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CORRECTIONS

Newsletter of the New Jersey Department of Corrections

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Larry Simms speaks about his reentry process.

ONWARD AND UPWARD

One Man's Story on Starting Over

BY LIZ VELEZ

Barber shops are sacred institutions. There's no hierarchy or pretense but an informal equitable meeting ground allowing for the free expression of thoughts, ideas, and most importantly, camaraderie. Yes, there's an added benefit of a great cut, but for African American communities, barber shops are a sanctuary where one can indeed be vulnerable, leading to a breeding ground of fellowship and brotherhood.

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In May, then-Commissioner Hicks toured Mid-State Correctional Facility, which houses the state's first clinically driven Substance Use Disorder treatment program for moderate to severe alcohol and/or drug addiction issues. As part of the tour, the former Commissioner met with staff and inmates to informally survey the populations on what's working, what can improve, and how the Department can be of further support, especially under the lens of COVID-19. The tour included visiting dormitories, medical services, officer dining rooms, and the inmate barber shop, where the Commissioner had one-on-one time with the resident barber, Mr. Larry Simms.

Sitting across from one another in barber chairs, under the glow of fluorescent lights, with the opportunity to share absolutely anything he wanted with the Commissioner, Mr. Simms opted to share his excitement for his upcoming release, and shock regarding how comprehensive his reentry process was. Mr. Simms was incarcerated for the ninth time, and he vowed it would be his last, citing his latest discharge process as a game-changer.

The Department prides itself on its comprehensive reentry process. Reentry starts at intake with a risk assessment offering supportive behavioral, psycho-educational, medical and vocational programming, and educational courses based on personalized needs. These support services not only help build a

pool of job-ready candidates prepared to enter the workforce once released but also support recidivism rates. During Mr. Simms' three year incarceration, he took advantage of vocational programs earning a Flagging Certification, dabbled in forklift driving, and worked in the barbershop to gain valuable skills to compete in the evolving job market.

Mr. Simms shared a little about his discharge process, which he notes started about 30 days before his release. His process included meeting the Social Services teams who assisted with obtaining his state Motor Vehicle Commission identification card, applying for affordable healthcare, general assistance, connecting him with wrap-around services in the community, and setting him up with a Peer Navigator.

The Peer Navigator program is a unique offering by the NJDOC, pairing those on a recovery journey with a support specialist that understands the challenges they'll face once released, having experienced a similar trajectory. The specialist provides support in the recovery process, educates the released on services available in the community, and provides transportation to appointments, among other benefits. More than 1,300 individuals received Peer Navigator services, with the program demonstrating overdose reductions and increased adherence to treatment and recovery.

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Mr. Simms described his reentry process as "perfection," noting he was connected with a debit card, traditional housing, and duplicate documentation essential for employment such as a birth certificate and social security card. When asked what his expectation of the reentry process was, Mr. Simms noted, "I didn't think too highly or didn't know what to expect. Once I saw how much was offered, I was blown away by it. I've been in prison a few times and never

had this type of support. I feel confident that this time will be different."

Mr. Simms has since left our facility, moving on to transitional housing, where he'll continue his treatment plan, a program he obtained with the support of the NJDOC. The Department wishes him luck on his journey.

WELCOME STATE CORRECTIONAL POLICE OFFICERS, CLASS 250

On June 7, the New Jersey Department of Corrections held a graduation ceremony at the Trenton War Memorial for 57 trainees who have successfully completed more than 17 weeks of training with the State Basic Course for Correctional Police Officers, Class 250. The class included five veterans representing the Marines and Army. Almost half of the class come from families with a law enforcement background. Since Governor Murphy took office in January 2018, a total of 969 trainees have graduated.



Class 250 graduates anxiously awaiting their graduation ceremony.



Class 250 graduates participate in the oath of office.





NJDOC staff participate in the annual New Jersey Special Olympics Torch Run for their 22nd year.

SPECIAL OLYMPICS TORCH RUN

BY CHRIS CARDEN

The NJDOC once again helped light the way in its support of Special Olympics New Jersey Summer Games. Approximately 20 custody staff from five facilities and the Correctional Staff Training Academy participated in the annual Law Enforcement Torch Run (LETR) to kick off the events.

Each year, thousands of officers trade their uniforms for running apparel on one of 26 separate routes to help carry the “Flame of Hope” to the Special Olympics New Jersey Summer Games to light the cauldron at the Opening Ceremony.

“We run the torch to show what law enforcement does for our Special Olympics athletes in New Jersey,” said NJDOC Retired Lt. Beth Westrich, who has participated in the torch run for 22 of the 25 years the Department has been affiliated with the games. “We raise funds so that the athletes can



NJDOC Correctional Police Officers show their support for the NJ Special Olympics.



