WORKFORCE WELLNESS
The NJDOC’s much-anticipated Workforce Wellness initiative is underway.

FLOWER POWER
Jones Farm Horticulture students distinguished themselves at the Philadelphia Flower Show.

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

FIRST RESPONDERS
Two Albert C. Wagner Youth Correctional Facility officers are recognized for their heroic actions.

SPECIAL GUEST
Trenton Mayor Reed Gusciora recently enjoyed a lunchtime meal at Mates Inn.

WELCOME, CLASS 245
March 18 was Graduation Day for State Basic Course for Correctional Police Officers, Class 245.
Inside Corrections is a monthly publication of the Office of Public Information at the New Jersey Department of Corrections.

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Inside This Issue

2

Inside Word
with Acting Commissioner Marcus O. Hicks, Esq.

3

Profiles in Education
NJDOC teachers discuss the advantages of instructing in a correctional setting.

6

Workforce Wellness
The new initiative will be available to staff throughout the Department.

9

Flower Power
Jones Farm Horticulture students make a strong showing at the Philadelphia Flower Show.

11

First Responders
A pair of Albert C. Wagner Youth Correctional Facility officers receive recognition for their heroic actions.

13

Special Guest
When Trenton Mayor Reed Gusciora recently dined at Mates Inn, it wasn’t his first visit to the eatery.

15

Congratulations, Class 245
The new class, 100 members strong, graduated on March 18.

Cover photo – Supporting the Department’s various educational programs are (from left) instructors Dora Dunn, Takesha Reed and Jason Urbanski.
INSIDE WORD
with Acting Commissioner Marcus O. Hicks, Esq.

The mission statement of the New Jersey Department of Corrections prominently states the Department’s commitment to operate safe and secure facilities. Safety and security measures are no less important on the grounds of the Central Office headquarters than they are in our prisons.

That is why, beginning in early March, the Department assigned an armed officer to the grounds of the Central Office. This officer has maintained a visible presence, patrolling the perimeter of the Central Office, including but not limited to the Mates Inn and the other buildings throughout the Department’s headquarters.

In addition, the armed officer frequently has been stationed at the security booth, particularly during heavy-traffic periods when staff members are arriving and departing from work. Employees are asked to present their NJDOC identification cards upon entrance and to display their vehicle hang tags in their windshields at all times.

I thank the Central Office staff as well as visitors to the grounds for their cooperation, especially as these measures have been introduced. Like me, I hope you take comfort in the fact that the revised procedures have made our headquarters safer than ever before for all of us.

Sincerely,

Acting Commissioner Marcus O. Hicks, Esq.
It wasn’t that long ago that Takesha Reed was teaching computer skills to businessmen. Her students were middle-aged professionals looking for supplemental skills to enhance already established careers.

Today, Reed no longer uses laptops, PowerPoint presentations or projectors to teach. Her classroom is now an enclosed area of a restrictive housing unit at a state prison. Her students are inmates.

Reed’s mission is to prepare members of the New Jersey Department of Corrections offender population to earn the equivalency of a high school diploma while incarcerated.

Why would Reed choose to make such a drastic career change?

“It’s more rewarding than the job I did before,” said Reed, an educator at Albert C. Wagner Youth Correctional Facility. “When you help an inmate get a high school diploma or reach any number of educational milestones, the sense of accomplishment for the student and the educator is overwhelming. You help that person realize that he can turn his life around – that he didn’t just make a bad life choice and waste a lot of time.”

A restrictive housing unit can be a challenging environment for teaching, since inmates are only there temporarily. Nonetheless, Reed does...
everything in her power to maximize learning during the time she has and actually feels that teaching without technology can be an advantage.

“There is more writing and more hands-on learning without technology available as a crutch,” Reed said. “I’ll say, ‘Let’s talk about this,’ and I’ll try to draw students in and get them to feel like they need to know more.”

As students transition out of the restrictive housing unit and into the more traditional classrooms available at the prison, Reed reports their academic progress so they can continue on at the appropriate level.

“Many of the students I had in restrictive housing earned high school diplomas, and many others have begun college courses as well,” Reed said.

