

Local News

Eyeglass production provides second chance for ex-cons

BY COREY PRIDE

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Chowchilla is home to one of the state's larger eyeglass production facilities.

Each day 108 people come to work and produce 1,500 to 2,000 pairs of eyeglasses.

The optical laboratory receives orders, makes the lenses to specification, assembles the glasses and fields complaints/requests for modifications at its customer service station via the Internet.

The glasses are shipped out to doctors whose clients are Medi-Cal patients who are under 18 and 65 and older.

The facility runs efficiently enough to rival any private-sector operation, but it is operated by the government.

The optical program at Valley State Prison allows inmates to learn a trade.

"This is something these guys can take to the streets," said James Lasek, an administrator at Valley State Prison. "It's not like when they get out they go to a place and they have to train them; they're trained."

Jose Chavez, the prison's optical products supervisor, said inmates receive 1,500 hours of training during the course of several months in order to work in the laboratory. It is a coveted job in prison. Other jobs behind bars may pay 10 to 20 cents an hour, but the eyeglass facility offers 30 to 95 cents. The recidivism rate for inmates who come out of prison having went through a vocational program is far less than those who don't, 23 percent and 61 percent respectively, according to prison authorities.

Jaream Skillern, who is up for parole in November of 2015, said working in the lab has given him skills beyond knowing how to produce lenses.

"It taught me proper job etiquette," Skillern said. "We weren't very interested when we were younger, but as we grow up ..."

Skillern, whose job it is to shape the lenses, said bifocals are harder to produce than other types of glasses. He said he has to be careful there's no prism (a wedge-shaped element that refracts light) visible because it will force the light to bend in the wrong direction, ruining the glasses.

Beall Carlston, who is eligible for parole in January 2016, said he is grateful because the program is providing a way for him to help his family.

Carlston, who wears glasses, said before he became involved in the process he had no clue how eyeglasses get made.

"I would have never known about this. I would have just assumed doctors make the glasses," he said.

Skillern plans to settle in Los Angeles after his release and Carlston is heading to Sacramento. Both men said they plan to get jobs producing eyeglasses. The prison system has eye-wear companies it works with to get ex-convicts jobs.

Carlston said besides the prison optical laboratory providing him with the opportunity to improve his life, it is also one more way for him to pay his debt to society.

"They need these to see," he said. "It is a big responsibility, but that makes it that much more rewarding."



Beall Carlston checks eyeglass specifications at Valley State Prison as part of its optical program. COREY PRIDE — Los Banos Enterprise

