

Second chances are always good. In Southside Virginia, a Diversion Program for young offenders is offering another chance at a successful life without incarceration.

The Coordinator of the diversion program at Southside Virginia Community College is pleased to announce initial successes from its first class. Designed to provide alternative sentencing, the first class began in October 2016. SVCC worked in partnership with local Commonwealth's Attorneys' offices to include Brunswick, Greensville, Mecklenburg and Lunenburg counties. The youthful offenders that enter the program face incarceration in either jail or prison due to a crime that they have committed and subsequently pled guilty. The program serves as an alternative to incarceration and/or a felony conviction and includes a requirement of participation in group and/or individual community service projects. Additionally, the program requires participants to be drug-free (verified through drug screenings) and of good behavior.

While serving as an advisor to SVCC's Administration of Justice Program, Lezlie Green the Commonwealth's Attorney for Brunswick County, presented the idea to Alfonzo Seward, program head for Administration of Justice. Both Green and Seward throughout their years in law enforcement recognized an unmet need for alternative sentencing programs in Southside Virginia. They joined forces with Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act Out of School Youth Program (WIOA) and Southside Community Corrections to develop a program that was approved by the college's administration and has been accepted as a sentencing alternative by both the local judiciary and defense bar.

The program is designed to follow a paramilitary format during the initial semester. The semester begins with a cohort of offenders meeting three nights a week in two different courses. These courses are designed to improve life skills, academic skills and overall behavior. The concept of the program is to provide individuals who fit the criteria with the opportunity to gain the necessary skills to attain employment and deal with the stressors of life so that they can become successful citizens.

Recently Seward recognized two success stories: Jamarcus Reid and Ja' Kei Woods, both members of the initial group. Although they were in the same cohort, their challenges were different due to differing educational backgrounds.

Reid completed the initial cohort semester and transitioned into college courses where he successfully completed his welding certification through SVCC's credit welding program. Reid also participated in 24 hours of community service projects while in the program. Reid and Woods participated in projects benefitting SVCC, Alberta Fire Department and the Town of Lawrenceville. They met the criteria of being drug-free during the program.

During the course of the program, and in addition to the welding certificate Reid completed a work experience and earned a Career Readiness Certificate. Reid has already experienced success in working in the welding field as well as other employment pursuits.

Woods was awarded his GED on February 23, 2018. For a period of almost a year and a half, he attended GED classes and the diversion cohort nights. Woods successfully completed the "Dream It Do It Welding Academy" and was awarded a \$100.00 gift card for his presentations.

Woods also successfully completed two work experiences, earned a National Career Readiness Certificate, and participated in 32 hours of community service projects. Woods plans to remain at SVCC to earn his welding certificate.

The program operates through grant funded assistance and donations to SVCC. Monica McMillan, Caseworker with WIOA was essential in assisting with funding, oversight, and employment of the offenders. Contributions to this worthwhile program can be made through the SVCC Foundation, Inc., at 434-949-1051. For program information, contact Seward at 434-949-1092.