

## ***Bridges To Life 2025 Annual Report***

### **Bridges To Life**

Bridges To Life (BTL), a 501(c)(3) organization established in Houston, Texas, in 1998, is a restorative justice program that rehabilitates offenders and brings healing to victims of crime.

**History.** Bridges To Life was founded in 1998 by Houstonian John Sage after the brutal murder of his sister Marilyn in 1993. In the wake of this tragic event, John realized the terrible toll it had taken, not only on his family's lives, but also on those of Marilyn's friends, co-workers, and the community at large. Guided by his faith, John developed the Bridges To Life program to bring crime victims into the prison system to tell their stories and share with offenders the impact of crime on their lives.

Starting with 41 inmate graduates in one Texas prison in 1999, the Bridges To Life curriculum has now been used in prisons and alternative facilities throughout Texas, as well as in 18 other states and 7 countries, graduating a total of 93,404 men and women from its program since inception. The work of BTL promotes the repair, restoration and reintegration of offenders, victims, their families, and the community, enhancing the human dignity of all involved.

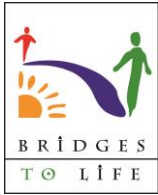
**Mission.** The *mission* of Bridges To Life is to connect communities to prisons to reduce the recidivism rate (particularly that resulting from violent crimes), reduce the number of crime victims, and enhance public safety. The *spiritual mission* of Bridges To Life is to minister to victims and offenders in an effort to show them the transforming power of God's love and forgiveness.

### **2025: A Comeback Year**

The pandemic of 2020 and its aftermath critically impacted our volunteer base. When prisons became inaccessible, our program could only be offered in a Self-Study version that did not require volunteer facilitation. After sitting out for two years, a significant number of our volunteers were reluctant to return when prisons reopened, or had moved on to other opportunities. We have worked hard to rebuild our volunteer base since that time and are delighted to report that a total of 833 volunteers participated in the BTL program in 2025! **Of these, a record-breaking 311 volunteers were newly recruited or returning to BTL from past participation.**

Over 6,000 participants graduated from our program in 2025, bringing the total number of program graduates since inception to 93,404. **With our reinvigorated volunteer base, we look forward to reaching the milestone of 100,000 graduates by the end of 2026!**

**In 2025, Bridges To Life completed 218 projects in 108 prisons and alternative facilities, graduating 6,426 participants from the BTL program.**



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### **Goals and Outcomes**

The Bridges To Life program has two main goals: (1) To reduce recidivism (re-offending) rates of program graduates; and (2) To facilitate the healing process for victims and offenders. By reducing recidivism, BTL also reduces the financial burden of crime on taxpayers and contributes to the safety and well-being of communities.

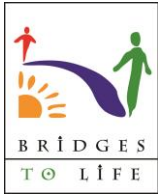
**Offender Impact.** The work of BTL has proven to help released offenders successfully reintegrate into society, as evidenced by recidivism studies conducted each year. With assistance from the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ), Bridges To Life annually tracks a large sample of offenders after they are released to determine how many return to prison (recidivate) within 3 years. **Of the 8,980 Texas BTL graduates released from 2017 to 2021, the recidivism rate was just 11.1%**, compared with the current national rate of 27-30% (*Council of State Governments Justice Center Report, 2024*), and of these, only 1.96% returned to prison for a violent crime!

Additionally, a National Police Foundation study of parolees released in the Dallas area between September 2014 and August 2015, compared the recidivism rates of those who had taken the BTL program during their incarceration with those who had not. The study concluded that *"the BTL program has positive effects on offender rehabilitation. Participation in the BTL program decreased the odds of recidivism by 30% over the course of the 3- to 3-1/2 year follow-up period."* Most significantly, only 1.4% of BTL parolees were reincarcerated for a violent crime, compared to 3.7% of the non-BTL group.

**Community Impact.** The BTL intervention emphasizes the involvement of victims, offenders, and the community in the criminal justice system. All participants in a BTL project develop a sense of connection, or buy-in, with the criminal justice process that is not typically experienced in rehabilitation programs. This focus on the inter-connectedness of participants provides a high-impact and systemic approach to dealing with the harm caused by crime and discourages inmates from committing crimes after they are released. In this way, crime is reduced, communities are made safer, and the financial burden of re-incarceration to taxpayers is avoided.

