

INSIDE

CORRECTIONS

NEWSLETTER OF THE NEW JERSEY DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS



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INSIDE WORD

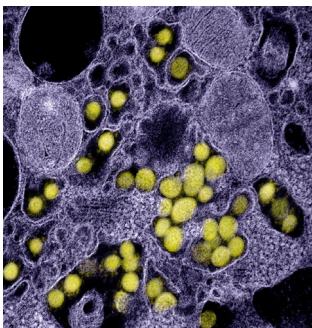
Commissioner Marcus O. Hicks, Esq., discusses universal testing and the new correctional staff help-line.

MEET ALLIE

A popular guest at Garden State Youth Correctional Facility will likely return as COVID-19 restrictions loosen.

#NJD C STRONG

Photos show employee strength and resiliency during the pandemic.



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NJDOC enters the second phase of its universal testing initiative.



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Employees can be seen exhibiting
strength and resiliency throughout
the Department.

Cover photo: A healthcare worker demonstrates how to self administer a saliva-collection test during a three-day mass testing of employees at the New Jersey Department of Corrections Central Office headquarters.



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INSIDE WORD

with Commissioner Marcus O. Hicks, Esq.

I am humbled and honored to be associated with warriors of such great courage and fortitude. Your jobs require a high level of accountability to accomplish the goal of safeguarding millions of people every day.

From our devoted civilian employees to the custody staff on our front lines, the recent pandemic has presented you with a barrage of new challenges, which you have met with commitment and poise.

Because of your commitment, we have finished the first phase of universal COVID-19 testing for inmates and employees, and are in the process of Phase 2 with emerging data that demonstrates a significant drop in active cases. I would like to thank you for your assistance and cooperation in making such a large-scale endeavor possible. My hope is that we will be able to use this data as a valuable tool to surge forward even more aggressively with our efforts to mitigate the spread of, and eventually eliminate, this virus within our facilities.

Additionally, we have partnered with Rutgers University to create 4BLUENJ, a help-line designed explicitly for the unique needs of correctional staff. 4BLUENJ is another tool in your workforce wellness toolbox to help build resiliency. Whenever you feel the need for help in coming to terms with job-related stress, I urge you to be proactive and reach out to 4BLUENJ (888-425-8365). The help-line is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week and is staffed by individuals with corrections experience and training.

Thank you for all that you have done and will undoubtedly continue to do for the sake of the New Jersey Department of Corrections and the millions of people who depend upon your skills and your watchful eye. Stay safe and stay NJDOC strong.

Sincerely,


Commissioner, Marcus O. Hicks, Esq.



A healthcare worker takes part in the mass testing of employees at the New Jersey Department of Corrections Central Office headquarters.

ROAD TO RECOVERY

NJDOC, Rutgers Begin Second Phase of the State's Largest COVID-19 Testing Initiative

By John Cokos

The U.S. quickly became the COVID-19 pandemic's epicenter – the northeastern region of the country essentially a bullseye. Many of the facilities operated by the New Jersey Department of Corrections (NJDOC) sit inside or dangerously close to that bullseye.

Officials at many levels who are managing the pandemic, including the nation's top infectious disease expert, Dr. Anthony Fauci, and Governor Phil Murphy, had stressed the urgency of a

large-scale increase in testing.

“We’re going to continue to build the partnerships necessary for us to keep building our testing program,” Murphy said at a daily press briefing. “More testing means more data, and more data allows us to take more steps forward.”

The NJDOC had already begun utilizing its partnership with Rutgers University Correctional Health Care (UCHC) to launch the state's largest COVID-19

testing plan, thus evolving into a microcosm of the state's COVID-19 recovery model.

Plans were developed early on for the first phase of the initiative, which involved testing approximately 8,000 staff and nearly 18,000 inmates, including those being released and individuals who had previously tested positive prior to the launch of the initiative.

“Since the onset of the pandemic, it's been a goal of the Department to test all individuals in our custody and staff,” said NJDOC Commissioner Marcus O. Hicks, Esq. “We've made great strides managing the virus with the implementation of the state's largest testing initiative, in concert with the Department's virus mitigation strategies, that include, for example, masking, temperature checks and modifications to group activities.”

The test kit used for the NJDOC universal testing initiative was developed by a Rutgers University laboratory known as RUCDR Infinite Biologics.