About 50 miles north of where Reed works, 36-year-old Jason Urbanski is an educator at Northern State Prison. Encouraged in his career choice by his grandmother, who was a mentor to him and who had a successful 40-year career in education, Urbanski also transitioned from teaching in a traditional classroom environment to a prison setting.

“I’ve always liked working with focused groups of students who may not be mainstream,” Urbanski said.

Urbanski has taught at public schools and charter schools and worked for not-for-profit groups that specialize in building career readiness and social and emotional skills for students in various schools districts.

“The students I work with now have all kinds of educational needs, many with limited or interrupted educational backgrounds,” he said. “My hope is that I can help these students get their high school diplomas and give them a really good shot at a successful experience when they get out of prison.”

After working with inmates for several years, Urbanski has identified a common advantage inmates have over traditional students.

“In a traditional middle school or high school setting, you have to help students make that connection as to why education is so important to them,” Urbanski said. “Adult learners in a prison setting often see that value, and when they do, they’re onboard. Once that drive to learn is in motion, and it’s matched by the drive as a teacher to teach, it’s the perfect pairing for success.”

Every day brings new challenges for many of Urbanski’s students. However, he reassures them that regardless of what else is going on in their lives, they’ve made a worthwhile choice that day just by showing up to class.

“Recently, I was working with a gentleman for about three months who moved on to the next level of classes, then earned his diploma. I was able to hire him as one of my teaching assistants,” Urbanski said. “We hung his diploma on the wall so other students could see it and be inspired to strive for the same goals.”

In addition to academic programs, the NJDOC...
offers a variety of vocational endeavors. One, the Mates Inn culinary arts program, provides a wide-ranging culinary education and the opportunity to learn in a real-world environment.

Chef Dora Dunn, one of the program’s instructors, has been a food critic and a feature writer and has taught culinary arts in a college setting. Dunn sees her current job as an opportunity to share her knowledge and improve the lives of inmates under her instruction.

“I feel we all should do what we can to tend to those who need us the most,” Dunn said. “This is what I have to offer, and this is what I do best.”

The lessons that take place in Dunn’s kitchen go beyond simply learning how to cook.

“Even if some of my students decide not to work in the restaurant business or never learn how to properly scramble an egg, they will leave with a better appreciation of the teamwork, self-respect, respect for others and work ethic needed to survive in life.”

Jecrois Jean-Baptiste has been monitoring the progress of NJDOC educational programs since he became director of the Department’s Office of Educational Services in 2011, noting some very positive statistics.

Since 2010, high school equivalency passing rates within the offender population have risen 13 percent, along with a significant increase in reading ability. Additionally, enrollment in academic and vocational programs continues to grow as wait lists to get into educational programs shrink.

“These data points summarize how hard work and a collaborative process have synthesized into developing correctional education within the State of New Jersey into a national model,” Jean-Baptiste said.

Educators like Dora Dunn, Jason Urbanski and Takesha Reed continue to serve as instructors and mentors to the incarcerated population and are a driving force behind the Department’s progress.

“Successful NJDOC educators need to be resilient in their teaching methodology in order to address the needs of a multi-age classroom with varied learning needs,” said Jean-Baptiste. “They must understand how their teaching can have a major impact in making both the facility and the community a safer place. They must empathize with those incarcerated, who will come to understand that school is no longer a place that symbolizes failure. The NJDOC educator plays a significant role in helping the incarcerated population to take advantage of their last chance to break the cycle of incarceration.”
The long-awaited Workforce Wellness initiative is underway within the New Jersey Department of Corrections.

The initiative is intended to promote whole-person wellness and will be available to custody and civilian staff throughout the NJDOC.

“We consider all of our employees to be first responders,” Kaldany said. “Being a responder has certain stresses and difficulties that we are trying to address.”

Fitness stations at the NJDOC facilities will be equipped with an informational kiosk, workout equipment, and literature and information on

Although it’s still in the preliminary stage, the program will be rolling out new components on a monthly basis.
health-related issues, healthy food options and various topics. At the fitness stations, links and important telephone numbers will be available.

