

# A FRESH START

With a population just shy of 8,000 people, DuBois, Pennsylvania, is the largest city in Clearfield County. Combined with surrounding areas, the region is home to around 18,000 people.

DuBois linen services company Paris Healthcare, a business unit of Paris Companies, competes with Pennsylvania farms, a glassware manufacturer and a cabinet door maker for the rural area's hourly workers. Factor in a low unemployment rate, and it's no surprise that labor shortages are a serious issue here. Paris Healthcare has struggled for years to find enough people to process more than 900,000 pounds of laundry per week, serving 400 locations in four states.

To keep the facility operating efficiently, Paris Healthcare general manager Chris Earle turned to a small but untapped labor source – the Jefferson County work release program. Run by the Jefferson County Adult Probation Department, the program allows a sentenced individual who received jail time to work while serving his or her sentence. It's also an opportunity for inmates to lay the groundwork for success after they're released, thanks to Paris Healthcare's commitment to connecting them with needed resources throughout the program and after they re-enter the community.

## A win-win situation

Laundry work can be hard physical labor, especially compared with other jobs paying similar wages, such as fast food. When Earle joined Paris Healthcare in 2017, the facility had a 120 percent turnover rate. "I knew if we continued this pattern, it would be unsustainable," Earle says. "It was very clear I had to not only hire employees, I had to keep them here."

Earle met with the work release program director, Lenny Calhoun, in early 2018, and saw that the program could be a win for everyone: Inmates would be able to do purposeful work while earning money

Pennsylvania  
laundry facility  
finds a unique  
new source of  
reliable workers

*continued on page 26 >*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHANDLER CROWELL





## JEFFERSON COUNTY WORK RELEASE PROGRAM: HOW IT WORKS

Launched in 2014, the Jefferson County work release program allows sentenced individuals to work outside the jail while serving their sentences. About 90 percent of Jefferson County inmates are eligible for the program.

The combined efforts of Paris Healthcare and probation officer/program coordinator Lenny Calhoun have made the program a rare success in central Pennsylvania. A work release program attempt in nearby Brookville fell apart due to transportation issues, Clarion County shut down its program, and Clearfield County has only one or two inmates working, Calhoun says. Meanwhile, Calhoun oversees a couple dozen workers each year in Jefferson County.

"We put time and energy into finding jobs for workers and getting them started," says Calhoun. "When Paris teamed with ATA [Area Transportation Authority], that solved the biggest challenge."

Although about half the inmates continue to work upon release, half of them don't. Some can't get a ride to work, while others simply don't want to work. For those who do keep working, it's life changing. A Department of Justice report states that employment programming, including both prison labor and work release programs, reduces prison misconduct and lowers recidivism.<sup>1</sup>

Jefferson County inmates are nonviolent offenders facing minor drug convictions. The work release program gives them jobs upon release, which means they're less tempted to return to dealing and/or using drugs. Calhoun says a few inmates who lived outside the county stayed local to keep working at Paris Healthcare.

"They uprooted their lives for the work," he says. "This program gives them a chance and creates a safer community for everyone."

to put toward a fresh start upon their release. Paris Healthcare could rely on a motivated work force. And the county would save money on incarceration costs.

“Employing these individuals during incarceration allows them to pay down fines, pay room and board costs, and save what’s left for when they are released,” says Earle. “When we committed to the program, county commissioners were pleased to see revenues that offset operating costs, and I was excited to have a labor force that came to work every day.”

## Moving forward

Earle agreed to take on up to 20 workers from the county program, but getting them to the job site was initially a challenge. The Jefferson County Jail is about 20 miles from Paris Healthcare and does not provide transportation for the work release program. The inmates don’t even have driver’s licenses, much less cars. In fact, Earle says about 20 percent of his regular employees walk to work due to lack of any other transportation.

He contacted the local transit agency, Area Transportation Authority (ATA), to propose a bus route from the jail to Paris Healthcare. ATA responded with stipulations, regulations and fare structures, and the required government approvals would take months.

Earle didn’t have that kind of time. To make do until a better transportation option surfaced, he rented an 11-passenger van and asked two of his drivers to handle work release transport – one for the first shift, one for the second. “Paris absorbed the cost until the bus



## LEADING WITH EMPATHY

Paris Healthcare general manager Chris Earle operates on the principle of empathetic leadership, which is associated with higher employee morale, loyalty and engagement. A study from the Center for Creative Leadership found managers who show more empathy toward employees are viewed as having higher job performance by their bosses than transaction-focused leaders.<sup>2</sup>

Although 60 percent of leaders lack sufficient empathy, research suggests they can learn.<sup>3</sup> Earle introduced empathetic leadership to his management team. They took emotional intelligence training and met with counselors to find out how to better understand the challenges workers face.

