

FastTRAC Corrections Training Program a Success!

By Teri Dudley, Career Counselor, Northeast Minnesota Office of Job Training



After thirteen months, a very important fastTRAC Corrections training program concluded on December 9th. Twenty-five students received a certificate that proves that they have training that will help them be successful in a Corrections work environment. This is significant when we consider that about 80% of all Corrections Officers do not have a Corrections degree or training of any kind prior to employment.

I have felt so privileged and inspired to work with this group or cohort of students this past year. Completing a training program is never easy but especially complicated when working fulltime, raising children as a single parent, navigating a learning disability, managing a family crisis, or dealing with serious health issues. This group of students came to support, respect, and care about one another and stepped up to help fellow students who, during the program, experienced significant life events or challenges to stay in the program.

Comments they made about the experience of working together in this program:

“Gained a new understanding of how people from such different backgrounds could work together as well as be supportive of one another.”

“The main thing I’ve learned is that collaboration makes the task easier especially when time is scarce.”

“Insight, stories shared by fellow students are amazing. What a terrific group of classmates!”

The fastTRAC Corrections students realized that one year of sacrifice could mean many years of work and financial stability that was currently lacking in their lives. Money isn’t everything but a good wage means less worry or hardship and more money to make contending with family challenges or crises easier. One student who started a new job on December 6th with the Minnesota Department of Corrections stated, “Now I don’t have to work three or four jobs to make a living anymore.” But the fastTRAC program doesn’t just provide career opportunities; it also helps the students grow in some very personal ways.

In this regard students expressed:

“I am more confident and have a stronger desire to do well; failure is not an option for me.”

“How broken we are as individuals and society; we can heal by working together; give people a hand up...and they can accomplish things they would not have tried before.”

“I learned to be more open-minded.”

And, “I’ve learned so much about the corrections field and how to keep my own family out of incarceration.”

This training program was a response to a need expressed by the Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College’s Corrections Advisory Board to fill some of the over 100 projected Corrections vacancies that will be created mostly due to retirements in Northeast Minnesota. In addition, Corrections agencies were expressing

frustration at the difficulty that they were experiencing finding qualified candidates. This is partly because most job seekers do not consider Corrections as a career option due to the many myths that the public has about Corrections environments and people who are incarcerated. Also many who do apply for Corrections jobs are not able to pass the interview process due to their lack of accurate information about Corrections and the skills that Corrections Officers must apply to most successfully perform their duties. They incorrectly rely upon methods they've heard about over the years that are now outdated and what they have seen on television programs that are meant for entertainment. When recruiting students to participate in the fastTRAC Corrections program it was necessary to begin by dispelling some of the myths associated with Corrections. Potential students came to view Corrections as an appealing career path that would not just allow them to achieve or recover higher wages and good benefits that were less available after the economic downturn. They would also make a difference in the lives of incarcerated individuals by having a part in preparing them to live successfully in society once released.

Now a year into the training here are a few comments made by students:

"Not what I expected and inspired me to go deeper into the Corrections field because there's a lot to learn"

"Learned some reasons that people end up incarcerated and this is helping me to know how to better interact with them to make a difference in their lives."

"fastTRAC has helped me by opening up another potential avenue for meaningful work in the community."

The fastTRAC Corrections training program was made possible by Pathways to Prosperity, a partnership between national, state, and local partners that is a collaborative approach to training adults to fill in-demand occupations. In this case, a local team formed by the Northeast Minnesota Office of Job Training, Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College, and AEOA Adult Basic Education collaborated to apply for a Pathways to Prosperity grant. Once the grant is awarded, the agencies work together as a team to accommodate students in any way possible that will increase their chances of success. For instance, Adult Basic Education spends a few weeks filling in skills gaps before college coursework begins and provides tutoring throughout the program. Classes are scheduled at times most advantageous for the majority of students (this program consisted of all evening classes). fastTRAC grant pays tuition for all students who cannot get Pell grants. Students also receive support services such as gas reimbursements, car repairs, childcare, emergency funding, and job search education. When the program ends, supports are provided for job search and further education for those students who want to continue on into a two-year Corrections or Law Enforcement degree or a four-year Criminology degree.

According to: <https://www.careerwise.mnscu.edu/education/fasttrac.html>, "A highly-skilled workforce is critical for Minnesota's economic growth. Many adults in Minnesota lack the skills to succeed in high-demand careers that pay a living wage. And, many employers cannot find the skilled workers they need to grow their businesses. There is a growing skills gap." If you are interested in participating in a fastTRAC training or other training program or if you just want to explore and find career paths possible for you, please contact the Northeast Minnesota Office of Job Training at a location near you: www.nemojt.org/ContactUs