



# TRUE GROWTH

## THE SHASTA COUNTY JUVENILE REHABILITATION FACILITY'S GROW PROGRAM

THE SHASTA COUNTY Probation Department's Juvenile Rehabilitation Facility is growing more than just fruits and vegetables through its innovative GROW program; it's growing the lives of the young offenders in its care.

GROW (Gardening, Responsibility and Ownership of Self and Community Wellbeing), a project funded through a Board of State & Community Corrections grant, partners with the Shasta County Office of Education, Garden of Hope and Shasta County Child Abuse Prevention Council.

"Our program partners mentor our kids, many of whom have not had positive role models," says Tracie Neal, Chief Probation Officer. "These relationships are very powerful for our youth because they see people truly interested in improving their circumstances."

Division Director Sarah Till recognized an opportunity to transform unused site property into a multi-purpose garden. "We built about 160 raised beds where we have planted fruits and vegetables we like to eat," says Till, whose kitchen facility staff cook seasonal foods from scratch as often as possible.

GROW teaches residents practical skills—how to compost, fertilize and plant flowers to ward off pests while attracting pollinators—but perhaps most importantly, how to care about—and for—living things.

"They teach us how to love the plants," says S.U., 17.

"I love the GROW Program," says J.S., also 17. "It actually brought people in the hall together. I helped pour the cement that the shed is on. I got to put my initials in it."

That kind of pride in ownership changes behavior and underscores the emphasis on rehabilitation that Neal and her staff view as their primary charge.

"Most counties refer to facilities like ours as Juvenile Hall or Juvenile Detention," says Neal. "When we opened the new facility in 2014, we chose to emphasize rehabilitation. Research indicates pro-social activities and community connection are key to success, and the GROW program is important in this regard as well as in providing leisure activity."

Adjacent to the garden, the facility houses about 60 chickens that produce 10 dozen eggs a week. Residents incubate and care for the eggs under adult supervision in the classroom. Their goal is to eventually produce all the eggs eaten within the facility. ▶

*continued on page 58*



The Juvenile Rehabilitation Facility also offers slow cooker classes so residents and their families can learn how to prepare the foods the youth are growing. “We recognize that rehabilitation and lasting change involve participation by the whole family,” says Neal, pointing to the benefits of involving parents in the role fresh fruits and vegetables play in their children’s lives.

Presently, fewer than 100 minors are on probation in Shasta County. Due to instability at home, many move back and forth between and among family, community and the Juvenile Rehabilitation Facility, which serves youth arrested for misdemeanor and felony charges up until their 19th birthday, according to Till.

Innovation in program philosophy is not the only significant change, however. “When I came aboard in 2014, the facility looked very stark and clinical,” says Till. “I wanted to try and ‘soften’ it up. My son makes a lot of art that I have in my office and I thought it would be a good project for the residents.”

The response was overwhelmingly positive. “They came up with parameters about what would be appropriate and then we used markers, colored pencils and paint on foam poster boards that we attached to the wall,” says Till. “They even participated in selecting where to hang the pieces.”

The new focus has also meant the addition of leisure and recreation activities that enrich youth, the lack of which Till says provides a motive for criminal activity.

“Formerly, free time consisted mostly of writing letters, playing basketball and reading books,” says

Till. “I wanted to bring a sense of normalcy by trying to fill their time with other positive activities.”

By introducing youth to meaningful pursuits that they can continue for the rest of their lives, and by providing a continuum of care services to them once they are released, Till and Neal hope to give these kids a chance at a new beginning.

Programs like GROW also serve another very important purpose. “We want to work with the kids on the restorative justice piece, helping them understand that some of their behaviors have negatively impacted others,” says Neal, who proposes youth donate some of their crops to community-based organizations.

The new programs have improved resident behavior in both the facility and the community, says Neal, adding, “One of the unexpected benefits is we find youth want to participate in programs like GROW—working on the farm, for example—rather than engage in delinquent behavior.”

There is reward, too, in momentary pleasures. “It gives me joy to watch the kids pick a vegetable right off the plant and eat it,” says Till. •



**Claudia Mosby** is fascinated by the power of words to influence, inspire and heal. She became a freelance feature writer so she could tell people’s stories. She lives in the North State and leads workshops, classes and retreats on writing and wellness. Visit her website at [www.writinginsideout.org](http://www.writinginsideout.org).

