



Wheels for the World program gets rolling

Program provides inmates an opportunity to establish a work ethic

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YOUNGSTOWN – Helping the disabled is one way to enable prison inmates.

Regional Chamber and Northeast Ohio Correctional Center officials celebrated the grand opening of the Wheels for the World program Thursday morning.

Dozens upon dozens of broken and soon-to-be restored wheelchairs filled the warehouse of the facility, as those in attendance learned the history of the program and the effects it's had on the world so far.

Wheels for the World is a program in which inmates receive donated wheelchairs, restore them and then give them to disabled people throughout the world. In many cases, the wheelchairs provide the recipients their first chance at mobility.

Wheels for the World is a division of Joni and Friends International Disability Center. Joni and Friends was founded by Joni Eareckson Tada in 1979 to communicate the gospel and equip Christ-honoring churches worldwide to evangelize and disciple people affected by disabilities, according to the organization's Web site.

Changing attitudes

"I've seen changes among the inmates through the program," said Susie Hayden, supervisor of Restoration and Transportation of Wheels for the World, during the ceremony. "At first they would say, 'I started it because it was something to do. Now it's something I want to do.'"

NEOCC is one of the 17 U.S. prisons that operates restoration shops around the world. There are currently 12 inmates at the facility that participate in the program, but officials are expecting the number of workers to increase to 35 over time.

Hayden said one of the most rewarding things about her job is showing the inmate workers the pictures and videos of children around the world receiving their first wheelchairs.

"It lets them feel like they accomplished something and that they've made a difference," Hayden said.

Managing Director Ron Thompson said the inmates who volunteer for the program must show up for work on time, and must cooperate with supervisors and fellow inmates during the job.

Positive work ethic

"The program gives inmates an opportunity to establish a work ethic," Thompson said. "Developing a positive work ethic is a good first step for many of them."

Margaret Matasic, director of Joni and Friends Ohio, said they have had a great response from people across the state willing to donate their time and help to the program.

"People in Ohio are very generous," Matasic said. "We've got thousands and thousands of chairs from medical equipment companies, hospitals and nursing facilities, as well as lots of other places."

On August 18, an Ohio-wide wheel chair collection will take place at 12 drop off locations around the state. Those wishing to donate a wheelchair should call Matasic at (330) 654-9313 for more information and nearby drop off locations.