

INSIDE CORRECTIONS

Newsletter of the New Jersey Department of Corrections

CELEBRATING DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION



By Patrick Lombardi

There's a harmonious bond between accepting and embracing persons of differing backgrounds. Its guiding principles are woven into the social tapestry of our nation, fostering integrity, persistence and perseverance through all walks of life.

As one of the largest and most diverse agencies in the State, the New Jersey Department of Corrections (NJDOC) established an office to champion these values and to support all those who work and volunteer within its correctional facilities.

The Office of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI) was introduced into the NJDOC in 2020. Operating within the

Division of Diversity & Legal Affairs, the office serves all staff members within the Department.

"The basic sense of it," said Assistant Commissioner Melinda Haley, Esq., "is to make sure that staff feel valued and that our Department represents every segment of society. We want to ensure that everyone in Corrections feels like they belong and feels like they're part of a team."

DEI exists to support all communities. While the office seeks to increase the representation of historically marginalized communities, they acknowledge that individuals who do not meet that criteria also require representation, recognition and attention.

"This office strives to continue the mission that the Commissioner has set forth as far as diversity, equity and inclusion," said Clarissa Wheat, who was hired as the Department's first DEI Coordinator in 2023. "We are not just looking at ethnicity when we are talking about diversity, equity and inclusion. We are looking at the collective of employees as a whole. We want to celebrate all groups and identities and educate others

who may not be a part of that particular group."

AC Haley acknowledged that the office's goals are on-going and ever-changing. DEI has a number of facets, yet the overarching objective is to ensure that *every* person is supported and recognized regardless of the differences that exists among us.

"You have the 'equity' side, which is more so what I, with the assistance of other executive staff, attempt to focus on, on a higher level," said AC Haley. "And that includes what we accomplish through committees, like the Helping Improve Recruitment Equity (HIRE) committee. Through that committee, we look at policies and the makeup of specialized units to find opportunities where we may be able to balance representation.

"The 'inclusion' part of DEI," AC Haley continued, "is where we do initiatives like Zero Discrimination Day and the various summits, which celebrate our differences and make staff feel included. For the most part, the DEI Council was established to assist in that role."

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Check out some events put on by the Division of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion this year

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See the photo page dedicated to officers who participated in this national program

3. Bill passed on Shift Overlap

Learn about the recent bill passed that will bring back shift overlap



DEI Cont.

The Division of Diversity & Legal Affairs has one full-time staff member, who works solely on the facilitation of DEI initiatives. In order to advance the office's mission, AC Haley and her staff established a DEI Council to be the bridge between the office and each of the NJDOC's correctional facilities.

AC Haley and Wheat maintained that they desire for the DEI office to be a resource for managerial staff. The office can provide a benefit to frontline staff members by assisting managers in the dissemination of messages, directives and other media.

"DEI is a principle," explained AC Haley. "It is meant to be in the fabric of decisions that are made. My office can be at the table when you are deciding to create a policy or a directive that could potentially impact one area more than another. We're there to help you brainstorm possible perceived inequities that may come out of such decisions and deal with ways that we can minimize potential, indirect harm to staff. Departmental leadership sends information to us — maybe about employment positions or other goals and concerns — and we can look at it to see what barriers exist. For example, the Department wants to increase recruitment of females and also wants to get more women into SID. The HIRE committee might first investigate if there are any barriers we can control that can increase that representation."

Wheat explained that the DEI office is happy to hear from staff members. She stated that that open dialogue creates diverse pipelines for all employees.

"We want that inclusive voice," she said. "We acknowledged the diversity we have within the NJDOC and want to make sure that employees here feel included in their spaces and are helping to move the needle toward equity for all."

Last year, AC Haley and her staff helped to organize the Black Leadership Summit, the Women's "Evolution into Leadership" Summit, Zero Discrimination Day, the Men's Wellness Summit and the LGBTQIA+ "Courageous Conversation" Forum.

"Now that Clarissa has come aboard, we're able to expand those efforts and host added statewide events to highlight and celebrate even more individuals and their diversity," said Haley. "This could include anything from virtual lunch-and-learns to in-person summits."

This office excels beyond events and policies, encouraging staff members to take a proactive step toward engaging with each other. To help facilitate fellowship Department-wide, the office oversees and assists in organizing Employee Resource Groups (ERGs). Currently, the DEI office has two ERGs under its umbrella—the LGBTQ Law Enforcement Liaisons and the Military Services Liaison Committee—but the office invites staff members to establish more groups in order to reach wider audiences.