Testing was rolled out to each facility, starting with the northern region hardest hit by the pandemic and to those housed in the Department's Residential Community Release Program facilities. Rutgers' non-invasive FDA-approved saliva kits are administered by both UCHC and

the Department's Special Operations Group.

“From the outset of the pandemic, our goal at Rutgers has been to use the full breadth of our research capabilities in service of the state,” said Rutgers Biomedical and Health Sciences Chancellor Dr. Brian L. Strom. “Rutgers and New Jersey have made tremendous strides with respect to testing, and I believe the saliva-based test developed by RUCDR and Rutgers-New Brunswick is a linchpin to a health and economic recovery. In addition, we have a long-standing relationship through our University Correctional Health Care to provide medical care in New Jersey's prisons and we are pleased that this innovative test can be used to enhance health and safety for staff and inmates.”

Phase 2 testing is currently underway for inmates and staff who previously tested negative, with results informing resumption of services. Testing cadence for employees is weekly for the foreseeable future, while inmates are tested weekly for 28 days, at which point testing will be revisited.

Universal testing data tracking positive cases since the onset of the pandemic can be found at njdoc.gov. Currently, there are about 95 positive cases among inmates - less than 1 percent of the population.





Yamilena Romero graduated from Pace University in May with a bachelor's degree in business administration

SCHOOL DAYS

NJDOC Employees Reflect on College Graduations

By Matt Schuman

When Yamilena Romero stopped attending Pace University in New York City back in 1999, she was a mere four classes short of earning a bachelor's degree in business administration.

"Life happens, and I never went back," said Romero, now age 43, a communications operator at New Jersey State Prison. "I was employed as a corporate buyer for department stores, and in 2018, I came to work for the New Jersey Department of Corrections (NJDOC). I knew that if I wanted to have an opportunity to advance, I needed to get my degree."

After securing permission from Pace, Romero took the required classes online

through Trenton-based Thomas Edison State University.

She was one of more than 20 NJDOC staff members to earn a college degree in 2020.

"People told me that as you get older, the academics become more difficult," Romero said. "Fortunately, that wasn't my experience. I actually found that I was more focused. It certainly wasn't easy, and it required discipline. By accomplishing my goal, I feel like I've learned a lot about myself."

She also learned something about her mother.

“My mom had been hounding me for all those years to go back to school and get my degree,” she related. “I learned that mom is always right.”

Another NJDOC communications operator who is a member of the Class of 2020 is Tammy Brown of Bayside State Prison. Brown began seriously considering a return to school in 2014. Six years later, she earned a bachelor’s degree in social work from Stockton University.

“I had credits from Cumberland County College (now known as Rowan College of South Jersey) from years ago, just sitting there,” said Brown, an NJDOC employee since 2005 who transferred from South Woods State Prison to Bayside in 2017. “I decided to go back, and I graduated from Cumberland County College in 2018. At that point, I enrolled in Stockton.”

Her focus was on social work, acquiring skills she hopes to utilize within the NJDOC at some point. Brown took classes online as well as on campus.

“All of the social work classes were done in the classroom,” she reported. “Those classes had a mix of recent high school graduates and adults.

“At first, I admittedly felt old,” continued Brown, who graduated from high school in 1996. “Yet, as I began to build friendships, that feeling went away. A couple of my classmates told me, ‘Don’t think you can’t do this because you’re a little bit older than us.’ I’m pleased that



Tammy Brown graduated from Stockton University with a bachelor’s degree in social work.

I was able to adjust to the environment. In fact, I’ll be attending graduate school at Stockton (the MSW program) in the fall along with a 21-year-old student I met in my classes.”

One of Brown’s most memorable – and bittersweet – days as a student came in March 2020, when a classroom party in recognition of Social Work Month was held.

“Because of the coronavirus, that turned out to be our last day in class,” she said. “The remainder of the semester was done on Zoom.”

The coronavirus also was responsible for the fact that virtually every member of the Class of 2020 – in and out of the NJDOC – has not had an opportunity to take part in a formal graduation ceremony.

Sergeant Bryan Fusaro of Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women earned a master's degree from Seton Hall University after completing Police Graduate Studies Program. Like many of his fellow graduates, Fusaro was offered an opportunity to participate in an online virtual graduation.

"I have 5-year-old twins, and they had a kindergarten graduation," he said. "It would have been nice for them to experience my graduation ceremony as well."

Fusaro, one of many staff members to take advantage of the NJDOC Tuition Reimbursement Program, heard positive reports from colleagues who had enrolled in the Police Graduate Studies Program, and he wasn't disappointed.

