

# FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**Date:** November 12, 2019  
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## Commercial Driving Class Attracts Both Men and Women at Prison in Rankin County

JACKSON – Biloxi native Susan Y. Shelby received training to become a commercial driver in an unexpected place.

Shelby, 50, was among 32 incarcerated men and women to graduate the Commercial Driver's License (CDL) Permit Preparation class Thursday at the Central Mississippi Correctional Facility (CMCF) in Rankin County. Her completion was timed just right; she was paroled the same day after serving more than two years for a drug conviction in Harrison County.

"It has been a life-changing experience for me," Shelby said of being in the CDL class. "Men aren't the only ones who can drive a truck. This is something I have looked at doing before, but never pursued. Now, I have the opportunity to do it."

The CDL class is designed to allow individuals a chance to take the CDL permit written test within three months of release. It targets Pre-release Program participants within three months of release.

The program aligns with the agency's on-going efforts to provide training for individuals in readiness for their release, Commissioner Pelicia E. Hall said.

"We are committed to helping people return to society with a chance at a successful life," Commissioner Hall said. "This is about making a positive difference in people's lives."

Jacqueline Brackett, CDL coordinator at CMCF, said the CDL class is quite popular. "There are so many benefits because commercial driving is such an open field. A person can drive all sorts of trucks with a CDL," Brackett said. "We are seeing more women show an interest. There is a lot of opportunity for them and men to succeed. I have a waiting list of about 300 people waiting for a place in the classes."

In providing remarks as Thursday's graduation guest speaker, Patrick Etheredge, vice president for workforce development with the non-profit Mississippi

Construction Education Foundation (MCEF), noted a high demand for drivers and that they could make a substantial living wage.

“There is a higher demand for women than ever,” Etheredge said. “They have a discipline, self-control, and qualities sought after that is just different than men.”

Etheredge said employers are willing to consider individuals with criminal records who are motivated to work hard. “People coming out of prison have that extra challenge, but many employers look at them on a case-by-case basis and consider the crime committed and their willingness to work,” Etheredge said. “The need is so (great) that employers are willing to take a chance.”

The MDOC program uses classroom instruction and a driving simulator. Each class has eight participants and lasts a total of 64 hours over eight days. The eight-hour-per-day classes are small to ensure students receive individualized training, can ask questions, and focus on driving concerns, Brackett said.

A CDL class was launched last year at CMCF through a partnership with the MCEF, based on a grant from the Foundation for the Mid South.

The Mississippi Department of Employment Security provided \$154,000 for the current CDL program through the Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act.

Four CDL classes have been completed at CMCF under the latest offering. A total of nine training classes will be held among the three state prisons, including CMCF, Mississippi State Penitentiary (MSP), and South Mississippi Correctional Institution (SMCI) serving 72 students over 18 months.

Commissioner Hall commended her employees for finding resources and building more partnerships to offer more re-entry programs, including the CDL. During a recent discussion with correctional leaders nationally and internationally, she mentioned that Mississippi has a CDL program.

“They were surprised to learn that,” she said. “They did not think that a state like Mississippi, with all the challenges that we have in our correctional system, was on board with all of the programs.”

Deborah Cagle, 26, of Aberdeen is another individual glad the MDOC is a part of the trend. She said she plans to pursue commercial driving after her release from CMCF, where she has been serving a five-year sentence for assault. “I come from a family of truck drivers so I have a personal interest. I am the only female in my family that will be doing it and everyone has been very encouraging,” Cagle said.