

## [Broward and Manatee Communities Decry Closure of Programs to Help Inmates Successfully Re-Enter Society](#)

### **Cuts Jeopardize Public Safety, Private Sector Jobs, Tax Dollars**

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BRADENTON, Fla. & FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla.--([BUSINESS WIRE](#))--During simultaneous news conferences, a cross-section of community leaders in Manatee and Broward counties today called plans by the Florida Department of Corrections to close two highly successful inmate re-entry programs “a big step backward.”

“In fact, the programs are so successful that only 1 in 10 Bridge participants returns to prison after three years, compared to the 3 in 10 inmates in state prisons who don’t benefit from transition services.”

The closure of the [Broward County Bridge](#) and the [Bradenton Bridge](#) inmate re-entry programs jeopardizes more than 70 private sector jobs statewide, threatens public safety and, ironically, will cost Florida taxpayers an additional \$1 million.

Wayne H. Poston, Mayor of Bradenton, said, “It is essential that the Bridges Transition of Bradenton facility remain open. Not only does the program provide invaluable training and life-skills benefits to the participants, the presence of Bridges has a measurable and positive impact on Bradenton. Bridges provides local businesses with an extremely motivated, skilled workforce. Equally important, Bridges is creating a pipeline of contributing, productive citizens for Bradenton and other communities throughout Florida.”

Cecilia Denmark, [Bridges of America](#) Corporate QM Executive and former director of The Broward Bridge, said the Bridges programs have been proven partners with the Florida Department of Corrections and local communities for more than 30 years. “This is not a pilot project, it’s a proven partnership,” she said.

In fact, the programs are so successful that only 1 in 10 participants returns to prison after three years. In contrast, among inmates who leave state prisons without re-entry services, 3 in 10 are back in prison in two years and 4 in 10 return in three years.

“This program transformed my life,” said Shawn O’Neil, a graduate of the program and owner and operator of New Creations Catering. “Now, as a successful business owner, I am blessed to be able to try to transform others by hiring inmates and graduates of Bridges.”

Shelli DiCostanzo, a Sarasota resident and the mother of a current inmate who is participating in the Bridges program, said, “It’s not possible to overstate how important this program is. Preparing inmates to re-enter the world as contributing, skilled citizens must remain a priority. In my daughter’s case, she is preparing for life as a law-abiding citizen who will not be returning to prison, ever. We need to keep Bridges open to help other women re-enter society, instead of becoming ‘revolving door’ residents of our state correctional institutions.”

For 18 months before inmates are released from prison, the Bridges programs provide successful transition and re-entry services, including drug treatment, education, life skills training, help with family reunification and jobs.

“I came to serve this program, but in the end, it serves me by seeing the truly amazing turnaround in these men’s lives,” said Rev. Ginery Twitchell of the Broward Bridge program. “It’s just wrong to take inmates who have worked hard, lived by the rules and successfully held jobs, and then throw them back in prison.”

The programs help ensure that inmates leaving prison have every opportunity to succeed when they return to the community.

“Gov. Scott and DOC Secretary Ken Tucker share our priority to help make sure inmates don’t return to prison but go on to be contributing citizens,” said Lori Brown, Bridges of America President. “This closure takes us in the wrong direction. Inmates have no way to succeed without effective transition programs.”

Every year in Florida, up to 40,000 inmates are released back into society at one minute past midnight on the day their sentences are up. They are given \$50, a bus ticket to a destination within 200 miles, the clothes on their backs and no personal identification. Four out of 10 have serious psychological problems that are controlled by medication, yet they have no way to continue accessing mental health medications once they leave prison.

“I fully understand the difficulty of dealing with declining revenues and the reality of making difficult budget choices. But no matter how you evaluate it – from a fiscal or community point of view – closing Bridges does not make any sense,” said Robin DiSabatino, Manatee County Commissioner. “This program has a remarkable history of effectively rehabilitating inmates, preventing most from committing crimes after release and returning to prison, and having to once again be supported by taxpayers. And the Bridges Transition Center does it far more efficiently, and with many more services, than a traditional taxpayer funded prison.”

Sharing concerns about private-sector job losses, Sally Hill of Suncoast Workforce said, “The Bradenton Bridge staff and employees are valued members of our community. If this facility closes, it would be a tremendous loss to them personally. In addition, Manatee County would suffer the loss of nearly three dozen jobs.”

Frank Mazzerillo, owner of Bagel Market in South Florida, who has employed six work release participants, including one who became a manager, agrees, “As a business owner I know the value of a buck, and every dollar spent on this program brings huge returns. To cut it would be foolish.”

Ironically, rather than saving money, the cuts will cost the state money, since it will cost an additional \$1 million a year to keep these inmates locked up rather than in the re-entry programs.

Added Elizabeth Darby of the Bradenton Bridge, “In fact, the programs are so successful that only 1 in 10 Bridge participants returns to prison after three years, compared to the 3 in 10 inmates in state prisons who don’t benefit from transition services.”

### Contacts

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