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Inmate Labor a Genuine Benefit for Taxpayers, State

In the hustle and bustle of everyday life, most South Carolinians might not give a whole lot of thought to state prison inmates.

But whether it's cleaning the state's highways or grooming the State House grounds, hundreds of inmates working across South Carolina provide valuable services to the state – and save taxpayers a lot of money while doing so.

Recently I experienced this firsthand in my role as commander of the S.C. State Guard.

The State Guard is an all-volunteer state force whose mission is to assist local communities throughout the state in cases of natural disasters and other emergencies. Our members serve inside the state.

The State Guard operates with unpaid volunteers and a tight shoestring budget, and it always has plenty of tasks to complete in maintaining its readiness to rapidly answer the call of duty.

During the last two weeks of September, a half-dozen inmates from the S.C. Department of Corrections helped us accomplish one of these tasks at our State Guard Armory in Columbia.

The inmates worked Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. sorting and folding thousands of surplus Army uniforms we had recently received for our State Guard troops. The uniforms needed sorting because we received them randomly and tightly piled in 4-foot cubes, and many of them were torn and not usable. They also needed to be separated by sizes while being unpacked and then folded, organized and arranged on shelves to assist with distribution or storage.

I was ultimately responsible for ensuring that the six inmates completed the task at hand, so toward that end I insisted that they start their workdays promptly and on time while staying focused and maintaining a high level of performance.

They cooperated, the work was accomplished, and the project was a success for both the State Guard and the Department of Corrections.

The Richland County Sheriff's Department assisted in this effort, providing transportation for the inmates to and from the Armory each day. The drivers were reserve deputies and also members of the State Guard, as is Richland County Sheriff Leon Lott, who oversees the Guard's public safety initiatives as its Provost Marshal.

This kind of cooperation among state and local agencies isn't always the stuff of media headlines. But it's a great example of the kinds of things that regularly happen behind the scenes as public employees work to efficiently serve the taxpayers of our state.

Indeed, South Carolina media outlets, in striving to serve the public interest, might want to consider providing some coverage of the Department of Corrections' (DOC) inmate labor programs to their viewers and readers.

An average of almost 500 inmates logged six to eight hours per workday assisting public entities across the Palmetto State last year, according to DOC data.

Through 36 contracts – with state agencies, counties, cities and public service districts – DOC billed a total of approximately \$1.6 million for those hours – \$13 to \$15 per day per inmate.

That money did not go to the inmates, however. They don't get paid. Instead, the dollars went into the DOC's coffers to help cover food and other inmate costs.

In addition, it was a big savings for the public entities that contracted with the Department of Corrections, as they would've ended up shelling out almost \$7 million if they'd had to pay the minimum wage for the work.

That's a big savings to South Carolina taxpayers of more than \$5.4 million, at least.

The inmates' labor includes everything from repairing Highway Patrol vehicles to sorting materials at local government recycling centers to keeping up trails at state parks.

It's important to realize that these programs help inmates develop qualities and work skills that prepare them for returning home as productive members of society once they complete their sentences.

So the next time you see one of those crews in Department of Corrections garb picking up litter along the highway, remember that they are providing a public service and saving South Carolina taxpayers money at the same time.

It's a genuine benefit for everyone involved.