NJDOC Correctional Police Officers were on hand to cheer on participants.

compete at no cost to themselves or their families.”

This year PBA Local 105 donated \$3,000 to Special Olympics NJ. Through year-round fundraising events, the LETR has raised more than \$3 million annually.

In addition to participating in the run, NJDOC officers volunteered at athletic competitions during the Summer Games.

This year marks the return of the games after almost a two year hiatus thanks in part to COVID-19 restrictions.

HERO SPOTLIGHT

Senior Correctional Police Officer Chad Ammerman in a true NJDOC Hero. Officer Ammerman saved an elderly man who was floating in open waters for a total of three hours after his boat sank off of the Jersey Shore. He quickly searched for a flotation device and swam into the water where he used a cooler for the victim to cling onto as he pulled him 40 yards back to the coast before a boat came along to help.



NJ PBA Local 105 presents Senior Correctional Police Officer Chad Ammerman with an award for his act of bravery.



Students gather for their classroom lesson.

HIGHER LEARNING

The NJDOC Offers Trauma-Informed Training to Its Teaching Staff

BY LAUREN LAGGY

Research shows traumatic experiences can have a negative impact on learning, behaviors, and relationship building. Sadly, trauma is often the harsh reality for the incarcerated long before their confinement in a correctional facility. These traumas oftentimes manifest in educational settings either by causing disruption in an atmosphere intended to assist in rehabilitation or by impairing a person's cognitive abilities. Common trigger responses to trauma are usually displayed as irritability, aggressiveness, anger, and anxiety, which can lead to physical and verbal abuse.

To further support a positive and safe learning environment where everyone can thrive, the NJDOC's Director of Education, Jecrois Jean-Baptiste, partnered with educators at Rutgers University to launch a progressive Trauma-Informed Training program for NJDOC Staff.

The program, aimed at educating staff on the impact that trauma has on the incarcerated population, assists in identifying mental health triggers in the classroom that may affect the



students ability to learn and make appropriate recommendations for mental health support to clinicians. To mitigate in-class stressors the students may face, staff will work in concert with the child study team to enhance the implementation of trauma-informed care within the classroom setting.

Director Jean-Baptiste introduced the idea of trauma-informed training for the incarcerated four years ago. In a conversation with Rutgers University, he discovered that many students were getting lost in the population because some level of trauma was affecting their learning. He found that teachers were not properly equipped with the knowledge on how to handle trauma triggers.

“It is important that we have a curriculum that is accessible to the incarcerated population so they can have a proper educational experience which will help break the cycle of violence and contribute to their successful reintegration into society,” stated Director Jean-Baptiste.

The staff training is a five-day virtual program totaling 12 hours that covers topics such as *An Introduction to Trauma* and the *Effects of Trauma on Development and Learning*. So far, 40 staff are

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trauma trained and a combined 80 students at Garden State Youth Correctional Facility and William H. Fauver Youth Correctional Facility have benefited from trauma-based classroom instruction.

“We chose these two facilities to start with training because they contain a youth population that is 22 years old and younger. The youth are most vulnerable and there are benefits to addressing traumas early on in the trauma life-cycle,” continued Director Jean-Baptiste.

Trained educators are prepared to make better assumptions on how to tailor their curriculum for students' needs. Clinical staff and educators assist the student in understanding the source of their trauma. The success of the trauma-informed training program is tracked through student surveys, reduced out-of-classroom discipline, and child study team meetings. Director Jean-Baptiste looks forward to expanding the program to other facilities within the near future.





TOMÉ NAMED ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER OF WOMEN'S SERVICES

BY LIZ VELEZ

The Department is crafting a thoughtful path forward to bring about systemic change at Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women (EMCFW). To further amplify the women's voices in the state's correctional system, the Department hired former Director of Reentry and Accreditation at the New Jersey Association on Correction, Helena Tomé, to the newly created role of Assistant Commissioner of Women's Services.

Ms. Tomé's correctional experience includes the development of programmatic support addressing the needs of the incarcerated and ensuring compliance with the Prison Rape Elimination Act. She also has held certifications in crisis intervention and sexual assault advocacy, lending to an empathetic and supportive approach in her delivery, uniquely positioning her as an advocate for the women of Edna with the ability to identify appropriate solutions to influence cultural change.

"To me, assisting the women in healing emotionally, feeling safe and fostering positive relationships is of the utmost importance," said Assistant Commissioner Tomé. "I look forward to working with and



Helena Tomé is the newly appointed Assistant Commissioner of Women's Services.

supporting the numerous remarkable staff who have chosen this noble profession and come to work each day ready to fulfill our mission with integrity. No challenge has more value and purpose than that."

In her new role, Ms. Tomé will serve as a liaison to the female population and external stakeholders while also creating and assisting with implementing safety and security innovations, including recommendations proposed by the Department of Justice.