The most recent recidivism studies conducted with the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) show that 89% of BTL graduates did not return to prison within 3 years after release. After experiencing the transformation offered by the BTL program, they are more likely to demonstrate that they have been rehabilitated by holding jobs, paying taxes, supporting their families, and contributing to their communities, rather than being a financial and emotional liability. **Considering the ripple effect of the transformation experienced by inmates and extended to their families and friends, BTL has positively influenced hundreds of thousands of lives.**

**In 2025, recidivism among BTL graduates reached its lowest rate ever at 11%, compared to the national recidivism rate of 27-30%.**



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**The Peer-Facilitated Model.** BTL's Peer-Facilitated (PF) model makes it possible for the program to be offered in units located in the most remote areas. Requiring only one BTL volunteer for oversight, PF projects in Texas are facilitated by TDCJ inmate Field Ministers and/or inmate Life Coaches. TDCJ Field Ministers have completed a training program in the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary at the Memorial Unit. Peer-facilitation of the BTL program has been well-received by prison system personnel and inmate participants, including 3 facilities in California and one in North Carolina.

**In 2025, BTL graduated 2,012 inmate participants from Peer-Facilitated projects at 41 prisons in Texas as well as 3 out-of-state locations.**

**Volunteer Involvement.** In 2025, BTL volunteers contributed approximately 5,000 more hours of service for the year than in 2024, reflecting both our increased volunteer base and our commitment to utilizing the Volunteer-Facilitated method in most units. As we learned from our temporary conversion to Self-Study during the pandemic, nothing can replace the value of volunteer interaction with program participants!

From its beginning, Bridges To Life was designed to be facilitated by Volunteers who not only guide participants through the BTL curriculum each week, but also encourage, challenge, and support these men and women as they build a platform for real and lasting change. We consider the Volunteer-Facilitated method of program delivery to be the Gold Standard of Bridges To Life!

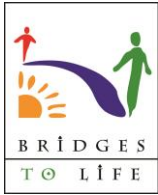
**In 2025, 833 BTL Volunteers contributed 70,964 hours of service, worth \$2,383,681\* in kind!**

*\*Independent Sector Value*

**Drug & Alcohol Treatment Residents.** Through our work with thousands of incarcerated offenders, we have encountered numerous program participants who have struggled with alcohol and drug addiction. From their frequent feedback, we learned that the BTL program has a substantial impact on helping them not only deal with their criminal actions, but also understand what role their addictions have played in their behaviors and choices.

This feedback led us to successfully expand the BTL program into halfway houses, homeless facilities, and rehabilitation centers to reach this population in both Texas and other states. In 2025, the BTL program was conducted at: the Salvation Army Adult Rehabilitation Centers (ARC) in Austin, Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston and San Antonio; the Santa Maria Hostel in Houston; and the Women Helping Ourselves program in Atascocita.

**In 2025, 262 clients in residential treatment programs graduated from BTL at 7 alternative facilities.**



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**Sex Offenders.** While sex offenders in other states have participated in BTL projects since 2010, the Texas prison system did not allow sex offenders to participate in Bridges To Life until more recently. After persistent discussion with TDCJ management and completing a pilot BTL project at a Sex Offender Treatment Facility (SOTF) in 2018, the decision was made to offer the BTL program at SOTFs beginning in 2019.

We continue to notice a high level of gratitude from sex offender inmates for the opportunity to participate in BTL, and sincere engagement in the program as exhibited by their attendance and homework. The positive feedback from these participants is consistent with general population inmates.

**In 2025, 84 sex offenders completed the BTL program in 3 TDCJ Sex Offender Treatment Facilities.**

**Juveniles.** In 2009, in response to interest from the Harris County Juvenile Probation Department, work began on a 12-week version of BTL geared toward juveniles aged 13-17. Through feedback from volunteers, juvenile probation staff, and professionals in the field of youth psychology, the BTL Youth Curriculum was developed into a professionally illustrated graphic novel entitled *Makin' It: A Story of Hope*.

The first BTL Juvenile Program was piloted with 20 youth and 4 volunteers at the Harris County Leadership Academy (HCLA) in Katy, Texas, and since that time, a total of 780 youth have graduated from BTL's juvenile program in youth facilities in Texas and three other states. While BTL's Juvenile Program makes up only a minor portion of our overall activity, the juvenile curriculum materials are also available for purchase on the BTL website for interested groups.



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## **Organizational Capacity**

**BTL Board.** Bridges To Life is led by Founder and Chief Executive Officer, John Sage, and a Board of Directors that provides fiscal and practical direction. The BTL Board is comprised of 9 members with established interests in social services, philanthropy, law, accounting, and business. Several members provide legal and business-related advice and counsel, and all provide the social and spiritual support needed for BTL staff and volunteers to fulfill the mission of the organization. The term of office for board members is three years.