"We would like to create a process where employees are encouraged to create their own ERGs, guided by us," said AC Haley. "These are communities in which people of related circumstances and experiences can convene and be that line of support, that safe space for each other. They have significant positive impacts at the local levels, where they're needed most. Custody staff members especially take pride in these opportunities, and we want to provide an outlet for them to continue more regular constructive discussions."

Establishing more ERGs throughout the Department would have resounding effects on morale and would open up avenues of communication at all levels.

The Division of Diversity & Legal Affairs recognizes that this is a continuous journey, with periods of success intermingled with diligent discussions and initiatives to address enduring challenges. AC Haley and her seasoned staff are committed to cultivating environments of inclusivity and mutual respect throughout the agency, and they are prepared to open new horizons in order to benefit the NJDOC and the State as a whole.

"My biggest concern is that during my tenure, the office is a check-the-box action. That would be more harmful for the Department than not having a DEI office at all," AC Haley expressed. "I want this office to have an impact that shifts the culture of the NJDOC. That is why we push the bounds with our initiatives. We want to encourage healthy, respectful conversations about difficult topics. Only then do you invoke real change."



Black History Month



By Chris Carden

Staff and leadership from across the New Jersey Department of Corrections (NJDOC) convened on February 22 for the second Annual Black Leadership Summit, a dynamic tribute to black excellence, history and mentorship.

Under the guidance of Assistant Commissioner Melinda Haley, Esq., the Office of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion orchestrated this pivotal event, underscoring the transformative importance of representation. Attendees immersed themselves in one of two enlightening breakout sessions, which allowed them to delve into the influential community advocacy of Black sororities and fraternities, affectionately known as “The Divine Nine,” or participate in an engaging Black history trivia game.

After an engaging and interactive drum circle invoked traditional call and response musicality, a compelling panel discussion featuring esteemed Black Department leaders: Assistant Commissioner Christopher Holmes; Garden State Correctional Facility Administrator Eleazar Spratley; Dr. Pamela Anderson, Nurse Practitioner; and Human Resource Manager Marie Mills-Rogers ignited valuable dialogue and inspiration.

This gathering exemplified our steadfast commitment to cultivating an inclusive environment and acknowledging diversity's indispensable role in our organizational triumphs. As we honor the profound legacy of Black history, we reassert our pledge to champion equity, empowerment and advocacy within our community.

For further insights into the Office of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion, please reach out to DOC-Diversity@doc.nj.gov. The NJDOC proudly celebrates the achievements and contributions of Black Americans within our Department and society at large. Together, let us continue to grow, thrive and evolve!



Women's Empowerment

By Mackenzie Fitchett

Women across the New Jersey Department of Corrections (NJDOC) came together in March for the Cultivating Your Empowerment symposium, a collaborative event put on by the Division of Diversity & Legal Affairs and the Division of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion, in honor of Women's History Month. The event took place at the Burlington County Fire Academy and welcomed over 75 women from the Department. Each of the women were invited to wear their "rock our empowerment" outfits, which included T-shirts with inspirational quotes about powerful women and lots of pink!

The day opened with remarks from Commissioner Victoria L. Kuhn, Esq.; Deputy Commissioner Erin Nardelli; and Assistant Commissioner of Division of Diversity & Legal Affairs, Melinda Haley, Esq. Also returning this year was the incredible statement piece of a dress covered in photos of powerful and influential women from across the world and the department.



The group of women then broke out into self-help seminars, including financial planning, work-life balance, cultivating inner peace and becoming more confident. These sessions had attendees discuss how to keep work from overtaking their personal life and offered instruction breathing exercises and yoga poses.

Attendees also enjoyed a round of "19th Amendment Trivia" before an enlightening panel discussion titled "My Sisters' Keeper," with four influential members of the Department: Deputy Commissioner Erin Nardelli; Lieutenant Teresa Montero; Program Support Specialist Mary-Ann Conte, MSW, LCADC; and Acting Director of the Office of Victim and Trauma Services Dr. Dawn McRae. The women discussed sisterhoods created through the Department and who they looked up to throughout their careers.

Zero Discrimination Day

In March, the Department held their second annual Zero Discrimination Day (ZDD) where each facility, including Central Office Headquarters, competed to win the trophy for Best ZDD event! This year's winner was South Woods State Prison with their theme of "Come one- come all- let's celebrate yall."