Vendors’ staff are also welcomed to use these services. The pilot sites are Central Office headquarters and South Woods State Prison.

A Workforce Wellness Committee Chairperson will be designated to lead the local Workforce Wellness Committee at each location.

The initiative centers around six pillars of health: occupational, physical, social, intellectual, spiritual and emotional.

The emotional pillar carries a stigma that makes discussing it extremely difficult for some people.

“We hope we can decrease the stigma by raising awareness and collaboration among the entire workforce,” Kaldany said.

The physical pillar will include monthly health awareness topics and screenings, nutritional counseling and discounted gym memberships.

The intellectual pillar is designed to broaden intellectual depth by encouraging the workforce to seek training and higher education opportunities.

As for the social component, it will include volunteer opportunities and positive community contributions.

Peer specialist and resiliency training will start this summer and continue on an ongoing basis.

Director of Correctional Staff Training Academy Aaron Erven indicated that the peer resiliency program will be available for every member of the Department.

“Mental wellness is part of our mission here,” Erven said. “We are bringing it to the forefront so that civilian and uniform staff can speak about the issues that are there.”

The peer specialists will be developed through resiliency training, which will be open to all uniformed and civilian staff, regardless of rank or title.

Resiliency trainers will educate employees on the warning signs that could lead to a potential crisis.

According to the American Addiction Centers, a national study concluded that suicide among correctional officers was 39 percent higher than other professions.

Acting Commissioner Marcus O. Hicks, Esq., is working on ways to help employees de-stress in order to avoid bigger mental health problems down the road.

“The well-being of our officers, as well as our civilian staff, is one of my main priorities,” Hicks said, “which is why I implemented a six-person Workforce Wellness Taskforce to successfully provide employees with the resources they need to address the incredibly difficult mental and

Dr. Herbert Kaldany (left) and Aaron Erven discuss the initiative.
The program has been in the planning stages since August 2018 and was ultimately approved by Hicks in January 2019.

Garden State Youth Correctional Facility Administrator Tracey Shimonis-Kaminski said if anyone should fall on hard times, the wellness initiative will offer support without judgment.

“The Department's wellness initiative is twofold: both proactive and reactive,” Shimonis-Kaminski said. “We hope by implementing the proactive awareness and reduction of stigma associated with mental health, we reduce the need.”

For many, opening up about deep-rooted and often private issues is awkward.

“The most difficult part is getting people to open up,” Shimonis-Kaminski said. “It is a process, and confidentiality is a huge part of the process.”

Kaldany agreed that changing a culture could take years. The wellness services will also be available to the families of the employees.

“The families often see problems in the employees that they can’t see in themselves,” Kaldany said.

The Workforce Wellness Taskforce committees will consist of six or seven employees in 14 locations, each of the 13 prisons, plus Central Office. The composition of the committees will reflect the cultural diversity of the staff.

“This way, it will capture the nuance of each individual location,” Kaldany said.

The initiative has a chaplaincy component, which will require chaplain training and the recruitment of volunteers. A Prison Chaplaincy Program will also start this summer.

“We wanted to create many different options,” Kaldany said. “Some people are not comfortable speaking with a peer. Some are comfortable speaking with a chaplain.”

In addition, all employees working in New Jersey can access the Employee Advisory Services -- the EAS offers counseling services free of charge.

The Cop2Cop suicide helpline already exists. The Department will create a specific referral help-line for those working in correctional settings so they can speak to a fellow correctional police officer.

“The Executive Staff has made a commitment to investing in the overall wellness of the staff, both in the immediate and long term, targeting both physiological and psychological health,” Shimonis-Kaminski said.
FLOWER POWER

Jones Farm Students Distinguish Themselves at Annual Philadelphia Flower Show

By Shaheed M. Morris

When Jones Farm Horticulture Instructor Debbie Mahon saw the judges’ ribbons for the Lavender entry at this year’s Philadelphia Flower Show, she thought she read them wrong.

She did not.

