

Solar panel array to help heat, power Ohio prison

Solar panel array to provide hot water, heating at Ohio prison with \$245,000 annual savings

AP By Andrew Welsh-Huggins, Associated Press
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Charlie Slavik, marketing and sales vice president for Indianapolis-based S...

CHILLICOTHE, Ohio (AP) -- The state on Wednesday unveiled a large solar panel project at a southern Ohio prison it says will save taxpayers \$245,000 in annual energy costs, reduce greenhouse emissions and help train inmates involved in the project as a route to future jobs.

The 400 panels at Ross Correctional Institution in Chillicothe, about 50 miles south of Columbus, will be the primary source for hot water and heating in eight cell blocks, the Department of Rehabilitation and Correction said.

The panels consist of multiple tubes that collect ultraviolet rays and transfer the heat to a liquid similar to antifreeze that then heats water in large tanks inside the individual prison facilities. Because they use UV rays, the panels work whether it's cloudy or sunny.

Just as important as the savings is the impact on the environment and the chance to provide job skills to inmates, said Ross warden Mark Hooks, following a rooftop tour of one set of panels on a warm and sunny day.

"You can't have rehabilitation if you don't give guys opportunities," Hooks said Wednesday during a ceremony awarding completion certificates to six inmates who finished a training program.

One of those prisoners, 29-year-old Shane Blackburn of Lucasville, incarcerated for attempted robbery and theft, has been offered a job by PH Construction Development once he's released in a few months. The Danville, Indiana-based company installed the panels developed by Solar America Solutions of Indianapolis. PH Construction also provided a letter to a judge overseeing the case of another inmate, Raymond Lashley, praising his work.

Lashley, 42, of Carrollton in eastern Ohio, said it was impossible to overestimate the value of being trusted to work on such a project.

"Just having the hope of something better," said Lashley, serving eight years for assault. "It's important to try to show people you can do the right thing."

Ross Correctional opened in 1987 and has about 2,100 inmates with an annual budget of about \$41 million.

Solar America Solutions, says the project is the largest non-utility solar installation in North America. Some of the challenges working in prisons include a limited work day and the knowledge that some inmates won't make it through the rigorous program, said Charlie Slavik, the company's marketing and sales vice president.

There are also rewards, he added.

"We get to make a difference in somebody's life," he said. "There are guys that have been pounding the pavement here, who have been incarcerated for several years, who are going to have a shot at a better life when they get out."

The company has a specialty working with correction facilities to install solar panels, including training offenders with a program based on an apprenticeship for plumbers.

Ohio says the project, which cost \$1.7 million, will help reduce natural gas usage and greenhouse gas emissions and has a 6.1-year return on investment.

Jails in Tennessee and Utah and prisons in Indiana and Wisconsin are among other correctional facilities with significant solar panel projects.

Andrew Welsh-Huggins can be reached on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/awhcolumbus>.