In addition to oversight duties, Board members contribute financially to BTL, assist with fundraising efforts, and provide in-prison volunteer service. In 2025, 100% of Board members contributed financially.

### **2025 BTL BOARD OF DIRECTORS**

**Kirk Blackard**

Author; Licensed Arbitrator

**Edward G. Davis, Jr., CPA** (*Board Chairman*)

Chief Financial Officer, Juniper Capital LP

**Katherine Cabaniss Parsley**

248<sup>th</sup> District Judge, *Retired*

**Will Perry**

Founder & CEO, Worldwide Power Products

**Ershel Redd, Jr.**

CEO, El Paso Electric, *Retired*

**John Sage**

Founder/Chief Executive Officer, Bridges To Life

**Richard C. Seltzer**

Attorney

**George W. “Trey” Strake, III**

Senior Director, Cushman & Wakefield

**Gay Van Osdall**

Community Volunteer

### **2025 BTL ADVISORY BOARD**

**Don Haley**

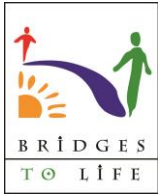
Houston; *Former Board Member*

**Ellen Halbert**

Austin; *Former Board Member*

**Wade Upton**

Houston; *Former Board Member*



## ***Bridges To Life 2025 Annual Report***

**BTL Staff and Growth.** In 2025, Founder and CEO John Sage continued to lead a staff of 17, consisting of the following roles: Chief Operating Officer, Development Director, Program Director, Communications Manager, Outreach Coordinator, and 12 Regional Coordinators.

While the majority of BTL's program activity is conducted in Texas facilities, interest from locations outside the state increases each year. In 2025, BTL projects took place in facilities in the following states and countries beyond Texas: Arizona, California, Florida, Idaho, Indiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Washington; Mexico and Uganda. In the year overall, 88% of program activity took place in Texas, 8% in other states, and 4% in other countries.

Bridges To Life continues to grow and serve more victims of crime and offenders each year. Starting with one project in one Texas prison in 1999, Bridges To Life has now completed 2,991 projects in 238 prisons and alternative facilities since inception, and is always evaluating the potential for expansion.

### **2025 BRIDGES TO LIFE STAFF**

#### ***MANAGEMENT TEAM***

**John Sage**—Founder and Chief Executive Officer

**Jim Buffington**—Chief Operating Officer

**Danielle Sims**—Development Director

**Joel Lightfoot**—Program Director

**Val Padley**—Communications Manager

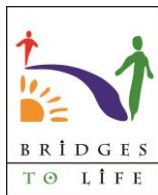
#### ***REGIONAL COORDINATORS***

**Brandi Lyons, Huntsville Area**—Byrd, Huntsville and Wynne Units (*Huntsville*), Wainwright Unit (*Lovelady*)

**Charles Fisher, Dallas/Fort Worth #1**— C. Moore Unit and Cole State Jail (*Bonham*), Bridgeport Correctional (*Bridgeport*), Salvation Army ARC (*Fort Worth*), Allred Unit (*Iowa Park*), Lindsey State Jail (*Jacksboro*)

**Christine Hanks—Outreach Coordinator**—Hamilton Unit (*Bryan*), Luther and Pack Units (*Navasota*), in addition to 8 monitored\* units in Texas, plus out-of-state and out-of-country locations (*see website for complete list*)

*\*Monitored units are those where our program is managed remotely due to distance from populous areas.*



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**Dina Verhaalen, Central Texas**— Salvation Army ARC and Travis County State Jail (*Austin*), Halbert Unit (*Burnet*), Stevenson Unit (*Cuero*), Kyle Correctional (*Kyle*), Coleman Correctional (*Lockhart*)

**Felicia Villarreal, Southeast Texas**—Gist State Jail, LeBlanc and Stiles Units (*Beaumont*), Salvation Army ARC (*Houston*), Jester III and Vance Units (*Richmond*)

**Jeremy Lampier, Dallas/Fort Worth #2**— Hutchins State Jail and Salvation Army ARC (*Dallas*), Judge John C. Creuzot Judicial Treatment Center (*Lancaster*), Boyd Unit (*Teague*), Coffield and Michael Units (*Tennessee Colony*), Estes Unit (*Venus*)