Earle explains empathetic leadership this way: If his car got a flat tire, he could secure the spare and still get to work on time. If one of his employees got a flat, would he have a spare? Would he have someone to call? Would he have a phone? Or would a flat tire mean days off work due to lack of transportation and money to pay for repairs? Empathetic managers understand that what they consider minor irritations may be major events to others. “You have to understand employees at their level,” Earle says.

Management got an opportunity to practice empathy when 22 inmates showed up for work last year through the Jefferson County work release program. Although some supervisors resisted the idea at first, their perceptions shifted. “After a couple weeks, my managers said, ‘These people are really hard workers and do a really good job,’” says Earle.



route was in place,” says Earle. “But the expense of a van rental was far outweighed by having 20 employees show up every day, on time.”

In the meantime, Earle kept working on the bus route. He contacted county commissioners, who helped expedite the process. Three months later, ATA had a new route from the county jail to Paris Healthcare, with one stop in-between. It’s now part of the public bus system.

### Solving problems

The first group of inmates arrived on site last year ready to begin a new chapter of their lives, but they lacked necessary items to do the job. Many showed up in flip-flops or worn-out shoes. Paris Healthcare bought them socks and close-toed shoes and supplied uniforms. It did the same for this year’s workers.

Paris Healthcare also helps the inmates get the valid IDs and Social Security cards they need to work. “We’ve tracked down family members for Social Security numbers so they could go to work,” says Earle. “Some don’t have family members, so we try to set them up with other government agencies to get proper ID.”

The assistance doesn’t stop when inmates finish their sentences. Workers who can’t stay with family or partners upon release have a hard time finding a place to live, and many former inmates have wound up homeless because they couldn’t secure housing. Paris Healthcare helps them navigate the maze of social services to access the basic necessities.

“We assist in finding local temporary housing, making calls to homeless shelters, halfway houses

and group homes that accept people in their positions,” says Earle. “But even these shelters are full at times, and we exhaust our search for something as simple as a place to sleep.”

Paris Healthcare offers this assistance to its traditional employees as well. “We created our own network,” Earle says. “We know many of our employees need help with transportation, housing, babysitting, healthcare... we connect them to those resources. We want to bring light to the programs available because the system is so hard to understand.”

Hunger can be another issue. In some cases, says Earle, workers have to decide whether to pay the cellphone bill or eat lunch this month – or they may not have the money to pay either.

Earle responded by providing lunch every Friday and every other Monday. He also keeps snacks available in the breakroom. If a barrier stands between employees’ lives and their jobs, Paris Healthcare does its best to remove it, he says.

### Lower turnover rate

Since fully implementing the work release program, Paris Healthcare’s turnover rate has dropped to 64 percent. Earle hopes to reduce it to 50 percent by 2020. “In our industry, that’s phenomenal,” he says. “These programs work, and we proved it.”

Of the 27 work release workers released from jail, 10 still work at Paris Healthcare. One who had previous industrial electric experience tested into a maintenance tech position and has excelled, says Earle.



Of the 27 work release workers released from jail, 10 still work at Paris Healthcare. In fact, one who had previous industrial electric experience tested into a maintenance tech position and has excelled.

Paris Healthcare plans to participate in the work release program in 2020 and beyond. Over time, Earle says he hopes to expand the company’s involvement from about 20 workers to more than 30. He’s asking ATA for a bigger bus.

“Our commitment is to facilitate – by any means possible – their lives, so they can re-enter the community with a stable job, housing and transportation,” says Earle. “It’s changed their lives. They can’t believe we are giving them a chance and saying, ‘You’re just like everyone else. The only difference between you and the production worker beside you is your home address.’” ■

### References

1. The Use and Impact of Correctional Programming for Inmates on Pre- and Post-Release Outcomes. National Institute of Justice. June 2017. <https://nicic.gov/use-and-impact-correctional-programming-inmates-pre-and-post-release-outcomes-2017>
2. Empathy in the Workplace: A Tool for Effective Leadership. Center for Creative Leadership. April 2007. <https://www.ccl.org/articles/white-papers/empathy-in-the-workplace-a-tool-for-effective-leadership>
3. What’s the Number 1 Leadership Skill for Overall Success? Development Dimensions International. February 23, 2016. <https://www.ddiworld.com/global-offices/united-states/press-room/what-is-the-1-leadership-skill-for-overall-success>