"It was very relevant to what we do in our profession as well as law enforcement as a whole," said Fusaro, age 37, who began his career with the NJDOC 10 years ago at Mountainview Youth Correctional Facility and transferred to Edna Mahan in 2017.

"It gave insights into management strategies and different supervisory tactics, such as how to lead in a supervisory situation. For example, it provided ways to circumvent resistance to change and do so in a positive way. The professional development was invaluable."

His most significant obstacle was time management.

"The material wasn't as difficult as the routine," he stated. "Because of my

professional obligations and my personal life, there were sacrifices that had to be made. Most of the time, I wasn't beginning my school work until about 10 p.m. I had to manage my time down to minutes. I was grateful to be able to reach my goal. Once I finished, there was a tremendous sense of accomplishment."

Esther Ramos, a senior audit account clerk at Southern State Correctional Facility, agreed that the time commitment required was the most daunting challenge she faced as she worked toward her degree. She met the challenge head-on, earning a bachelor's degree in accounting from Colorado Christian University.

"I was determined to finish," she simply said.

Ramos, age 47, attended Rutgers University just after high school, then got an associate's degree from Cumberland County College in 2011.

"From there, I entered the workplace," said Ramos, who has been at Southern State for three years after a four-year stint at Bayside. "Still, I knew I wanted to get my bachelor's degree at some point."

That point arrived three years ago.

"Sometimes, I feel as if I've aged 10 years in the last three years," she confessed. "There was a lack of sleep and not much of a social life. Weekends and nights were spent studying. I had to miss out on a lot of things, but like I said, I was committed to seeing this through. That said, it was absolutely worth it. This degree means so

much to me that it hasn't fully sunk it yet." When Senior Correctional Police Officer Alnetha Little of Northern State Prison decided to work toward an associate's degree in criminal justice from Essex County College, her sense of determination mirrored that of Ramos.

She started off slowly, taking just a few classes per semester. Her objective was to move forward by maintaining her focus.

"When you're a parent, and you work full time, you still have to put in the time for

assignments and studies," said Little, an NJDOC employee since 2012. "Once I started working toward a degree, I refused to give up. I needed to finish what I started."

Now that she has indeed finished what she started, the 30-year-old mother of two has a new goal.

"I'm seriously thinking about getting my bachelor's degree," she announced.



CONGRATULATIONS

NJDOC Employees Earn Their Degrees

MASTER'S DEGREE RECIPIENTS

LISA ASHBURN
Adult Diagnostic and Treatment Center
Fairleigh Dickinson University
Public Administration

DANIELLE CLARK
Southern State Correctional Facility
Widener University
Social Work

ALEXANDRA D'AVANZO
New Jersey State Prison
Northeastern University
Applied Nutrition and Nutrition Education

BRYAN FUSARO
Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women
Seton Hall University
Human Resources Training and Development / Education Supervision

TAWANNA GARRISON
Northern State Prison
Fairleigh Dickinson University
Public Administration

CHYME JONES
Central Reception and Assignment Facility
Fairleigh Dickinson University

TAVON SPEARMAN
Garden State Youth Correctional Facility
Kean University
Public Administration

JASON URBANSKI
Northern State Prison
Kean University
Special Education, Learning and
Behavioral Disabilities

BACHELOR'S DEGREE RECIPIENTS

HECTOR ARIAS
East Jersey State Prison
Berkley College
Business Administration

TAMMY BROWN
Bayside State Prison
Stockton University
Social Work

ARIEL FERMIN MORA
Mountainview Youth Correctional Facility
William Paterson University
Criminal Justice

CANDICE MYERS
Mid-State Correctional Facility
Southern New Hampshire University
Criminal Justice

ANTHONY PURNELL
Bayside State Prison
Rowan University
Radio, TV and Film

ESTER RAMOS
Southern State Correctional Facility
Colorado Christian University
Accounting

Brittany Roberts
Northern State Prison
Liberty University
Criminal Psychology

YAMILENA ROMERO
New Jersey State Prison
Pace University
Business Administration

REBECCA STEPNIEWSKI
Central Office
Rowan University
Law and Justice

ASSOCIATE'S DEGREE RECIPIENTS

LAKESHA AMONS
Northern State Prison
Essex County College
Social Science

JUAN GONZALEZ
Adult Diagnostic and Treatment Center
Thomas Edison State University
Criminal Justice

ALNETHA LITTLE
Northern State Prison
Essex County College
Criminal Justice

MILLICENT RHODEN
Central Reception and Assignment
Facility
Jersey College School of Nursing
Nursing

CHRISTINA SPRAGUE
South Woods State Prison
Eastern Gateway Community College
Criminal Justice

TUITION AID

Program Available to NJDOC Employees

New Jersey Department of Corrections employees who attend an institution of higher learning are able to take advantage of the NJDOC Tuition Reimbursement Program.

