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Durfee State Prison Reaches Educational Milestone

(Springfield) - A former college campus transformed into a state prison facility remains a center for academic achievement.

Since the University of South Dakota/Springfield was closed in 1984 and turned into a prison, more than 1-thousand state inmates have passed the General Educational Development (GED) test at what now is known as the Mike Durfee State Prison (MDSP).

"The first inmate to complete the program passed the tests in June 1985 and the one thousandth came last week," says program director John McNeill. "Some of the inmates pursuing their GED are doing it to prove to themselves or others what they can accomplish, even if they are incarcerated."

The GED test is a battery of five multiple-choice tests that ask questions about subjects covered in high school. The exam covers reading, mathematics, social studies, science and writing skills.

One of the state's 27 GED testing centers is located on the grounds of MDSP.

In state Fiscal Year 2001, nearly one-quarter (237 of 971 or 24%) of the new court commitments to the state prison system did not have a high school diploma or GED. Only sixteen percent of new inmates had taken some college classes or earned a college degree when they entered prison.

Department of Corrections (DOC) policy requires inmates who come into the prison system without a high school diploma or its equivalent to work toward completing the GED while incarcerated.

"For many inmates, earning a GED while in prison is a stepping stone to becoming a productive citizen," says Corrections Secretary Jeff Bloomberg. "We want the inmates to leave prison with a renewed sense of purpose, to succeed when they get back in the community, not fail and come back to us."

According to the South Dakota Department of Education and Cultural Affairs, more than 1,400 people in South Dakota earn their GED each year. In the past year, 244 adult inmates or juveniles in South Dakota DOC programs completed their GED.

Most colleges and employers accept a GED certificate as being equivalent to a high school diploma.