

# Thomson Federal Prison Rehabilitation Programs Thrive Despite Critical Staffing Shortages

*Thomson Federal Prison is earning praise for its innovative rehabilitation efforts, even as ongoing staffing shortages threaten to jeopardize its progress.*

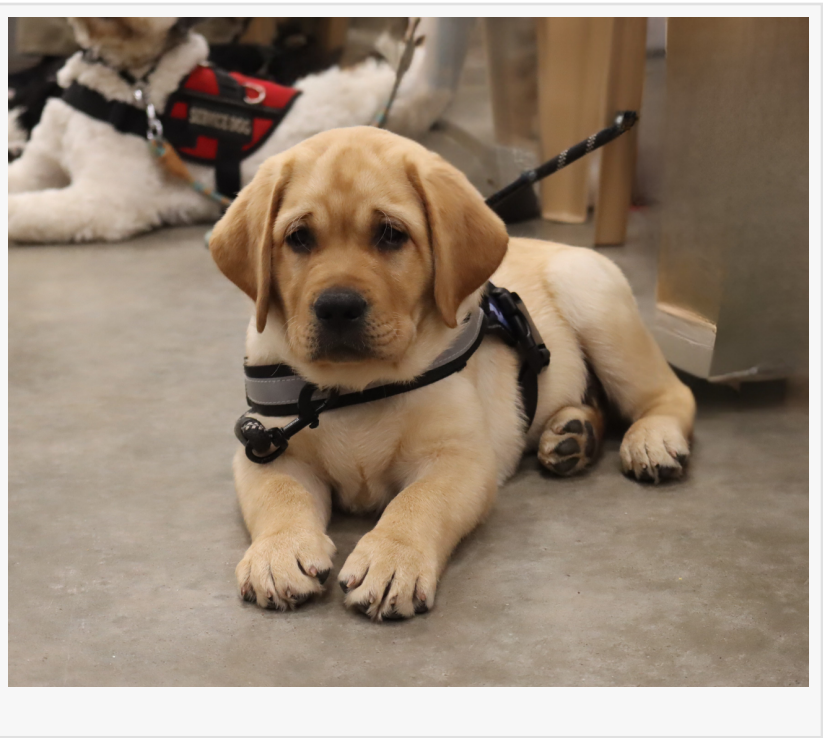
THOMSON, IL, UNITED STATES, September 19, 2025 / EINPresswire.com/ -- There's a growing sense of hope at Thomson Federal Prison. New opportunities are giving incarcerated people second chances and real, job-ready skills. The Pawsitive Paws Dog Training Program, in particular, is bringing change both inside and outside the prison. But just as things are moving forward, a deepening staffing crisis threatens to undo the progress — and local Union leaders warn that only immediate federal action can keep these advances from slipping away.

The Pawsitive Paws Dog Training Program began as a small effort, with just three dogs. It's grown into a cornerstone of rehabilitation, now preparing 13 service dogs for veterans and people with disabilities. Inmates train the dogs, gaining hands-on experience and a sense of purpose that lasts beyond prison walls. Staff have worked tirelessly to make this program a success — and the impact is felt across the community.



"These dogs will transform lives both inside and outside our walls," said Jon Zumkehr, President of AFGE Local 4070. "Our inmates gain valuable skills while providing an essential service to the community."

The achievements don't stop there. Since June 2023, participation in educational programs at Thomson has skyrocketed from 19% to 91% — the highest rate in the Federal Bureau of Prisons. New investments in technology, like virtual reality CDL and welding simulators, mean incarcerated people are leaving Thomson with practical, job-ready skills. These advances are the direct result of staff commitment, creativity, and belief in rehabilitation.



"Our vision is clear — we want Thomson to be fully staffed and a model for rehabilitation," Zumkehr said.

These successes come as the facility faces mounting staffing challenges. Earlier this year, the former Federal Bureau of Prisons eliminated 70 positions at Thomson without consulting local leadership. The impact was immediate: visiting hours were reduced by three days a week, and the facility has averaged nine lockdowns per month in the past quarter due to short staffing. Each day, Thomson must augment an average of 11 staff members just to maintain basic operations.

Healthcare has taken a hit as well. Four psychologists, two nurses, and one pharmacist have resigned because of pay concerns. Over 20 staff members have recently received offers for higher-paying positions with ICE and Border Patrol. The removal of retention incentives at Thomson has only worsened the situation, leading to even more departures.

Senator Grassley has fought for the staff at Thomson and for the Federal Bureau of Prisons, securing an extra \$3 billion for staffing. Yet, none of that funding has reached Thomson. "You can't run a safe, effective prison while understaffed," Zumkehr said. "The Federal Bureau of Prisons must act immediately to address pay and retention, or we risk losing more good people—and the progress we've made."

Director Marshall has been invited to Thomson to witness the impact of these cuts for himself. "It's absolutely crazy — the two officials who made these decisions have never even visited

Thomson and didn't take our unique situation into account," Zumkehr said. "They compared us to other low-security federal prisons, even though we have twice as many inmates." Zumkehr also pointed out that the cuts happened under the previous director.

As Thomson Federal Prison keeps investing in rehabilitation and education, We are calling on Congress and the Bureau to act now. Without urgent attention to staffing and pay, the very programs that offer hope and second chances could disappear.

This week, Zumkehr traveled to Washington, D.C., to meet lawmakers about the ongoing staffing crisis, pay disparities, and the threat of another government shutdown. If a shutdown happens, staff will have to work without pay until it ends. "The last shutdown lasted 35 days — you can only put so much on your credit card, and staff had to choose between their job or child care," Zumkehr said. "If a shutdown happens now, it will devastate recruitment and drive more staff away from Thomson."

Thomson's story is one of hope and hard work and leadership — but it's now at a crossroads. Immediate action from the Federal Bureau of Prisons is needed to protect what's been achieved and ensure a safer, better future for everyone.

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