**Juliette Shepherd, Greater Houston #2**—Henley and Hightower Units and Plane State Jail (*Dayton*), Young Medical Facility (*Dickinson*), Lychner Unit and WHO Program-Atascocita (*Humble*)

**Maryann Griffin, Northeast Texas**— Bradshaw Unit and East Texas Treatment Facility (*Henderson*), Telford Unit (*New Boston*), B. Moore Unit (*Overton*), Powledge Unit (*Palestine*), Beto Unit (*Tennessee Colony*)

**Meredith Schwanke, Waco Area**—Bartlett Unit (*Bartlett*), Crain, Hilltop, Hughes, Murray and O'Daniel Units and Woodman State Jail (*Gatesville*), Hobby Unit and Marlin Transfer Facility (*Marlin*)

**Mindy Red, Greater Houston #1**—Clemens Unit (*Brazoria*), Memorial, Ramsey, Stringfellow and Terrell Units (*Rosharon*)

**Stanton Lawrence, Huntsville/East Texas**—Ellis, Estelle and Goree Units (*Huntsville*), Polunsky Unit (*Livingston*), Ferguson Unit (*Midway*), Lewis Unit (*Woodville*)

**Tac Buchanan, Amarillo/Lubbock**—Clements Unit and Randall County Jail (*Amarillo*), Roach Unit (*Childress*), Dalhart Unit (*Dalhart*), Montford Unit (*Lubbock*), Jordan Unit (*Pampa*), Formby Unit and Wheeler State Jail (*Plainview*), Mechler Transfer Unit (*Tulia*)

**Zack Jonas, San Antonio Area**—Garza East and McConnell Units (*Beeville*), Cotulla Unit (*Cotulla*), Briscoe Unit (*Dilley*), Ney and Torres Units (*Hondo*), Connally Unit (*Kenedy*), Dominguez State Jail and Salvation Army ARC (*San Antonio*)



### **Awards and Recognition**

Bridges To Life is a nationally recognized program. The organization and many of its volunteers have received numerous awards, including:

- **John Sage was named the 2024 recipient of the Vincentian Charism Award by the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth**, giving national recognition to individuals whose work demonstrates a commitment to serving others.
- At BTL's 2023 Houston Vision Luncheon, John Sage was presented with a **Certificate of Recognition from the Texas Department of Criminal Justice honoring 25 years of service to the incarcerated**. The award was presented by Timothy Jones, Director of Volunteer Services for TDCJ.
- BTL's Self-Study Program received the Texas Governor's Criminal Justice Volunteer Service Award for "Most Innovative Program of 2020."
- Texas Governor's Criminal Justice Award in 2025, 2024, 2023, 2022, 2021, 2020, 2019, 2017, 2016, 2014, 2013, 2001-2010
- Jim Buffington, 2019 Texas Department of Criminal Justice Pathfinder Award
- John Sage, 2017 Texas Department of Criminal Justice Volunteer of the Year
- 2015 American Correctional Chaplains Association Offender Program of the Year for prison program deemed most creative, effective, and outcome-based in the US
- John Sage, 2011 American Leadership Forum Public Service Award
- 2009 Bert Thompson Pioneer Award for Community and Restorative Justice
- 2008 Samaritan Spirit Award
- Jim Buffington, 2007 Texas Department of Criminal Justice Volunteer of the Year
- 2004 Manhattan Institute Social Entrepreneur Award

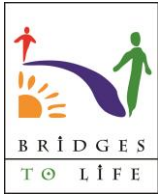


The Bridges To Life program and its staff members have been profiled in both print and video by a variety of media sources, including:

**Articles** – *Canvas Rebel Magazine, Catholic Mobilizing Network, The Cinemaholic, The Cross Timbers Gazette, The Echo, Houston Chronicle, The Journal Gazette, National Police Foundation, The New Yorker, Texas Catholic Herald, Texas Monthly, The Victim's Informer, Voyage Houston*

**Interviews** – *BetterMan Podcast, The Balanced Voice, Crime Stoppers of Houston, Forgiven Felons, Hardie Party of Five, KBTX Bryan, KCBI Radio, Fox News San Antonio, People in the News In North Texas, Shalom World TV, Testimonies of Forgiveness, TBN TV, Watermark Church Seminar, WFAA TV*





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## Community Collaboration

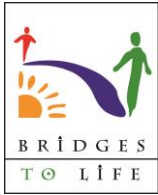
The Bridges To Life program continues to successfully carry out its mission with the cooperation and partnership of numerous community agencies, faith-based organizations, and government entities. Since its beginning, BTL has worked in close collaboration with the Texas Department of Criminal Justice to provide a grassroots solution for reducing recidivism and making communities safer.

