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WI Department of Corrections Partners with Little Free Library Project to Promote Literacy

Inmates Build Library Boxes as Part of Governor's Read to Lead Initiative

MADISON, Wis. – As part of Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker's Read to Lead initiative to promote reading and literacy, the Wisconsin Department of Corrections (DOC) and some of its inmates are partnering with the non-profit group the Little Free Library Project to create more reading opportunities in Wisconsin communities.

On Tuesday, January 31, DOC Secretary Gary Hamblin and Prairie du Chien Correctional Institution (PDCI) Warden Gary Boughton officially presented five "Little Free Libraries" or wooden book boxes crafted by inmates at the medium-security prison to the Little Free Library Project for distribution.

The donation is the result of a pilot program between the DOC and the Little Free Library Project to promote reading opportunities for children and literacy for adults. Prairie du Chien Correctional Institution (PDCI) has a Buildings, Maintenance and Construction vocational program through Southwest Technical College which integrated the construction of the Little Free Library boxes into its curriculum.

"Our partnership with the Little Free Library Project helps promote reading as well as literacy and job skills among our inmate population," said Secretary Hamblin. "The pilot program takes donated lumber and produces not only more reading opportunities in communities but valuable woodworking skills for our offenders that they can use later to secure employment. It's a positive program for everyone involved."

The Little Free Library Project receives donated boxes and has placed them in community spots throughout Wisconsin and other states. The inmate-created boxes are decorated with different themes and will be set up in the small Richland County village of Boaz as well as in Kimberly, Madison and Milwaukee. The location of the fifth library box has yet to be decided.

At the presentation Tuesday Secretary Hamblin said since the pilot project at PDCI has been successful the DOC will explore setting up similar efforts at other institutions to help promote reading opportunities in more Wisconsin communities.

Governor Walker commissioned the Read to Lead Task Force, comprised of educators, reading experts, elected officials from both parties, and philanthropic and non-profit representatives and charged them with reviewing the state of reading in Wisconsin and developing a plan for improvement. The recommendations of the Read to Lead Task Force focus on improvements and changes in teacher preparation and professional development; screening, assessment and intervention; early childhood; accountability; and family involvement.

“These Read to Lead priorities are in line with the DOC mission to help offenders gain the skills they need to be successful upon Reentry into the community,” said Secretary Hamblin. “Literacy and reading promotion are key building blocks of that Reentry success and a critical part of our effort to reduce recidivism and repeat crime in the state.”

The DOC oversees about 90,000 adult and juvenile offenders in institutions or on community supervision and is dedicated to helping offenders be successful in the community. Reading is fundamental to that preparation for success. Without good reading skills it is impossible for offenders to secure the education and vocational skills they need to find jobs and succeed in their communities and lead crime-free lives.

Meeting that important need is a challenge, however. Over seven percent of the nearly 22,000 offenders in Wisconsin adult institutions read below the fourth grade reading level and many offenders do not have any English reading skills at all. Roughly 40 percent of offenders enter the state prison system without a high school diploma.

For more information about the Little Free Library Project, visit www.littlefreelibrary.org.

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