Zero Discrimination Day originated as an annual day celebration created by the United Nations and other international organizations to promote equality. The Department, through the hard work of the Office of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion, now uses this as a day of inclusion and equality for employees across the Department.

Each facility plans their own ZDD event and bring in their own idea of inclusivity through food, lessons on a new language, group activities and more.

The winner, South Woods State Prison, built a wooden butterfly for a "cultural display" and patrons were able to pick a hand, or man or woman, of their color and write their name to decorate it. The Food Service department supplied a menu that incorporated many delicacies from around the world and the Education department put together the information and assisted with the tasks that went along with organizing the event.

"All in all, it was a huge group effort to say the least," said Stephanie D'Augustine, the event coordinator. "We used the day to acknowledge the right of everyone to live a full and productive life - and live it with dignity."

Some awards given included the "Using Emojis for Good" award to Bayside State Prison, the "Each One Teach One" award to Mid-State Correctional Facility, the "180 Degree award" to New Jersey State Prison, and the "Commitment to the Future" award to Northern State Prison. Other honorable mentions include Adult Diagnostic and Treatment Center and Edna Mahan Correctional Facility.

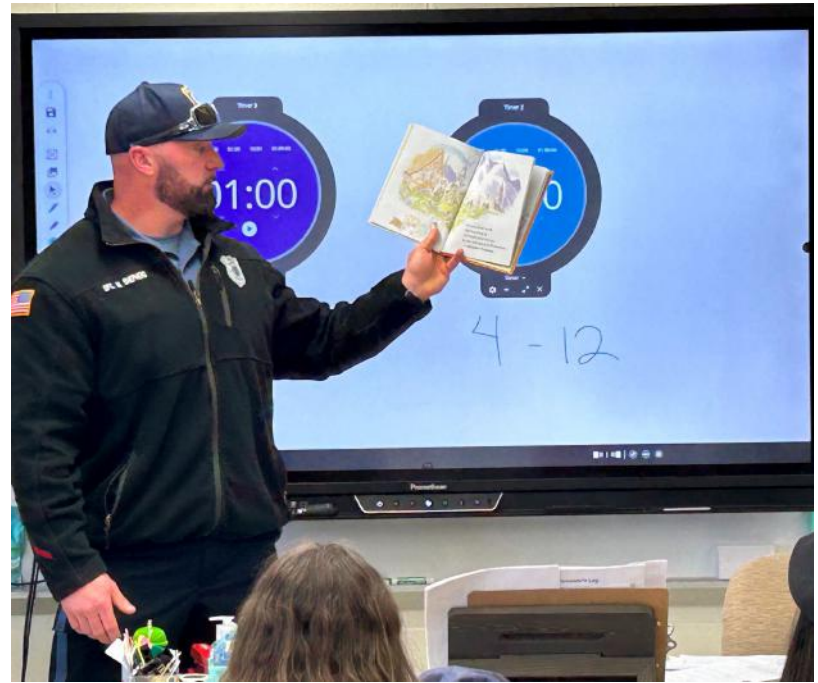


READING ACROSS NEW JERSEY!

By Mackenzie Fitchett

Every year on March 2, the nation celebrates Dr. Seuss' birthday and dedicates the month to reading. This year, during Read Across America, 16 officers were invited to read at local schools that share the same community as their facilities. This opportunity allowed the officers to interact with their youngest community members.

Thank you to all of the officers who participated: Lieutenant J. Whittaker, Senior Correctional Police Officer (SCPO) S. Gaskin, SCPO J. Randall, SCPO L. Green, SCPO M. Sheppard, SCPO T. Morey, SCPO D. Garrett, SCPO D. Kraweic, SCPO K. Rowan, SCPO J. Noll, OFC J. Parks, OFC L. Ruiz, OFC A. Brown, SCPO A. Aucott, SCPO N. Brooks and SCPO D. Cruz.



DEPARTMENT REINTRODUCES SHIFT OVERLAP

By Mackenzie Fitchett

Starting on May 1, a new law will go into action that will allow correctional police officers, sergeants and lieutenants time-and-a-half pay for a 10-minute shift overlap debriefing to increase communication between officers during shift change.

“Our officers, and the Department as a whole, are excited to have this signed into law,” said Director Patrick Miller, Division of Operations. “At one time, the Department had shift overlap procedures and this bill allows us to maintain those procedures.”