Based on the success of this relationship, BTL has multiplied its impact by expanding both in and out of state, currently working with the Departments of Correction in Arizona, California, Florida, Idaho, Indiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Washington to bring the BTL program to prisons in their states. Extending outside the United States, BTL continues to collaborate with prison management at locations in Mexico and Uganda.

Bridges To Life works closely with the Harris County Community Supervision and Corrections Department to implement projects at the Santa Maria Hostel, a women's residential treatment facility in Houston. Additionally, BTL partners with Angela House and the Santa Maria Hostel in Houston, The Salvation Army Adult Rehabilitation Centers in Austin, Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston and San Antonio; and the John C. Creuzot Judicial Treatment Center in Lancaster.

BTL's education collaboration includes **Southern Methodist University (SMU) Perkins School of Theology**, which offers a Restorative Justice course requiring participation as a BTL volunteer at the Dallas Salvation Army ARC facility. Additionally, students in SMU's Embrey Human Rights Program may volunteer for BTL to fulfill their community service requirement, and restorative justice students in the SMU Dispute and Conflict Management Master's Program can participate as a volunteer for BTL as an approved internship. BTL has also partnered with **The University of Texas, Dallas Baptist University, Paul Quinn College** in Dallas, **Indiana Wesleyan University**, and **Penn State University** for their Criminal Justice program students to participate with BTL as volunteers.

BTL is a steady source of referrals for The WorkFaith Connection, SER—Jobs for Progress, Tarrant County Reentry Coalition, One CommunityUSA, One Man's Treasure, Prison Entrepreneurship Program (PEP), Unlocking DOORS, and CrossWalk Center, among many others. These re-entry partnerships allow BTL to expand resources offered to participants, providing them with housing, clothing, education opportunities, job training, and employment-related services that will aid them in successfully reintegrating into their communities.



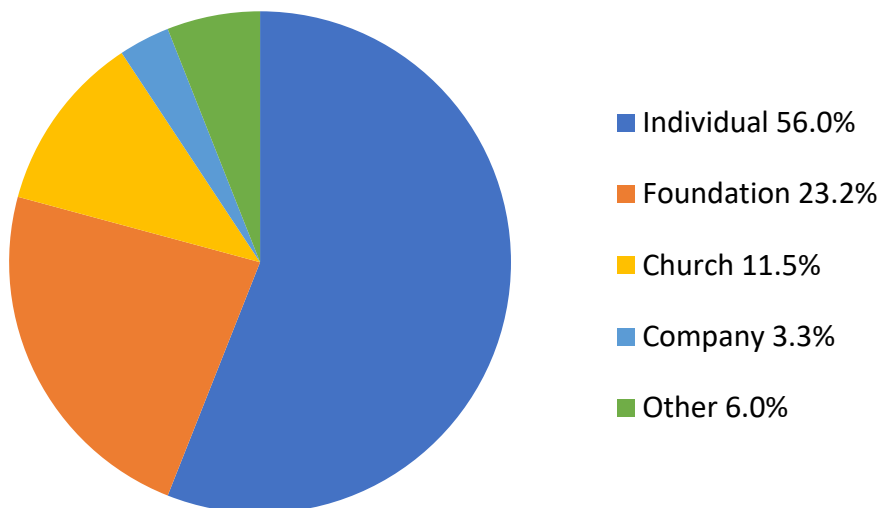
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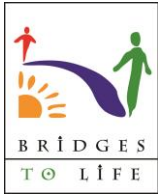
## Program Value and Fiscal Responsibility

### *How Is BTL Funded?*

For 27 years, Bridges To Life has relied on the generous support of individuals, foundations, churches and faith-based organizations, and corporations that see the value in our work. **In 2025, Bridges To Life received \$1,806,914 in cash donations and other revenue.** For the second time in our history, donations from Individuals in 2025 totaled over \$1,000,000!