“I thought the judges were wrong,” said Mahon. “To get any ribbon at the Flower Show is a difficult task. I had to re-read the ribbon to make sure they did not judge the wrong plant.”

The Lavender entry won a coveted rosette ribbon.

“We took a Lavender shrub and pruned it to look like a tree, which is called standardizing,” said Mahon. “This is very hard to do. The judges thought the Lavender was charming and sturdy.”

The New Jersey Department of Corrections Jones Farm Horticulture students placed 36 plant entries and received 34 ribbons at the Flower Show, which attracted 300,000 people to the Pennsylvania Convention Center March 2-10.

In total, the students received two rosette ribbons, three first place, 13 second place, eight third place, six honorable mentions and two class commendations.
Mahon has registered Jones Farm for the last 10 years, starting with just five plant entries. In early March of this year, Mahon, packed up 36 plants and traveled to Philadelphia to present her students’ work.

“Every year, I put this enormous amount of emphasis on the program,” said Mahon. “And every year, the students do better and better.”

During one of the judging sessions of an herb class, the judges gave the Jones Farm entry a highly coveted rosette ribbon, of which only 200 were awarded on each day of judging.

“The students have bragging rights now,” said Mahon. “The students can show they grew plants for the Flower Show, and they grew exemplary plants.”

The students competed against hundreds of other growers.

Students started making preparations for the contest 12 months before the Flower Show. The show entries are cared for all year long.

Inmate Jeremy Lopez put the final touches on the Kit Kat Begonia for three weeks. The Kit Kat won multiple awards.

“It was very humbling,” said Lopez. “We take a lot of pride in this work.”

The first-place winners were the Amaryllis plants, which came as no surprise to Mahon.

“This is going to sound arrogant,” said Mahon, “but Jones Farm is known for the Amaryllis.”
While driving her personal vehicle on Route 206 on the way to work at Albert C. Wagner Youth Correctional Facility, Senior Correctional Police Officer Adrianne Campen has seen her share of roadside accidents.

It’s a road she’s driven for the last 17 years.

But, on January 30, in the pitch-dark hours of the morning, Campen drove by a two-car accident without any police presence or emergency responders. She stopped without hesitation.

Campen jumped out of her vehicle to provide assistance with the accident, walking over gas residue and debris scattered across the highway. The airbag of a female driver’s vehicle was deployed.

“You do what you have to do,” Campen said. “Not one person stopped to get involved. I controlled the bleeding from her head and maintained her airway.”

The injured driver has been confirmed as an NJDOC employee who is based at the Central Reception and Assignment Facility. The employee’s name is being withheld to protect her privacy.

Campen’s hands were covered in blood as she
treated the badly injured driver.

“I didn’t have any gloves with me,” said Campen, a former emergency medical technician who serves as a first responder training instructor for the Department, said. “My main goal was to get her stabilized.”

Unbeknownst to Campen, co-worker and fellow Senior Correctional Police Officer Michael Ambrozaitis was headed to work on the same road and also stopped and provided help.

“It was so dark, I had no idea that Officer Campen was at the scene,” Ambrozaitis said. “I saw her when I looked into the car, and she was working on the woman.”

Ambrozaitis immediately secured the scene by using a flashlight to redirect traffic from a chaotic intersection and also checked on the other driver. Many vehicles did not stop and continued to drive through the accident scene.

“If it were not for Officer Ambrozaitis, I probably would have been hit by an oncoming car,” Campen said.

The ambulance arrived several minutes later.

CRAF Administrator Robert Chetirkin said the Department held a collection and sent a card to the injured NJDOC employee.

“To my understanding, someone ran a red light and plowed into her,” Chetirkin said.

Albert C. Wagner Youth Correctional Facility Administrator Raymond Royce noted that Campen spearheads the facility’s first responders training.

“It was a great blessing that they were able to utilize their training to render aid to another member of our Department during a time of need,” he said.

Both officers received recognition by the New Jersey Department of Corrections. The commendation reads: “Your commitment and vigilance to your duties, professionalism and willingness to go above and beyond the call of duty continually set you apart from your peers.”

Ambrozaitis, who has been with the Department for 19 years, received his first commendation in his career.