The program provides undergraduate students who are enrolled at a regionally accredited school with up to a 50 percent tuition reimbursement for courses in which their grades are either an A or a B and up to a 33.33 percent reimbursement for courses in which they earn a C grade. Graduate students who are enrolled at a regionally accredited school may receive up to a 50 percent reimbursement for courses in which they earn an A and up to a 33.33 percent for B grades.

For more information about the Tuition Reimbursement Program, contact Greg Richards in the NJDOC Office of Human Resources at 609-292-4036 x5145.

**Feeling Stress?
Need to Vent?**

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(1-888-425-8365)

**24-Hour peer support
program for all NJDOC staff
provided by confidential
corrections-trained experts.**





Allie is a Golden Retriever and a certified therapy dog with The Bright and Beautiful Therapy Dogs Inc.

MEET ALLIE

Golden Retriever Brings Good Spirits to Employees at Garden State Youth Correctional Facility

By John Cokos

Leadership at Garden State Youth Correctional Facility (GSYCF) tested a theory regarding its correctional police officers and civilian staff. Confirmation was established quickly; few people could resist falling in love with Allie.

Allie, a two-year-old Golden Retriever, is a certified therapy dog. She quickly gained popularity at the facility as part of the New Jersey Department of Corrections (NJDOC) Workforce Wellness Initiative being piloted across three locations.

While the initiative is designed to promote general health, its primary goal is to help employees manage stress.

In a news release distributed by the NJDOC, Dr. Herbert Kaldany, the Department's Director of Psychiatry, Addictions and Mental Health, said the ultimate goal of the wellness initiative is to help NJDOC employees establish resiliency and negotiate stress before it reaches crisis level.

"This type of program is especially important

within correctional management – an industry impacted by high suicide rates,” noted Kaldany.

Allie has become an integral part of GSYCF’s efforts to support the wellness initiative.

“NJDOC staff work in a highly stressful environment, and we believe the comfort that Allie provides is helping the staff with daily stress,” said Antoinette Minors-Ferguson, a member of the facility’s wellness team.

Ideas about bringing in a therapy dog were circulating among the wellness team and then reinforced after some of the members attended a suicide prevention conference hosted by the New Jersey Division of Mental Health and Addiction Services.

“Interacting with a friendly pet can help people deal with physical and mental issues and builds on the bond between humans and animals,” Minors-Ferguson added. “Pet therapy can help to reduce blood pressure and improve overall cardiovascular health as well as release endorphins that provide a calming effect. This can help alleviate pain, reduce stress and improve the overall psychological state of a person.”

Allie began her visits in the Garden Room, an area of the facility the wellness team is actively developing as a hub for the initiative.

Correctional Police Lieutenant Duane Hollingshead said he takes employee

wellness very seriously and believes in the benefits of having Allie around.

“I’m one of those guys that when I ask somebody, ‘How are you doing?’ I’m not just asking a rhetorical question,” Hollingshead said. “If I noticed someone was dealing with some things, I’d send that person to the Garden Room to see Allie. She was positively affecting people’s moods even if it was just for a brief period.”

Once team members saw how interested the staff was in going to visit with Allie, they began bringing Allie to the staff. Since then, Allie has become very comfortable with the staff and with the layout of the facility. She has no trouble navigating to the areas where people are going to pet her and play with her.

Before restrictions were set in place to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, Allie was brought in for a tour through the facility once a week, on different days so everyone could get a chance to spend time with her. This allowed officers who were unable to leave their posts to have time with Allie as well.

“I do anticipate Allie’s return as soon as we are able,” said GSYCF administrator Tracy Shimonis-Kaminski. “We have been keeping in touch with Allie’s owner throughout this pandemic. She is anxious to bring Allie back, and we are eagerly anticipating Allie’s return. I believe that Allie’s presence will be even more impactful in the wake of the pandemic. We are all under a great deal of pressure, and her presence will be likely welcomed by all.”



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