### 2025 Revenue (Cash Basis)



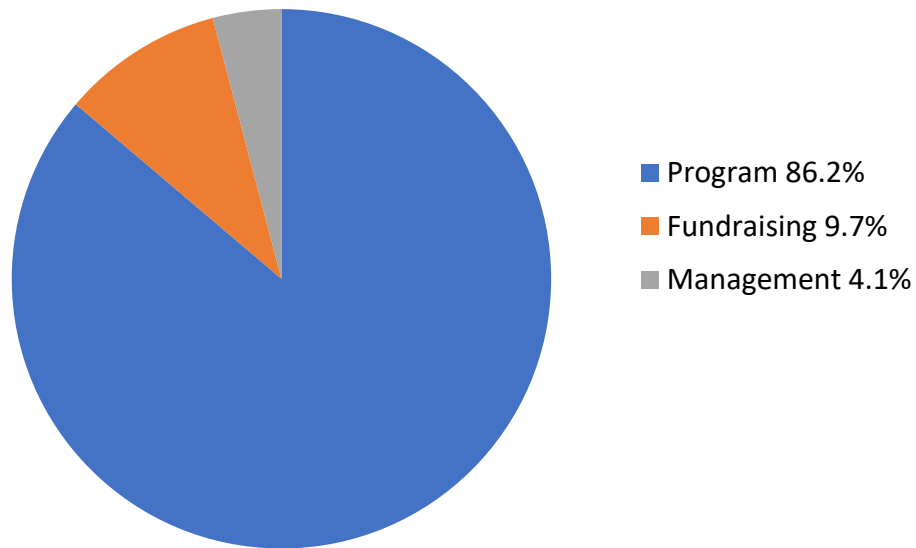


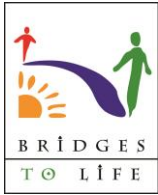
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**How Is Funding Used?**

Bridges To Life is fiscally responsible. **Cash expenses in 2025 totaled \$1,806.659**, of which 86 cents of every dollar was spent on program services. BTL is a Better Business Bureau Accredited Charity and a GuideStar Platinum Level Participant. The agency's IRS 990 and audited financials can be found on the GuideStar profile or by contacting our office.

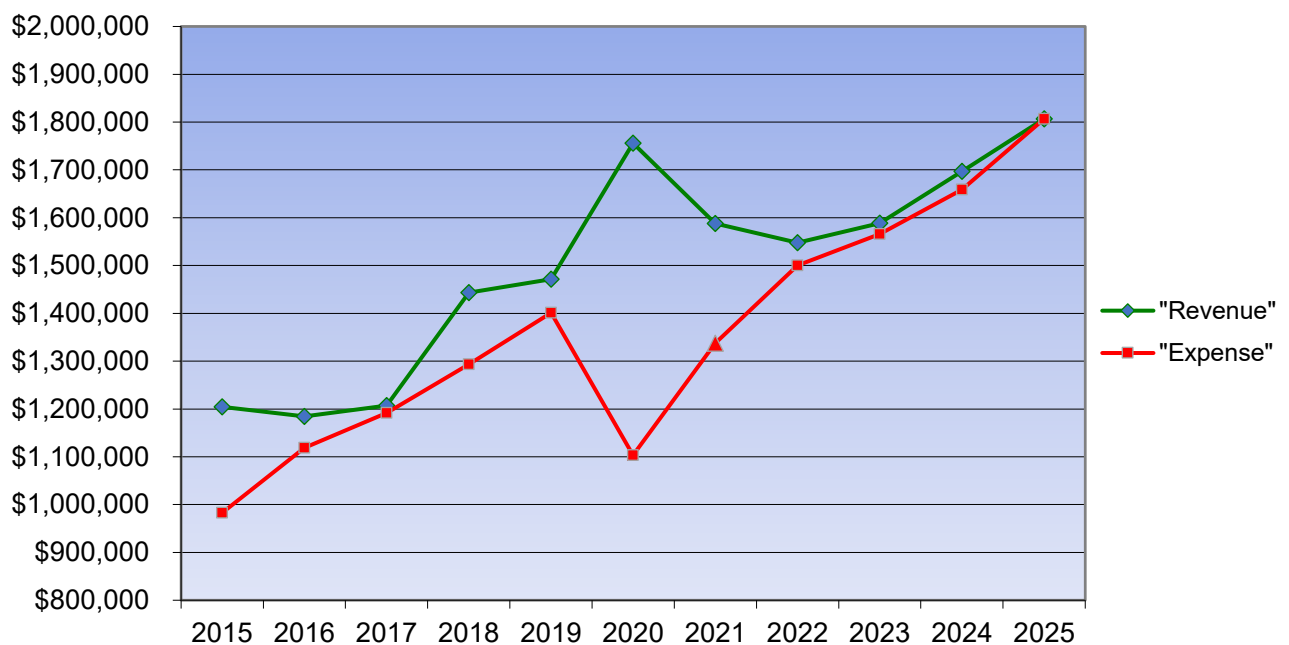
**2025 Expenses (Cash Basis)**



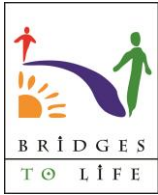


## Annual Budget History\*

Revenue covered expenses in 2025, making it possible to fully fund our programs and operations throughout the year without exceeding available resources. This reflects not only our commitment to frugal spending, but the consistent support of our generous donor base.

