

Scott Walker
Governor

Ed Wall
Secretary



Mailing Address

3099 E. Washington Ave.
Post Office Box 7925
Madison, WI 53707-7925
Telephone (608) 240-5000
Fax (608) 240-3300

State of Wisconsin Department of Corrections

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By Brandon Best
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Contact: Joy Staab
(608) 240-5060

CNC Program creates New Opportunities for Inmates

Racine, Wis. – Lt. Governor Rebecca Kleefisch, Department of Corrections Secretary Ed Wall, and Department of Workforce Development Secretary Reggie Nelson attended a ceremony at Racine Correctional Institution (RCI) recognizing eight graduates of the new computer numerical control (CNC) program on June 23.

The graduates received CNC Certification from Gateway Technical College, who partnered with the DOC and DWD to provide the 13-credit accelerated program to inmates — equipping them with in-demand skills to provide for themselves and their families upon their release.

Wall said, “We can never rest on our laurels and think we’re doing enough. We’re never doing enough until we get to the point until everyone who leaves prison has the skills and abilities they can turn into jobs to keep them from coming back.”

Kleefisch emphasized the need for CNC operators in the labor market. She told the students their skills are “essential to move Wisconsin’s manufacturing industry forward.”

RCI utilized the DOC’s mobile lab as the classroom. The mobile lab is a 44-foot trailer equipped with state-of-the-art equipment, used to provide a hands-on experience for inmates training to become CNC operators.

Beginning in January, students learned how to operate machine tools, computer operations, entry-level CNC programming, CNC set up, CNC operation, print reading and occupational math. Graduates completed courses in Applied Mathematics, CNC Machining Technology, Fundamentals of Blueprint Reading and Shop, and Fundamentals of CNC Machine Application.

All students manufactured an advanced slip-fit bearing for their final project. “Some people cannot produce this kind of product after being on the job for many years,” said instructor Kevin Fulsom. “I’ve gotten them to be able to do it within the six months they’ve been in the class.”

“It’s a big deal, changed my life tremendously,” said Jozie Johnson, a newly certified CNC machinist. “I’ve been trying to get into this field for years and this thing just landed in my lap. I’m grateful Mr. Fulsom was able to come and help us and do this for us. Everybody is ecstatic about this.”

Newson noted the starting wage for CNC operators ranges from \$17 to \$22 an hour in Milwaukee, Racine and Kenosha counties. DWD labor market economists have projected strong demand for CNC operators, with statewide job growth of 24 percent over the decade ending in 2020, approximately 230 jobs per year on average.

Another graduate's mother said, "His learning in here is going to give him an opportunity to find a better paying job and a job that's going to enable him to climb the career ladder and get better opportunities." Her son is "very focused" on finding a job and an apartment, so his daughter can begin visiting him.

Kleefisch encouraged the inmates, "Don't let anyone tell you that your skills and certification are not big enough and good enough to defeat anyone's stereotype and made-up ideas about who you are."

Jonathan Luna, another graduate, plans to enter into an apprenticeship program to continue his education. Luna gave advice to his fellow inmates, "To anyone who's eligible to take the program, take the program. It's a fantastic program. It's a wonderful opportunity."

Wall praised the inmates for their work. "I can't thank you guys enough for taking this step forward and stepping out of the box. You could've just sat there and done your time and marked days on a calendar," Wall said. "We are so proud of you. We thank you for your dedication and encourage you to take it forward."

The CNC program is funded through the DWD Wisconsin Fast Forward grant and is anticipated to serve approximately 24-32 individuals over the next two years.



