisors oversee everything on the production floor and in the prepress area.

One supervisor, Hondo native, Chris Ybarra, Industrial Specialist IV, said, "Starting in bindery gives the workers an idea of how everything works. The supervisors are always evaluating them, seeing who has potential, who's got this and who's got that, observing their work ethic and how they carry themselves. From there we move them around so they can get experience in the entire shop. It benefits them, and it benefits us."

Like the Hobby Unit crew, it is easy to see that the men who work in the Torres Print Shop take pride in what they do, what they know and how they work together. For many of them, it is the first time they have this much responsibility placed on them. Their coworkers rely on them as they rely on their coworkers, and they have stepped up and earned the respect of their coworkers and the TDCJ staff who supervise them.

On the bindery floor, there are a myriad of machines, each specializing in a specific type or an array of printing products. Some of the machines require a team of operators to make sure paper is loaded as it is needed, to ensure there is enough ink or toner at hand and to unload finished products and assure the correct apparatus is in place to receive more finished



Left: Lining up pages that will become a four-part form; Right: Kyle Hinojosa checks the page alignment on part of the form; Below: Chris Ybarra.

product. The machines don't stop for loading and unloading.

"Some of the machines require someone with a higher level of experience and sense of responsibility," Ybarra said. "We select workers for these machines, because they are wanting to learn and do more, but safety is our highest concern."

Like Ybarra, the staff at the Torres Print Shop find reward in their work. They are not here to just get things done; they're here to serve as role models, to show what a good work ethic looks like and help shape and develop the inmates into dependable potential employees.

All of the work done here can result in jobs in the community. The software and applications in use in the presses and machines, and the organizational processes are all current with what outside companies are using. The inmates receive on-the-job training certificates and printed evaluations of their work along with help developing their resumés. Potential employers are encouraged to contact the print supervisors for references on inmates who are released and looking for meaningful work.

PROTECTING COMMUNITIES, PREVENTING CRIME

For a small team like the Fusion Center, protecting the agency as a team and preventing crime can be a rewarding experience.

The Fusion Center serves as the agency's intelligence hub, collecting and analyzing information from multiple sources to identify threats, trends, and criminal activity that could impact operations statewide. With real-time puzzle piecing, they have a unique role in communicating this intel, which can lead them to solving criminal investigations. The goal of the hub is to ensure the intelligence information is constantly up to date between law enforcement and the agency during investigations.

Director Terry Andrews leads the Fusion Center's operations, overseeing analysts and investigators who turn raw data into actionable intelligence every day.

