

Inmates learn employment skills through WorkReadyNH

By Nancy A. Cavanaugh
ncavanaugh@eagletimes.com



Yesterday, inmates from Sullivan County jail graduated from the WorkPlayNH program at River Valley Community College. (From left to right) Diane Lackey, case manager; Bruce Thurston; Superintendent David Berry; Kelsey Zielinski; and Nicholas Santana. — D.F. DASCENZOUNITY —

Yesterday morning, three inmates from the Sullivan County jail arrived at River Valley Community College (RVCC) to take the final test for the WorkReadyNH program they've been participating in for the last three weeks.

“They’re getting the college experience and professional development,” said Dave Berry, superintendent at the Sullivan County jail. “One of them has already said when he finishes the TRAILS program and gets out, he wants to go into the CNC program at River Valley.”

TRAILS (Transitional Re-entry and Inmate Life Skills) is a minimum security treatment center located inside the jail that helps with addictions, mental health issues, education, and life skills.

“They grumble about having to get up early to go, but when they come back they’re enthusiastic,” said Berry.

The classes for the program run from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., Monday through Friday.

“They get there a little earlier so they can do their homework. They have to use the computers at the school because we don’t have computers for them at the jail,” she said.

An officer drops them off at the door and picks them up when they’re done for the day, which is the only thing that would give away that they’re inmates.

“It has been fantastic. The inmates have blended right in. They were nervous at first, but it didn’t take long for them to gel,” said Martha Mott, director of the WorkReadyNH program with River Valley Community College. “[The program participants] always come out a tight knit group.”

Yesterday, the participants took an ACT test, which tested their knowledge on work skills, math, reading and critical thinking. After the test, there was a graduation ceremony.

The WorkReadyNH program is tuition-free, paid for by a grant from the U.S. Department of Labor to the Community College System of New Hampshire (CCSNH), of which RVCC is a member. The program teaches essential skills, including what to do at an interview, soft skills, communication skills and customer service.

“Businesses told us time after time that they wanted their employees to have these skills so we created the program. The skills will help at home too,” said Mott. “These are the big skills that matter. They will make or break a relationship — at work or at home.”

“The program has been challenging for them, but it has improved their confidence,” said Berry. “These inmates never had much of an employment history, now they have skills to offer an employer.”

Mott agreed about the challenge.

“It is a challenging program. Many of them tell us when it is ending that they wished it could last longer,” she said.

There was a series of events that led to the inmates being part of the program.

“I really have to credit River Valley Community College leadership for reaching out to us to collaborate on education for inmates,” said County Manager Jessie Levine.

Levine forwarded the email to Berry, who then reached out to Mott.

“Dave Berry thought it was a great idea and came out to meet with us,” said Mott. “He is an out-of-the-box thinker.”

From there, Berry worked with a case manager to identify three possible inmates for the program. He is hoping to do it again in the spring.

Levine is pleased with the collaboration between the school and jail.

“This is more evidence of how willing this community is to collaborate to meet its citizens' needs,” said Levine. “This is a great opportunity for our inmates to build their skillsets and maybe be inspired to continue their education upon release.”

The WorkReadyNH program has had 2,000 people graduate from across New Hampshire during the last four years. Of those, 329 were graduates from the RVCC program, which has been offered in Keene and Claremont and will be offered in Lebanon after they open the campus in the early spring.