In delivering keynote remarks, Commissioner Joseph K. Spano recognized not only the hard work of the nine graduates, but also the commitment and love of their families and many others in attendance. In speaking directly to a graduate who did not want her mother to see her in an orange jail jumpsuit, Spano said: “Like all of the family members here today, your mom is not seeing you wearing orange -- she’s seeing your progress, and seeing your hope.”

County Executive George Latimer then addressed the graduates, noting that as a society, we do not believe in “disposable people.” Drawing an analogy to the recent rescue of thirteen scouts from a flooded cave in Thailand, Latimer stated: “In principle, that’s the same thing we are doing here today. This graduation says that these lives matter; that these young men and women -- wherever they are at this minute in time – that there is going to be something better coming.”

Commencement speaker Taionna Howard, age 18 and a single mom, addressed the audience in a moving fashion, detailing her personal story of trauma and the factors that led to her incarceration. All of the graduates were appreciative of the overwhelming support they received to achieve this milestone, and acknowledged that today marked a new chapter in their lives.

Margaret Cunzio, Chair of the Board of Legislators’ Public Safety Committee and an educator from Mount Pleasant, stated: “Being part of today’s ceremony left me with a true sense of community. Providing offenders with an education and other programs is not simply a ‘feel good’ initiative -- it enhances public safety by giving them skills that are critical once they return home.”

For many years, the County has partnered with BOCES to ensure that young offenders, as well as adult learners, have the opportunity to pursue a high school diploma while in jail.  Inmates under nineteen years of age are considered a ‘special needs’ population by County jail officials based upon their cognitive, social and developmental needs. As a result, they receive a wide array of educational, therapeutic and recovery-related programs. Four of today’s graduates have already received acceptance letters to Manhattan College, and are taking a three-credit college course at the jail and at no cost to taxpayers or participants. [[Click here to see the Manhattan College story](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E-zln11mipw)].