



Opening Doors within Prison Walls, Colorado

Program Impact Story: Denver Women's Correctional Facility

“They know the odds are against them, but they are willing to give it everything they can. They are pioneers, and the camaraderie among them is remarkable and inspiring. They have a real sense that they are changing their own lives, as well as the lives of other women in prison.”



The end of a prison term is the beginning of a new life. At least, that is the hope of many reformed offenders, and one of the charters of the Colorado Department of Corrections (CDOC).



The effort to help offenders reintegrate into society actually begins long before a

prison term is completed. The CDOC Pre-Release and Community Re-Entry Programs work with both adults and youth offenders to develop community transition plans that address everything from housing to money management. But perhaps one of the most important and difficult aspects of reintegration is helping offenders find employment. For most offenders, finding a good job depends largely on the ability to develop marketable skills while still in prison.

Carl Wotowis is assistant director for the CDOC's Offenders Program, and John Jubic is with the Governor's Office of Information Technology (OIT). Working independently on training programs for

offenders, they both discovered the Cisco® Networking Academy® in prison systems overseas. Both were struck by the praise that these prison academies have received from the international community for helping offenders reintegrate into society. Carl was also impressed with the collaborative nature of the program, and began his own networking effort, reaching out to John Bjerke, Western Region Manager for Cisco Networking Academy. John helped connect Carl with the Arapahoe Community College (close to the Denver Women's Correctional Facility) and the Pueblo Community College (close to the La Vista Correctional Facility). Once the community college connection was made, John Jubic and Carl began work

ing with CDOC associate director of Educational Services, Ross Kimbrel. Everyone was excited about the potential of the program, putting in a tremendous amount of time to create and conduct the courses inside the walls of a prison.

Within 24 months of learning about Cisco's education program, the CDOC became the first U.S. prison offering Networking Academy courses.



Providing technology training is not a new concept for the CDOC. When employees call the OIT's help desk, the first line of response may be, in fact, an offender who has received technical training. The Cisco Networking Academy will offer a new level of training and opportunities for OIT help desk offenders who will be able to participate in higher-level certification programs. But the vision for the prison academy went well beyond building on an existing program.

The first students invited to join the pilot Cisco Networking Academy at the CDOC are women.

"We were inspired by a white paper Cisco wrote on women in IT," says Carl. "We wanted to see if we could change the lives of women in the prison system by encouraging them to consider IT careers."

There are close to 1,000 women in the two CDOC correctional facilities, and 12 were accepted into the pilot program after extensive screening. These women are making a serious commitment to the Cisco Networking Academy program. It isn't just the challenge of signing up for a 20-week course that meets twice a week for two hours at night and requires eight hours a week of lab and testing time. Students agree to sign a waiver that delays possible early release until they have completed the courses.

In addition to technology coursework, students hear from professional women who visit the facilities to talk about their careers in information and communications technology. The hope is that having women in the workforce share their experiences and success will also help encourage the students to continue their efforts and believe in their ability to change their lives for the better.

"Students were definitely apprehensive at first. They knew it was a special program and that it would be challenging," says Carl. "But instructors say that their confidence grew in a remarkably short period of time. Within a month, the women were opening up and talking during labs, and they are discussing complex technology concepts with greater assurance."

While potential students were being screened, John Jubic's team was working with Cisco and the CDOC's Educational Services staff to convert a vacant training room into a new IT classroom and computer lab.

"We have a PC for each student, and tear-down PCs and a Cisco switch. For security compliance, we keep the network isolated, only connecting to the facility network once a week for updates."



The Denver Women's academy will implement Cisco IT Essentials and Comp TIA A+ certification programs. Once the pilot program at the Women's Facility is concluded and assessed, the plan is to start up a Networking Academy program at the La Vista Correctional Facility, and expand to include the CCNA® (Cisco Certified Networking Associate) Discovery 1-2, and CCENT® (Cisco Certified Entry Networking Technician) certification programs.

Shannon Fresquez-Chapa is one of the 12 women in the pilot. "Being selected to participate in this program," says Shannon, "gave me the confidence to believe in what I recognized within myself, and then move forward. This class is giving me many opportunities that normally aren't available to women (felons). Cisco doesn't just open doors, but changes lives, if one utilizes what is being offered. I plan on being one of those people."

Everyone involved in the program has been impressed with the courage of the women in the pilot. Speaking on behalf of the team, Carl says: "They know the odds are against them out in the community, but they are willing to give it everything they can. But I think the biggest surprise for all of us is how much they are supporting each other. They are pioneers, and the camaraderie among them is remarkable and inspiring. They have a real sense that they are changing their own lives, as well as the lives of other women in prison."