“Communication improves effectiveness across board,” Miller continued. “As it allows us all to be on the same page, delivering the same message. The officers should also be abreast on the current events of the facility in the event that there are specific threats or trends.”

At the end of last year, a Department-supported bill was signed by Governor Phil Murphy that appropriated \$13 million for the reinstatement of a 10-minute shift overlap for all NJDOC facilities. This bill was a culmination of a year’s worth of hard work from local unions and the Department who had a goal of creating more avenues of communication. It also came as a solution to the communication needs of the Department, which became apparent after receiving the results of the “Your Voice Counts” employee engagement and satisfaction survey that launched last year.

“The survey was launched, people spoke up, and we were listening,” said Director Miller. “Enhancing communication will also allow us to enhance officer safety, security and transparency through the passing of critical information from one shift of officers to the next.”

During debriefing, officers will proceed to a line-up where roll call will be conducted and uniforms are inspected. This will allow for a seamless flow of relevant information from one shift to the next. Officers on the incoming shift will be provided administrative directives, policy and procedure revisions, and important reports from the previous shift.

“For many decades, lineup is something that has been used all over the country by many law enforcement agencies at local, state and federal levels as a tool to exchange information with staff,” said Division of Regional Major Brian Labonne. “Lineup is a way to have a better-prepared, and more-informed workforce. I believe that when staff are informed, that they become more interested, or vested, overall in what is going on in our facilities, and that can only be helpful in ensuring that the Department’s goals are being met.”

'BE NOT AFRAID'

Earlier this year, the Music Theory program at Garden State Correctional Facility (GSCF) was the highlight of a documentary released by the NJDOC. The documentary *Be Not Afraid* debuted at the Garden State Film Festival and received the "Broader Vision" award, which is given to films whose message serves the public good. This documentary showed the group of incarcerated men who learn music proficiency along with lessons in persistence and teamwork. This program has been led by Dante Coluccio for the last 26 years and has made a difference in the lives of hundreds of incarcerated individuals. Check out the documentary here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WN6b8OF59Uk&t=18s>.

Check out this recent interview with both Coluccio and the director of the documentary and Deputy Director of the Public Information Office Chris Carden.

How did you get involved with this program?

Dante Coluccio: I had been a touring musician and started to get tired of traveling after all those years, so when this opportunity came about, I figured I would take it on and see what happened. I wanted to give other people the chance to experience all the opportunities that I had throughout my life. I came in to the program in 1998 when there was only a piano and a few workbooks. So I found out what the guys were interested in and started to build the music program that I thought would offer students the most success.

What does this program provide to the incarcerated population?

Dante: The students not only learn how to play different instruments but they are also taught music theory. This allows them to not just play what I teach them to play, but they are able to put theory on their instrument. This program is also not just about learning an instrument, but it teaches compromise, how to weigh each other's opinions in a constructive way and come up with the best solution. Teamwork is a life skill that they can take home with them.

Why is this program important to you?

Dante: After 26 years, it does not get old. Anyone who would really want to know would have to watch the thrill of people learning and realizing they can do something like learn how to play an instrument. For a young person to get a grasp on something and turn it into something incredible, it changes them.

How did you get the idea for this documentary?

Chris Carden: In December 2022, Garden State presented a graduation ceremony for its high school and college students. The band played during the ceremony. I'd never seen anything like it and knew there was a story there to tell. So I pursued it and discovered an emotional tale of brotherhood and redemption.

Why did you create *Be Not Afraid*?

Chris: I believe in the transformative power of art and education, and I thought the music theory program at GSCF offered a great opportunity to show how music can offer a positive path forward to incarcerated persons. Through it, they learn not only how to play instruments and write music, they learn about the importance of working together, being dependable, punctuality, leadership and a host of other life skills.

Be Not Afraid Continued:

Why was this an important story to tell?

Chris: The media has painted a picture of corrections that focuses all too often on the negative. Staff are typically depicted as uncaring at best, or abusive. I thought it was important to counter that with the truth: there are people in corrections, like Dante Coluccio, who devote a significant portion of their lives to helping those within our care. That truth caught the attention and accolades of the Garden State Film Festival, and I'm very proud of the work.

Dante: We want people to realize that with opportunity, these men can find out who they really are. They will understand that their ability is just as good as anyone else's.



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