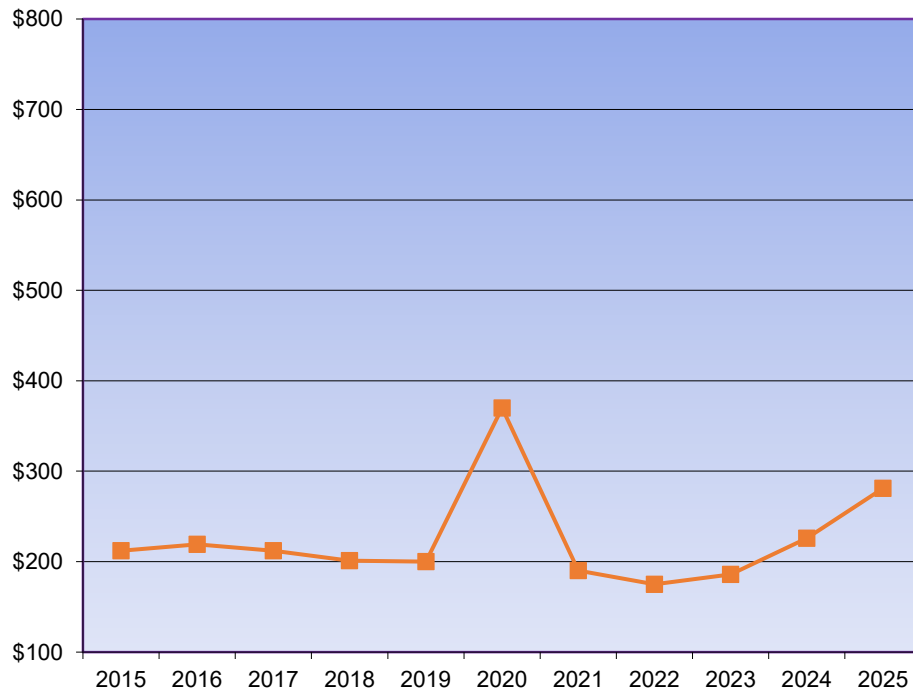


*\*Decreased expenses in 2020-21 reflects prison closures due to the Covid-19 pandemic.*

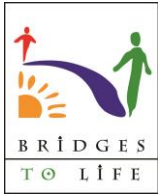


## Cost Per Graduate\*

While Texas spends \$121,600 to incarcerate a first-time or repeat offender in Texas over the average sentence, **the cost of the BTL program in 2025 was just \$281 per graduate!** This means that if even 5% of our 6,426 graduates in 2025 do not return to prison, which is well substantiated, the benefit to Texas taxpayers would equate to a savings of over \$39,000,000 in reincarceration costs, not to mention significant other short-term and long-term costs to society.