“It makes me feel good,” said Ambrozaitis. “I have seen a number of accidents. But this one was different. I’m honored to be recognized.”

The commendation surprised Campen, who has been with the Department for 17 years.

“I was surprised to receive the commendation,” Campen said. “It’s part of our duties. We do the unexpected every day. In our job, you hear about the bad so much, it’s nice to be recognized for the good.”
SPECIAL GUEST

Trenton Mayor Reed Gusciora
Makes a Lunchtime Visit to Mates Inn

By Shaheed M. Morris

On a cold Thursday afternoon, Mates Inn had an unexpected guest: Trenton Mayor Reed Gusciora.

“It’s a win-win situation,” Gusciora said. “This benefits the Trenton community, the state and the inmates. You also help with reentry issues.”

Gusciora and aide Andrew Fenwick dined at Mates Inn, located on the grounds of the NJDOC’s Central Office headquarters.

Gusciora ordered fish tacos. For dessert, he ordered cookies du jour.

“The food is really good,” said Gusciora, “You can’t beat the price. We have to support Mates Inn.”

Fenwick ordered lasagna and was not disappointed.

“The four-layered lasagna was beautifully presented,” said Fenwick. “I enjoyed it, and it tastes like something homemade.”

Gusciora, dressed in jeans and an open-collar dress shirt, entered the restaurant and took his seat at a corner table adjacent to the window.

Inmate Ekin Chatmon, 29, who served Gusciora and his staff member, was surprised to find out the Mayor had been his customer.

“I didn’t know it was the Mayor,” Chatmon said. “I am happy that he came here. It means a lot for us...
to see the Mayor here. I hope to see him again to
tell him thank you.”

Gusciora said he dines frequently at Mates Inn. However, when he goes to Mates Inn, he never
tells anyone of his plans.

“I always bring my staff with me when I come to
Mates Inn,” Gusciora said. “The food is fresh and
prepared by a top-of-the-line chef. I will be back
here soon.”

Some seated guests waved and smiled at
Gusciora as he departed after staying for about
30 minutes.

Acting Commissioner Marcus O. Hicks, Esq., was
pleased to hear about the Mayor’s presence at
the restaurant, which serves as a classroom and
occupational training ground for offenders.

“The Mayor started coming here before he was
elected,” Devine said. “He didn’t change once he
got elected.”

Throughout the years, various dignitaries have
dined at Mates Inn, which is open weekdays from
11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.

Garden State Youth Correctional Facility
Supervisor of Education Mark Yaros said
dignitaries’ visits help with the inmates’ self-
estem.

“In having any dignitary cements the understanding
that the inmates are learning real-life situations,”
Yaros said.

Mates Inn Instructor Stephen Villari added, “We
love to have high-profile dignitaries. They are the
ones who can make change. It means a lot for the
inmates to be able to serve them.”
CONGRATULATIONS, CLASS 245

March 18 Is Graduation Day for 100 Men and Women

The New Jersey Department of Corrections held a graduation ceremony for the 100 recruits who comprised the State Basic Course for Correctional Police Officers, Class 245, on March 18 at the War Memorial in Trenton. A total of 522 Correctional Police Officers have graduated since Governor Murphy took office in January 2018.

AHMED A. ABOUZIED
JOSEPH J. ANDES
MATTHEW R. ANDREWS
JOSE L. ARIAS
JENTA A. ASHFORD
JAKE W. AUGUSTINE
NICHOLAS J. BALISTRIERI
DARREN C. BARBER
JOSEPH M. BASSOLINO
TAQUIER J. BATTLE
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BESHOY Y. HABIB
NICHOLAS HICKEY
LARRY E. HILL JR.
DA’SHAWN J. HINTON
MARCUS S. HUGGINS
MARIN JANUSZ
Acting Commissioner Marcus O. Hicks, Esq., (left) and Senior Correctional Police Officer Antonio Perez (far right) with Correctional Police Officer Nicholas Hickey, who received the Fred Baker Academic Achievement Award for his performance during State Basic Corrections Officer Training.