

Toastmasters' programs in local prisons need your help

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Your Turn

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Each year in Florida, 30,000 men and women are released from the Florida prison system and reenter society. They return to families, friends, lovers, and old neighborhoods. They resume previous jobs, find new ones, or enroll in a college or university.

Are there ways to help ensure their success once released? I hope so since it costs Florida taxpayers nearly \$25,000 a year to keep a person in custody. This figure does not include lost income and emotional costs to their family.

A group of us are working to help incarcerated men and women improve their communication and leadership skills while they are in prison. When released, we want them to find and hold good jobs, develop healthy interpersonal relationships, and become productive community members.

We do this by volunteering at Toastmasters clubs that operate in prisons. Contrary to what some believe, Toastmasters is about much more than making laudatory remarks at weddings and other festive occasions.

Club members practice preparing and delivering short speeches on a variety of topics. They learn to give and take constructive criticism. They acquire leadership and management skills by working cooperatively to plan and run meetings.

Volunteering at one of these clubs is not difficult. Members do all the work. As volunteers, we attend and listen, provide support, offer encouragement, and make suggestions.

Unfortunately, we are running out of volunteers. Clubs at the Gadsden Re-Entry Center and the Bay Correctional Facility in Panama City shut down in 2022 because they have no volunteers. The club at the Federal Correctional Institution for women in Tallahassee has been closed for the last two years for the same reason. Existing members — some have belonged for years — will be unable to sharpen their communication and leadership skills. Newly incarcerated men and women will not be able to join the organization.

Chuck Rabaut, a local man, started more than 20 prison Toastmasters clubs in north-central Florida 10 years ago. He made it his mission to support them with his time and energy. Some weeks he drove more than 1,000 miles and attended three meetings in a single day. He recruited volunteers and hustled funds to keep them going.

These are minimum security facilities; safety is not an issue. In most instances, the club can meet when it is convenient for the volunteer. Those who cannot commit to a single two-hour weekly meeting could share the responsibility with several others.

Please help us continue this vital work.



Andrew Miller of Tallahassee is a retired biologist who volunteers in prisons, restores antique windows, and writes. For more information on this valuable program, please get in touch with him at acm8738@gmail.com.