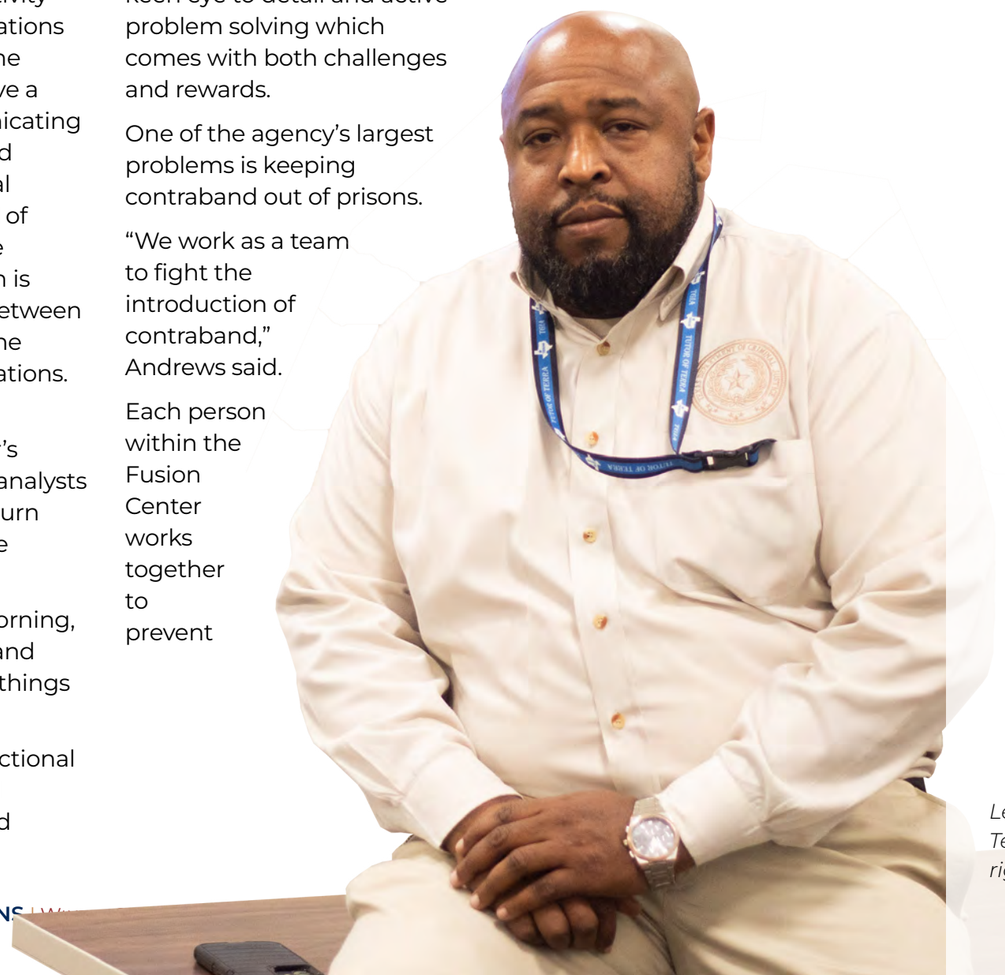
"We all get up in the morning, we're ready to be here and ready to go and do the things we do," Andrews said.

After starting as a correctional officer, Andrews moved up the ranks and landed in the investigative side of corrections. He has built strong partnerships with local, state and federal agencies, making sure information gets to the right place. His role requires a keen eye to detail and active problem solving which comes with both challenges and rewards.

One of the agency's largest problems is keeping contraband out of prisons.

"We work as a team to fight the introduction of contraband," Andrews said.

Each person within the Fusion Center works together to prevent contraband from ever entering the facility. Andrews and his team collaborate with their counterparts to aid in this effort.



"One side never has all the pieces of the puzzle. Our team gives their specific talents, and I let them work within their talents, then they come together with a group to build the entire picture. They do that all the time, and I'm consistently amazed," Andrews said.

The Fusion Center is composed of data analysts, Correctional Intelligence Management Office (CIMO) staff, which includes several administrative assistants, managers, criminal analysts, strike force investigators, and Texas Anti-Gang Information Tracking system program supervisors. These positions are built on teamwork while also maintaining employee independence.

Although these positions have vastly different responsibilities, they all have a few characteristics that benefit the team as a whole. Many of the traits they have are good communication, attention to detail, and a sense of curiosity.

"It's about 80 percent communication and 20 percent investigation," Andrews said. Their constant updates and communication not only keep the team informed but those they work alongside. "We work with every division on a regular basis," Andrews explained.

"We have weekly catch-up meetings to see what everyone is doing, and we have a team-based approach to make sure the information we have is not overlapping," Andrews said.

Forensic accountants take a closer look into finding the details. Whether it's sorting through documents or tracking money trails, forensic accountant Heather Turner's role is crucial in finding the root of it all. She was given an opportunity to contribute to a greater mission. She said, "My goal is to make it a healthy, clean environment for both staff and inmates." She's doing just that alongside her team. Together, they are making strides towards a safer community and preventing crimes along the way.

Left: Fusion Center Director, Terry Andrews; Above and right: Heather Turner.

STITCHES OF LOVE & HOPE

QUILTING CLASS AT THE HOBBY & BARTLETT UNITS

The sound of machines coming from a small room send a whirring echo throughout the empty gym at the Hobby Unit in Marlin, Texas, but it's not the expected floor waxer or drill.

