



# FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## **MDOC Seeks to Help Offenders without an Approved Place to Stay**

JACKSON - Inmates who can be paroled but lack an approved residence can now live temporarily at one of four Mississippi Department of Corrections Community Work Centers.

The transitional housing at Wilkinson, Noxubee, Madison, and Flowood Community Work Centers also is available for offenders on house arrest and earned release supervision (ERS) who have violated the terms of their release, but the violations are not a new arrest or charge.

“We are trying to address the need for transitional housing without expending additional funds,” Commissioner Pelicia E. Hall said. “People who have been confined for a while need extra time to transition back to their communities. In order to manage our budget and meet the needs of the agency, we must be more creative and innovative in our thinking.”

Programs, including cognitive behavioral therapy and life skills, are being offered at Noxubee, which is for males, and Flowood, which houses females. Also, Mississippi State University is working with MDOC to assist offenders at Noxubee, where the pilot program recently graduated 24 offenders.

Offenders in the three- to -six-month-long program also provide free labor alongside state inmates at county work sites to establish a work ethic.

Converting portions of the community work centers was a means to get ahead of an issue talked about for some time now, Commissioner Hall said.

“We are glad to learn that since we converted parts of the work centers earlier this year to provide transitional beds, the need isn’t as great as reported,” Hall said.

“We have found that we do not have hundreds of people being held in prison because they don’t have a place to go.”

MDOC is working with the state Parole Board to identify eligible offenders for the transitional centers. So far, most of the eligible offenders are those on ERS and house arrest. Offenders convicted of sex crimes and with significant medical and psychological conditions are not eligible.

Though the transitional program is in its early stages, the early results have been promising, Deputy Commissioner Christy Gutherz said.

“Every one of those offenders at Noxubee had an address when they graduated, and families coming to visit them saw positive change in them,” Gutherz said.

During the Aug. 3 graduation, Gutherz reminded the graduates of how far they had come.

“On that first day, we had some unhappy men come in here and give us some mean looks because they didn’t know why they were here. After we explained the process, we said ‘With your cooperation and participation, this will all work out,’” Gutherz said. “Here you sit, 24 strong, on graduation day, looking extremely dapper in your new sets of clothes instead of the issues we give. Remember how this feels. Those pants are not green and white. Relish what you look like.”

Parolee Christopher Newquest, 28, one of the Noxubee graduates on Aug. 3, said he learned about being responsible and setting goals.

“I can happily say I will be able to be honest with myself and enjoy life,” said Newquest, who was placed on house arrest for three years in DeSoto County in 2016 for having a controlled substance within a facility. “I learned how to control my emotions. And this program has molded me and inspired me to become the person I am today.”

Nathan Swords, also a graduate, said being in the program helped him. Aside from finding a job, his family is his primary focus for the next chapter in his life, he said. “I definitely learned a lot, and it has been difficult being locked up. I came out a lot better man than when I went in.”

Swords, 27, was sentenced to house arrest in November 2016 after being convicted of possession of methamphetamine in Pontotoc County. He received a

total of two years to serve followed by three years of probation, and is now on parole.

Gutherz said the Noxubee program, which started May 2, received strong support from the community as it was being planned and implemented.

“The county officials didn’t hesitate to work with MDOC to help get the program started, due in part to a great working relationship established at the work center,” Gutherz said.

State Parole Board member Betty Lou Jones, who attended the Noxubee graduation, told the graduates there are two types of parolees, ones who want to get out and others who want to stay out.

“You have accomplished something you probably thought you never would have accomplished,” she said. “This is just the beginning... We expect you to be productive citizens, and we expect you to tell others about what you accomplished.”