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Fort Lauderdale inmate work-release center to close

By [Arlene Satchell](#), Sun Sentinel

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Several supporters of a Fort Lauderdale inmate work release center turned out Friday to voice their dismay and opposition over its pending closure.

Many, including local clergy and businessmen, touted the center's rehabilitative programs and some called the Florida Department of Corrections' decision to close it "devastating."

Last month, the operator of The [Broward County](#) Bridge — also known as the Pompano Transition Center — received notice that its contract with the state agency would be terminated March 31 due to budgetary constraints.

Orlando nonprofit Bridges of America runs the center at 5600 N.W. 9 Ave., where more than 200 male inmates who are nearing the end of their prison sentence are housed and assigned to substance abuse transition, work release and community job programs.

Inmates receive life skills and career readiness training, GED tutoring, drug treatment and help with rebuilding family ties as well as job placement to help better prepare them for life after prison.

Shawn O'Neill of Coral Springs, a 2007 graduate of the program and owner of New Creations Catering said Friday he's "outraged" by news of the closing.

"It's a place where men's lives are really changed," O'Neil said, citing the benefits of family visitation and the counseling he received.

"They take you from a hopeless situation to a hopeful situation," said Thomas Walker of Miami, a 2003 graduate. "It's important that they remain open."

Another Bridges location in Bradenton with 120 female inmates will also close as part of the correction department's cost-saving measures.

These closures will mean the loss of more than 70 jobs and will put more than 300 inmates who are on the path to successful re-entry, back into the state's general prison population, Bridges' officials said.

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The Bridges of America closures however aren't isolated.

Five state-run prisons and work camps are also slated for closure this year in an attempt to plug the financial deficit, said Ann Howard, a spokeswoman for the state's department of corrections.

"We're \$79 million in the hole right now and are taking steps to rectify that," Howard said.

The projected savings from the closures of the Bridges' centers for fiscal year 2011-2012 would be more than \$5 million, Howard said.

Still officials at The [Broward County](#) Bridge argue that the mathematics of the department's decision just doesn't add up stating it will cost the agency more if the inmates are moved to state-run facilities.

The annual cost to house 332 inmates at the two centers is \$5.3 million compared to the \$6.4 million its costs in the Florida Prison System, Bridges' officials said.

"I have seen thousands of inmates who wanted to change get the chance to return to society as productive, law abiding, taxpaying citizens," said Cecilia Denmark, a Bridges of America executive and former director of the Fort Lauderdale center. "This closure takes us in the wrong direction."

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