

On July 8, 2011, we fielded a unique pilot program combining intensive therapy, service learning and a youth entrepreneurial focus in sustainable agriculture to work with twelve youth who had been placed out of home, kicked out of school and put on probation. These youth had been headed to lockup, but instead (through this program) reversed their future, ‘flipped their prisons.’ Now these youth are helping to answer the question of what to do with the numerous closed prisons in NC as they are helping to ‘flip’ actual closed prisons. By transforming closed prisons into sustainable farms and educational centers we are reclaiming opportunities for troubled youth and returning veterans, attaining education for our communities and sustaining wellness for our impoverished regions.

Measured over a four-year period, the program has been 92% effective in preventing recidivism with these high-risk youth. Older youth now mentor younger recruits as they attend group therapy, grow food for needy families, build compost bins, tend to their beehives, launch their own businesses, speak at universities and train adults around the state. Coming from rival gangs, our African American, Native American, Caucasian and Latino youth now connect historical trauma of their people to their personal trauma even connecting how their current behavior continues or breaks those cycles. On Dec. 9th, 2013, our youth co-leaders helped explain our plan to ‘flip’ actual prisons to the Department of Public Safety’s Executive Leadership Team (DPS). These two African American and Native American youth who were on probation two years earlier are now leading the state in making a replicable model that will help guide the reuse of ‘field camp prison sites’ around NC. We intend to broaden our impact.

To this end, GrowingChange transforms closed prison sites into sustainable farms and educational centers to reclaim opportunities, attain education, and sustain personal and environmental wellness for troubled youth, returning veterans, and our community. Specifically, we will transform jail cells into aquaponics tanks, guard towers into climbing walls, a prison bus into a traveling museum, the galley into a certified community kitchen, the old ‘hot box’ (isolation chamber) into a recording studio, and more. Combining court diversion, residential internships for veterans, school programs, wellness programs, and 68 acres of trails through our agroforestry land, this first site would serve hundreds annually. Most importantly, we will create the most nationally innovative plan for closed prison reuse that captures the support of a broad coalition. These sites are uniquely positioned to serve our challenged communities as we impact Health, Hunger and Hope.