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## **Bristol County inmates graduate from St. Vincent de Paul program**

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DARTMOUTH, Mass. — Officers at the Bristol County House of Corrections buzzed to unlock the doors to three housing units on Thursday evening a little before 6:30.

Ten inmates exited the units and began the roughly 100-yard walk outside, then down a hallway, then through a security checkpoint to the jail's chapel.

They walked into the chapel to a thundering applause, hugs and handshakes from the crowd of volunteers from the Attleboro District Council Reentry Program of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and the Residents Encountering Christ (REC) program.

The inmates were celebrating the completion of the St. Vincent de Paul "Getting Ahead While Getting Out" reentry program. It was the culmination of 10 weeks of classes in which SVdP volunteers met with inmates twice a week to do some soul searching and develop a plan for their first three days after release.

“I’m proud to say that after doing this program, upon release I now have the understanding, the strength, the will to live my life the right way,” Bristol County inmate Tim Harper said at the graduation ceremony.

He wasn’t the only one lavishing praise for the St. Vincent volunteers and the program. One by one, the ten inmates, who are called “investigators” during classes, came to the podium in the chapel. After being introduced by one of the St. Vincent volunteers, or program facilitators as they are called, the inmates were given the opportunity to say a few words about the program.



**Inmate graduates of the Attleboro chapter of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul’s reentry program, “Getting Ahead While Getting Out,” smile with program facilitators, from left, Paul Hodge, Joan Blagdon and Tom Dwyer during a recent graduation ceremony at the Bristol County House of Correction. The graduates were Adnell Joseph, Joseph Shaheen, Roy Farias, Angel Nunez, Travis Nice, Michael Demers, Marcellino Alves, Jose Avelar, Timothy Harper and Derek Ryder. (Photo courtesy of the Bristol County Sheriff’s Office)**

This program opened my eyes,” Joseph Shaheen said. “I realized I needed to change and I need goals. I want to return to college. I started my engineering degree, now I want to go back and finish it.”

“This program has really changed me 100%,” Marcellino Alves said. “I know I’m never coming back (to jail).”

“Thank you for taking time out of your lives so I can better mine,” Adnell Roman told the volunteers.

Started in 2016 by the St. Vincent de Paul’s Attleboro Voice of the Poor Committee, the “Getting Ahead While Getting Out” program focuses on the critical 72 hours immediately after release. Where will inmates go for housing or clothing? Will they have a phone or a driver’s license? The plans, detailed and down to the hour, give an inmate a roadmap (complete with backup plans) on how to succeed and set up future success in the first three days.

Beyond the plan, inmates and volunteers also discuss short- and long-term goals, and how to achieve them. They accomplish that by looking back, learning from past mistakes, and looking ahead to the future.

Inmates penned stories about their past, then were asked by SVdP volunteers to write about their future, with the stories on display for all to read at the graduation ceremony.

“You can change. There is hope,” Irene Frechette, Northeast Regional Vice President of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, said at the graduation. “When you get out, there are a lot of wonderful people there to help you. You are future stories ... you’re great writers, great thinkers. Take that with you and share your gifts with everyone.”

St. Vincent members Paul Hodge, Joan Blagdon and Tom Dwyer served as program facilitators, or instructors.

Joining them and Frechette at the graduation ceremony were Peter Kortright, program director of the District Council of Attleboro Reentry Program and member of the St. Vincent de Paul National Re-entry Task Force; Steve Meaney, Diocesan Central Council president of the St. Vincent de Paul Society; and Mary Dwyer, Attleboro District Council president of the St. Vincent de Paul Society. They also read remarks from State Senator Paul Feeney, Representatives Jim Hawkins and Betty Poirier, and Bristol County District Attorney Thomas M. Quinn.

Several of the graduates are also involved in the REC religious program at the prison, so the volunteers who administer the program attended in support.

“We are all behind you and we all want you to succeed. That handshake, that hug you received when you walked in here, carry that forward in all of your future endeavors,” Bristol County Sheriff Thomas M. Hodgson said at the graduation. “All of us, at some point in our lives, make bad choices, but that doesn’t mean we can’t catch up and get back on track.

“The Society of St. Vincent de Paul is an amazing organization. For the past 10 weeks, these volunteers have given their time and expressed not only how much they care about you, but how much they love you.”