

## **Program secures jobs for inmates, reduces recidivism**

[Alex Vuocolo](#) January 2, 2019

(AP) — For the last 23 years, Orlando Foreman passed his days in a federal prison.

It's here that he learned how to be a paraplegic, forced to rely on a wheelchair after he was paralyzed by Wilmington police during a robbery turned shoot-out in 1995.

It's here that Foreman was forced to face the consequences of his actions — decisions that filled his life with more than 36 years spent behind bars.

At the age of 55, Foreman is finally ready to turn his life around.

"This is the first time — excuse my expression — that I ever gave a damn about my life," Foreman said, his voice thick as tears rolled down his cheeks.

Emotions took over for Foreman just before the Christmas holiday as he sat alongside six other men and women attempting to bridge the gap between incarceration and freedom.

It doesn't happen often, he later said, but sharing his story brought up the shame and embarrassment he has harbored for more than two decades while in prison.

Shame for his mother, who watched all three of her sons go off to prison despite them growing up in a two-parent home. Shame for his daughter, who grew up without her dad. And shame for himself, for changing his life for the worse before being granted the opportunity to change his life for the better.

Foreman's battle isn't over yet.

Delaware's recidivism rate for those returning to society after incarceration is extremely high.

A state report published last year shows that 45 percent of inmates released in 2013 were back in prison within a year, and almost two-thirds were back behind bars after three years. That rate has increased to 76 percent in recent years, said Priscilla Turgon. She is executive director of Project New Start — the re-entry program Foreman, along with six others, completed the week before Christmas.

Now, Foreman's got to find housing, which can be difficult for a wheelchair-bound man convicted of a felony. He needs a job, one that will allow him to make an honest wage.

But unlike many men and women coming out of Delaware and federal prisons, Foreman is armed with the skills he gained through Project New Start, a small but successful program slowly chipping away at Delaware's battle with recidivism.

"The program shares things with you that you don't normally see growing up in the inner city," Foreman said. "It gives you structure that no one has ever shared with you. It gives you a foundation and an approach that you've never experienced before."

The program, championed by Turgon and Assistant Director Brian Alleyne, is extremely selective: More than 40 people interviewed to join. Of those, 12 were selected. Seven graduated last week.

Participants spend 375 hours together over 10 weeks learning cognitive behavioral change, parenting, financial literacy, conflict resolution and technology training. They also receive certifications in forklift operating safety, OSHA and ServSafe, making them immediately employable to many job opportunities in the state.

“This here is a solution to that problem” of mass incarceration, said New Castle County Executive Matt Meyer.

“All of us here, we’re here because we’re behind you and we support you,” he added. “We’re in an incredible time where there are over seven million unfilled jobs across the country ... and what you’re doing is not just about getting that job. You can get a job, but it’s about finding a career.”

To ensure that participants gain those skills, Project New Start relies heavily on partnerships with local employers, as well as the Delaware Law School, Alternatives to Violence Project and many others.

Most provide their services free of charge to the program, which relies on grant funding and private fundraising to operate its classes, Turgon said.

The results are good.

Though selective and small in its numbers, 61 of the 66 graduates of Project New Start through September have secured employment and 78 percent of participants have not been reconvicted or recommitted.

This is important given the efforts Gov. John Carney recently announced to focus closely on re-entry for those coming out of Delaware prisons.

In an executive order signed earlier this month, Carney created a commission to study how to help state prisoners successfully re-enter back into society. Turgon, who has operated Project New Start since 2013, was not invited to the table for this initiative, she said.

Carney’s executive order aims at coordinating services more effectively, strengthening data sharing between agencies and ensuring inmates have access to programs before they’re already out of prison.

“We need to be successful” in Delaware prisons, Carney said at the signing. “And we’re not doing a very good job.”

Inmates are often released with little information about where to go and often with nothing more than the clothes on their backs, despite the time of year or weather.

This uncertainty often leaves offenders with few options, said Anthony Miller, another participant who spoke at the program’s graduation ceremony last week.

“Before I was released ... I felt kind of scared and hopeless about making the transition back to society,” Miller said. “And each day that I came through these doors and saw somebody coming in and educating us ... it gave me hope that I could make it, succeed and the more powerful desire to be a better person.”

Seven people — six men and one woman — graduated from the most recent class of Project New Start.

Among them sat aspiring writers, construction workers, peer specialists and most of all, men and women determined to be productive members of society.

Until they find that job, they’ll keep the support of Project New Start and its staff. Twice a week, participants will check in for their intensive individualized job searches, which they’ll navigate with the help of the program.

And once employed, they’ll have the structured support of Project New Start for at least 12 months — and if they want it, they’ll keep it forever, Turgon said.

Their success helps define the future of Project New Start, too, as the program relies on its statistics to garner dollars, partnerships and support from local, county and state officials.

“There is a lot riding on your success,” Attorney General Matt Denn said. “You are really standing on the shoulders of people who have gone before you ... and the reason so many people got involved is because they saw the success of it.”

Foreman already has a certification from the state to be a peer specialist. Others have job prospects waiting in the wings.

“I want to give back to my community and give back to people because people are crying,” Foreman said. “People are in need out in the streets.”

Now though, these men and women of Project New Start have hope.

“For people like me, where I came from, like she said, the recidivism rate, usually you go back in within the next three years,” Miller said. “So a lot of us, we don’t have no hope. It seems like nobody gonna help us and we turn back into who we used to be.

But through this program and through these supporters, I feel like this time, I’ll be all right.”

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Supporting partners of the program include:

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