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Date: March 30, 2018
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Corrections, Mental Health Officials celebrate graduation of first class in pilot program

JACKSON – A pilot program to assist offenders with co-occurring substance use and mental health disorders has produced its first group of graduates.

MS Co-Occurring Reentry Program (MS CORP) was funded by a \$647,461 Second Chance Act Reentry Program for Adults with Co-Occurring Substance Use and Mental Disorders grant provided by the U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance.

The Departments of Corrections and Mental Health launched the three-year Second Chance Act Reentry Program in 2016 aimed at improving identification of offenders with co-occurring disorders, training staff in mental health awareness, providing integrated individualized treatment plans, and tracking participant outcomes.

Six men received certificates and awards during a ceremony at Hinds Behavioral Health Services on Wednesday. They completed the National Institute of Corrections “Thinking for A Change” curriculum within the Hinds Behavioral Health Services co-occurring intensive outpatient program.

“We are fortunate to have the opportunity to make vitally important programs, such as this one, available to our offenders in an effort to provide meaningful post-release supervision,” Commissioner Pelicia E. Hall said. “Including cognitive behavioral therapy in our rehabilitation efforts gives offenders the chance to make better choices and lead productive lives.”

Stephanie Clanton, a therapist at Hinds Behavioral Health Services, said the federal funds allow the re-entry program to be provided at no cost to the participants or the state.

“The program’s concept is focused on helping offenders get a new start in life after incarceration while addressing mental health issues in such a way to hopefully reduce chances of recidivism,” Clanton said. “This was the first class to start the program, and we are very proud of them.”

Clanton said the “Thinking for a Change” program is combined with a therapeutic program that includes group and family therapy along with peer and community support services. The program can be completed in a minimum of 12-16 weeks, with moderate-risk offenders requiring 140 hours and high-risk offenders requiring 210 hours.

The program is open to both males and females who are at least 18 years old, Hinds County residents, and on supervised probation/parole for two years. Also, they must have a co-occurring substance use and mental health disorder diagnosis. Inmates are screened for eligibility while at one of the three state prisons.

John Blackman, one of the graduates, said he wants to use his experiences to mentor youth.

“This program changed my life. If it were not for ‘Thinking for a Change,’ I would still be in the prison institution,” said Blackman, 44, who is on parole for burglary.

“It was a long hard road, but I believe if you free your mind, your behind will follow. My favorite parts of the program helped me in learning to trust people again, keeping an open mind and raising my self-esteem. Now, I want to help other people.”

During the “Thinking for A Change” program, offenders are taught social skills and cognitive behavior skills in a classroom-setting three hours per week. Lessons include active listening, responding to anger, apologizing, giving feedback, using new thinking, paying attention to thinking, recognizing risks, making a plan and problem solving.

By delivering the MDOC-led “Thinking for A Change” curriculum with the Hinds Behavioral Health Services co-occurring intensive outpatient program, offenders have the benefit of a multi-disciplinary team working in one location for convenience and coordinated comprehensive treatment planning.

Hinds County Probation and Parole Agent Angela Harper said the benefits are already visible in the class members who graduated Wednesday.

“We have not had anyone to violate rules and return,” Harper said. “Two participants have full-time employment and another is working toward his GED.”

Wednesday’s graduates will continue to receive outpatient individual therapy, relapse prevention group, and family therapy as long as needed.

Ann Rodio, program administrator for the Department of Mental Health Bureau of Alcohol and Drug Services, served as the guest speaker for the ceremony.

“This program highlights the power of inter-agency collaboration and commitment in working towards achieving a common goal,” Rodio said.