It is the hum of sewing machines that inmates are using to make quilts. There are nine total inmates who all work for Laundry Manager II Terri Speer. Speer is the one who initiated the program with the help of Hobby Unit Warden Audrey England. Together, Speer, England and the inmates came up with the name for the program, "Stitches of Love and Hope."

"When Warden England got to Hobby, she wanted to start programs for female inmates. I'm a quilter in the world, so it was an easy transition," Speer said.

She and the inmates talked to the warden about starting a quilting class, and she was all for it.

"We got everything you would need to make a quilt donated, including machines and fabric, and started the class," Speer said.

At the beginning of the program in February 2025, each inmate had to have basic sewing knowledge as Speer chose who would become the first group of quilters. She said they've come a long way since then.

"I like seeing their knowledge change from the very first project they did to now. They're only three projects removed from that, and they're very meticulous about getting it right," Speer said.

One inmate who thoroughly enjoys their purpose, is Marisela Villa. She enjoys making the quilts for the local nursing homes in the area. Additionally, if they have extra fabric, they also donate smaller quilts to the police department for use in incidents where infants or toddlers are involved.

"It's very fulfilling. It makes us happy and excited to know that somebody else is going to receive them and enjoy what we've created," Villa said.

The inmates put a lot of thought into the fabric that they use and the feelings that their choices invoke. A simple color choice can make a quilt happy or make patterns stand out more.

"I like putting the patterns and colors together. It's fun being able to mix different colors," Villa said. "I like dark colors, and I've noticed that if you mix brighter colors with it, the whole thing just pops."

As Speer witnesses the inmates learn and improve their quilting skills, she is hopeful that the stigma of quilting being for old generations will change.

"People think it's an old lady project, but really, it's not. I like seeing the younger generation here starting to quilt," Speer said. "It is a skill that they can take home and use to create quilts for their family, children or grandchildren for years to come."

As it turns out, Speer's feelings that quilting isn't only for old generations is proving true because about an hour from Hobby Unit, five men are organizing tables and carrying out sewing machines to start

work on their quilting projects at the Bartlett Innovation Unit.

Warden Lori Larson started the quilting program at the Bartlett Innovation Unit this year after seeing a YouTube video of a similar program at Louisiana State Penitentiary, better known as, Angola. She makes quilts for her grandchildren in her spare time and she thought it would be interesting for the men to design something meaningful.

"We're doing this for a purpose, and it's to donate these quilts and give something back. The guys decided to vote and chose St. Jude's Children's Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee. They chose St. Jude's because they felt more of a connection to that," Larson said.

That choice was the right one to inmate Jeremy Nesbett, who is in this first group.

"I like the fact that I'm giving back. I've wasted so much of my life and being able to help somebody and make them smile is something that I'm willing to do," Nesbett said. "These kids have cancer, so they're innocent, and it's a sense of peace knowing that I can give back when I've taken so much from people."

At the start of this program, the men set a goal of finishing one quilt per week, per man, with their first 50 quilts going to St. Jude's. After that they'll take another vote for where the next 50 are donated. In Nesbett's view, it's about trying to change the stereotype of those in white and giving them an opportunity to be a part of something purposeful.

"You look at guys like me, and you think a certain way, 'Oh, they're not going to be doing sewing', but when you step out of your comfort zone and it's about something that's greater than you, especially these little kids, you know ... it's bigger than me," Nesbett said.

It is a great feeling for Warden Larson as she witnesses the change in the men as they learned to sew and decided where they wanted to donate the quilts.

"Knowing these guys are in here for a crime and watching them learn how to piece these little pieces of cotton together to create something beautiful is interesting," Larson said. "They find themselves very challenged learning something so simple like how to sew in a straight line but it's something that they've picked up very quickly and they have become different people."

The class expects to add another five members once the initial group is at a level where they can pass on their knowledge. Inmates like Nesbett know that this class shows how TDCJ is changing the culture.

