

Open house to highlight items made by state prison inmates

By **John Reynolds** Staff Writer September 10, 2014

Baked goods, office furniture and street signs are just a few of the products made by Illinois prison inmates that will be on display in Springfield this week.

Illinois Correctional Industries will be holding the open house today and Thursday at the Illinois Department of Corrections' Concordia Campus at 15th and Moffat streets from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Production managers will be at the site giving demonstrations of products including outdoor furniture made from recycled materials, a new line of highly visible reflective signage and meat products such as hamburgers and sausages.

Jen Aholt, chief executive officer for ICI, said the biggest customers are other state agencies, county governments, municipalities and nonprofit organizations. This is the second year for having an open house.

"Anyone can come," Aholt said. "Not only do we want procurement folks, but we also want anyone who has a business and can potentially hire our inmates."

Different prisons in Illinois manufacture different items for the ICI program.

Inmates at the Lincoln Correctional Center make signs, while inmates at the Hillsboro Correctional Center make wooden office furniture. Visitors to Illinois' parks will be seeing new grills and fire pits that are made by inmates at the Shawnee Correctional Center at Vienna.

The vocational programs are popular among the inmates. Nationally, people who participate in the work program have a lower recidivism rate than the general inmate population, Aholt said.

"You are addressing one of the major obstacles of their success: a job skill," Aholt said.

The inmates can make up to \$1.40 an hour. A portion is sent to the state's victim fund, and the inmates also are able to put away some of their earnings that will be available to them when they are released.

Through the open house, Aholt hopes to show the public that the work the inmates do is not an arts and crafts program. At the bakery at Illinois River Correctional Center, for instance, the inmates bake 16 million pounds of dough every year.

"It's a real industry. We're putting out some serious numbers, and we are training these inmates," Aholt said.

Illinois Correctional Industries is a self-sustaining agency within the Illinois Department of Corrections.