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MDOC announces work release program as parolee begins new job after completing it

JACKSON – Today is a big day for Russell Fitzhugh when he shed prison attire for civilian clothes and became a private citizen heading for a job thanks to a new MDOC program, and all while celebrating his 49th birthday with his family.

Fitzhugh, a Texas native who calls Brandon home, will be released on parole after being the first paid MDOC inmate to have worked outside a prison during incarceration as part of a new Transitional Work Center attached to the Central Mississippi Correctional Facility. The program matches eligible inmates with paid jobs outside the prison as a means of giving them a head start on re-entry to society.

MDOC, legislative, and local leaders were among those attending a press conference Monday announcing the opening of the Transitional Work Center, which is located in a refurbished facility in Pearl, with ownership transferred to the state from the Rankin County Sheriff's Department. The center will be home to a new program state lawmakers authorized in the 2022 session, taking effect July 1.

Commissioner Burl Cain said the program will help give inmates who are nearing their release on parole an extra advantage for success after release.

“It’s important because the guy is going to have money already in the bank, he’s going to take it home when he goes to his family, already paid his fines,” Commissioner Cain said, adding that other inmates could be inspired to seek the same opportunity. “It causes other inmates to want to do the same thing, therefore seeing a ripple effect. They’ll be training for a higher paying job instead of being just a broom sweeper. We will have prepared him in prison, corrected deviant behavior, and he’s ready to go to work.”

Deputy Commissioner for Workforce Development Bradley Lum thanked legislative leadership for supporting the program's creation that puts MDOC a step closer to finding jobs for inmates before release instead of after incarceration.

"It's a big day for MDOC, it's a big day for our inmate population and their families, and it's a big day for the state of Mississippi. We believe in public safety at the core of our priorities and we also believe this is a critical component of safety in Mississippi," Lum said. "We are ensuring that we are not only providing housing, safety, and security inside our facilities, but we are also providing [inmates] a path that leads to stable life when they walk out of prison."

Work Release participants will work in the free world and wear free world clothes to their job locations. They will be paid a prevailing wage with the following distribution: 25 percent to outstanding fines and fees; 50 percent in a savings account; 15 percent to a prepaid debit card for personal items; and 10 percent for administrative fees. Overall, between 75 to 100 qualified inmates are expected on a case-by-case basis, primarily depending on their parole eligibility dates. State law allows 25 participating inmates at any given time.

Fitzhugh is a repeat offender with his last stint in prison being for possession of controlled substance with intent to distribute who became parole eligible after serving 25 percent of an eight-year sentence. Upon his release, Fitzhugh will join the City of Brandon's maintenance department. One of his first assignments will include hanging holiday lights in the city.

"This is a blessing because I don't have to get out there and do what I was doing before. I have a job. I have money in my pocket. God has blessed me so I can go home and help my family. That's the biggest thing," Fitzhugh said. "It feels great and it is the end of a long road."

Fitzhugh also plans to help mentor kids when possible, sharing his experiences to steer them from prison. The program has a strong potential to reach other inmates he is leaving behind.

"Other inmates are glad to see the program and are looking forward to the same opportunities. I feel like other inmates have a good chance for the same outcome I have," Fitzhugh said.



PHOTO 1

MDOC Commissioner Burl Cain, center, announced the opening of a new transitional work center in Rankin County during a press conference held at the facility on Highway 468 in Pearl. Commissioner Cain was joined by Executive Deputy Commissioner Karei McDonald, right, and Deputy Commissioner for Workforce Development Bradley Lum.



PHOTO 2

Russell Fitzhugh, left, greets MDOC Commissioner Burl Cain who congratulated him on his release on parole set for Tuesday. Fitzhugh is the first inmate to complete a new work release program that pays incarcerated inmates a wage while working at jobs outside their facility. Looking on from the right, Rankin County Sheriff Bryan Bailey.



PHOTO 3

Deputy Commissioner for Workforce Development Bradley Lum provided additional details during the press conference.



PHOTO 4

State and local dignitaries joined the MDOC leadership in announcing the opening of a new transitional work center. They included, from left, Pearl Mayor Jake Windham, State Rep. Gene Newman, Dep. Commissioner Bradley Lum, Brandon Mayor Butch Lee, Russell Fitzhugh, Commissioner Burl Cain, Sen. Dean Kirby, and Rankin Sheriff Bryan Bailey.