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Date: December 18, 2017
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MDOC Expands Program to Improve Inmates' Lives

JACKSON – With the help of volunteers and mental health staffers, the Mississippi Department of Corrections has expanded a program to both male and female inmates to help them understand the behavior that led them to prison, how to cope while in prison and how to stay out of prison.

The program, commonly referred to as the 1A Men's or the 1A Women's Program at Central Mississippi Correctional Facility (CMCF) in Pearl, combines faith-based values with mental health and is available for inmates with life sentences and those within a year of release. The women's program has been ongoing since 2009, while the men's portion started in January. With recent graduations, 70 inmates have completed the program this year.

"The program is another example of our goal to provide meaningful rehabilitation," Commissioner Pelicia E. Hall. "For the offenders who have life sentences, they can still help society through this program by becoming positive influences on offenders who are released and giving those offenders a better chance at success."

Joe S. Jones, 44, among the recent graduates of the 1A Men's Program, said the program has made a difference in his life and those around him.

"This program is a light in our dark place," said Jones, of Canton, who is serving two drug sentences - possession of cocaine in Leake County and sale of cocaine in Madison County.

"This means a lot to me. I pray that God will continue to bless this program and MDOC will allow it to continue to make a difference in men's lives," Jones said. "I have seen guys step up and take responsibility."

Eric Hicks, 32, who graduated the program on Aug. 30 while in prison for burglary and grand larceny in Itawamba County, said he appreciated the instructors. "This program changed my life, and I hope to someday change someone else's life for the better."

Dr. Sandy Adams, director of Mental Health at CMCF, said plans are underway to expand the program from three days per week on a 12-week cycle to a four-day-a-week five month program. The goal is to help offenders "learn how to identify their destructive patterns of behavior and to give them the tools and skills to make the necessary changes to lead to a successful and productive life," Adams said.

Classes include Addictive Personality, Boundaries, Anger Management, and Jobs for Life. "The purpose of this program is to grow emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually," Adams said.

Ginger Estes, 55, who recently completed the 1A Women's Program, said attending the program has helped her with anger management. "Anger is what got me here, and programs like this have helped me so much to understand my anger and to handle it better," said Estes, who is in prison for possession of cocaine with intent to distribute in Prentiss County.

Inmates must be free of rules violations for three months before and during the program. They sign a contract promising to follow the program's rules.

"Comments by staff and other offenders about the noticeable behavioral changes in the housing area outside of the program point to their attempt at making positive behavioral changes that affirm individual successes and hopefully, lifelong," Adams said, referring to the male offenders who complete the program.

The recent graduations for the 1A Men's and 1A Women's Program are among several in recent weeks recognizing offenders' completion of programs. Other ceremonies include:

- The University of Mississippi Prison-to-College Pipeline Program's Fall Graduation on Dec. 6 at the Mississippi State Penitentiary (MSP). Seven offenders completed the "Education and The Environment from Black Fiction to Creative Nonfiction," a 15-week class conducted by Dr. Patrick Alexander and Dr. Ann Fisher-Wirth.
- Thinking for a Change Graduation of the Hinds County Probation/Parole Office & Hinds County Restitution Center on Dec. 6 at the Sparkman Auditorium at the Mississippi Agriculture & Forestry Museum. Forty-one (41) offenders graduated.
- Thinking for a Change Graduation for the Noxubee County Transitional Program on Dec. 7 at the Noxubee County Community Work Center. Twenty-four (24) offenders graduated.
- The Alcohol and Drug Program at Parchman today. Twenty-five (25) offenders completed the program.