"TDCJ has come a long way. When I first came in we didn't have classes like this," Nesbett said. "Now, to have it offered and

Below: Jessica Carson, left, and Tracy Luna work on a large quilt. Right: Terry Speer and Marisela Villa talk about design options.

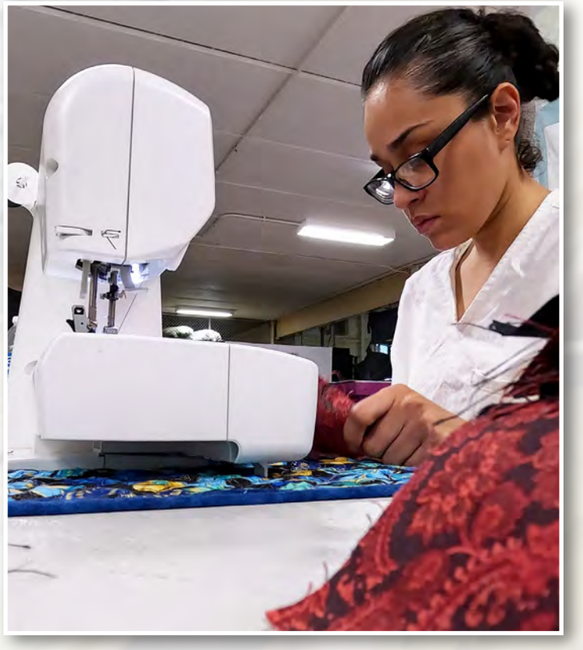
know that they are trying to find different ways for us to change by introducing new material and new classes like this makes our horizon look totally different for the outcome of life. It makes you want to change ... it really does."

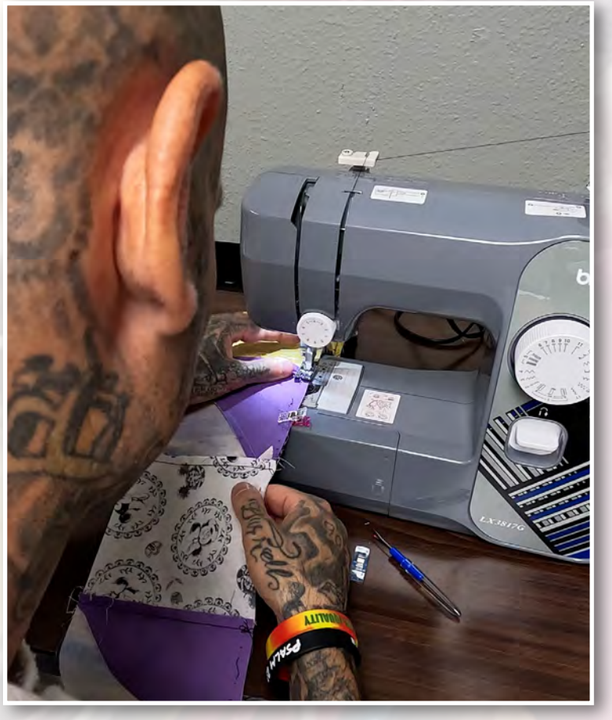
The TDCJ Communications team did a story for social media on Speer and her quilters back in May 2025 that went viral with over 420,000 views. This was helped by a Netflix documentary that had premiered just prior called, "The Quilters," about men in a Missouri maximum-security prison who sew quilts for foster children. All this attention has led to an influx of donations to the Hobby program along with other wardens inquiring about starting their own quilting program, proving that just because you look a certain way and are wearing white, doesn't mean you can't make a difference in the outside world.

If you'd like to donate materials or anything else to the quilting programs, please contact the units:

Hobby Unit:
254-883-5561

Bartlett Innovation Unit:
254-527-4218





Far left below: Villa sewing patches together. Left below: Nesbitt working on a quilt. Below: Jeremy Nesbitt shows off a sample of the quilting work being done at the Bartlett Innovation Unit.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