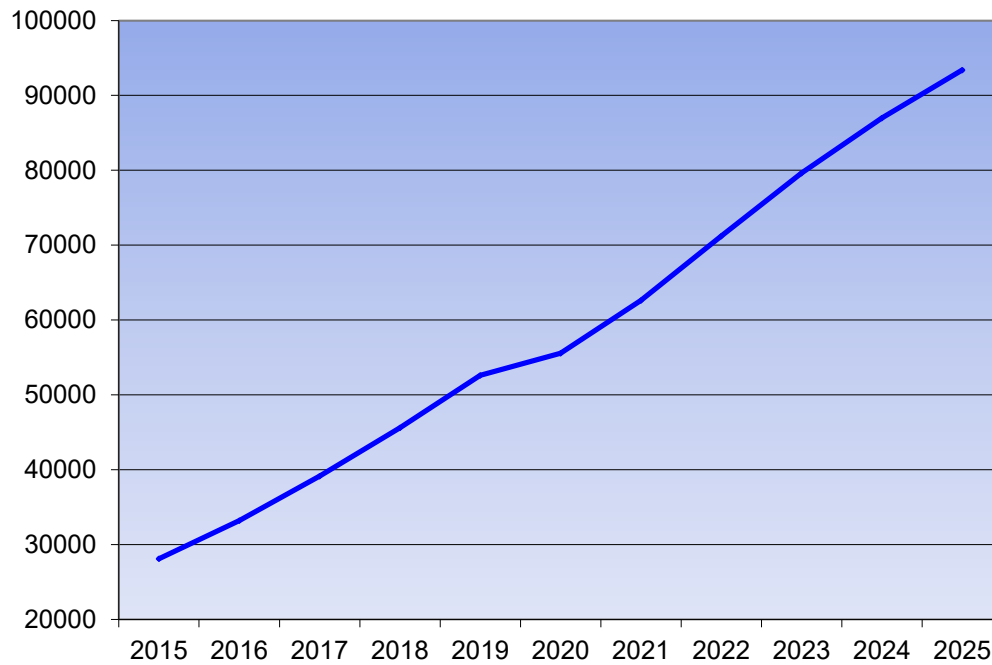


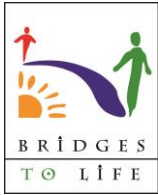
*\*Increased cost per graduate in 2020 reflects prison closures due to the Covid-19 pandemic.*



## Cumulative Total of BTL Graduates

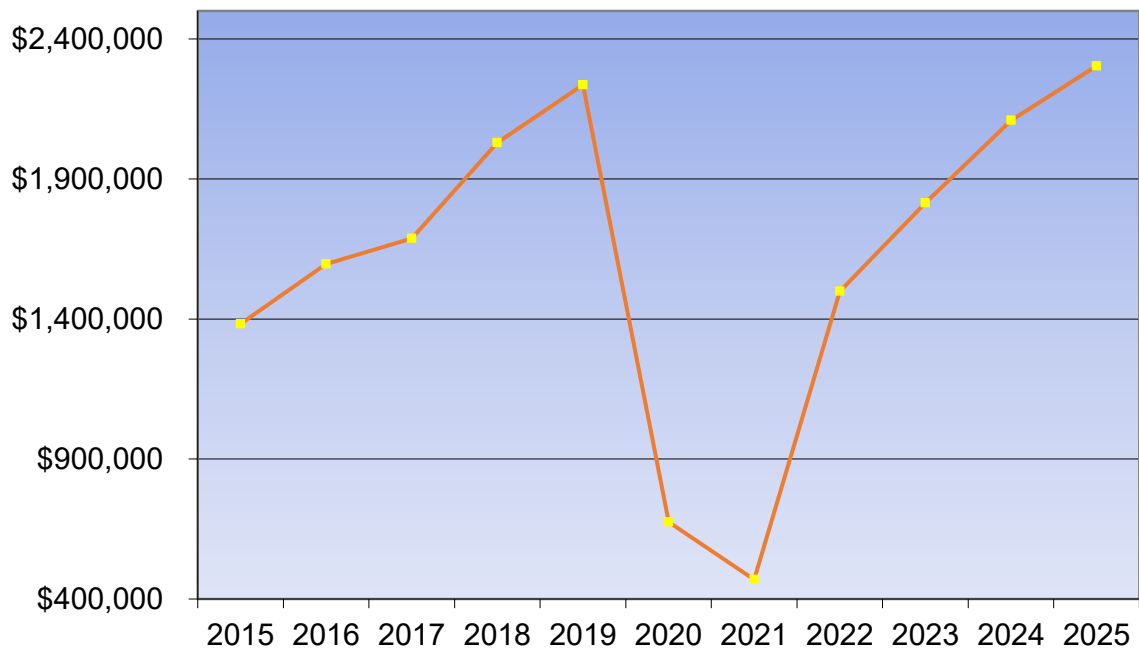
With the addition of our 6,426 graduates in 2025, **BTL has now reached a total of 93,404 graduates from 238 prison and alternative facilities since inception**, and we are well on our way to the 100,000 graduates mark!





## **In-Kind Value of Volunteer Hours\***

As can be seen in the chart below, we have worked hard to rebuild our volunteer base since 2020. **In 2025, BTL volunteers contributed 70,964 hours of service valued at \$2,303,681 in kind\*\*!**



*\*Decreased volunteer hours in 2020-21 reflect prison closures due to the Covid-19 pandemic.*

*\*\*The in-kind value of volunteer hours is determined by the Independent Sector organization each year ([www.independentsector.org](http://www.independentsector.org)).*