

Ulster County Jail Program Helps Inmates Prepare for Life After Release

IGNITE offers incarcerated people education, job training and re-entry support

By Sarah Trafton, Staff Writer

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The IGNITE program at Ulster County jail offers incarcerated individuals the opportunity to earn several vocational certifications, such as a ServSafe certification from Aramark.

KINGSTON — After a near-death experience, Austin Andrew realized he needed to make a change in his life.

He had recently violated the terms of his probation. A routine appendectomy went wrong, leading to a lengthy hospital stay for sepsis. After recovering, he decided to turn himself in.

"I wanted to do right by my daughter and myself," said Andrew, 33, of Lake Katrine.

On Dec. 4, Andrew surrendered to law enforcement authorities, who arrested him for parole violations related to multiple driving while intoxicated convictions. At the Ulster County jail, he noticed pamphlets about a program called IGNITE.

It would become the turning point he was looking for.

Individual Growth Naturally and Intentionally Through Education is a jail-based rehabilitation program aimed at helping incarcerated people prepare for life after release through education, job training, personal development and connections to community resources. It began in 2020 at Genesee County Jail in Flint, Mich., and has since expanded to nearly 40 facilities across the country. The Ulster County jail became the second facility in New York to adopt IGNITE in December 2023 and the 11th nationwide.

To qualify, incarcerated individuals must go more than 60 days without an incident at the jail and undergo an individualized assessment to identify their goals. Once accepted, participants move to a specialized housing unit, where they receive special uniforms and have access to an in-unit washer and dryer, a coffee maker, laptops, a printer, art and writing supplies, and other amenities.

Participants must also complete 16 hours of online learning each week and choose education and job training programs and support groups they want to attend.

The program typically has about six to eight participants at a time, Ulster County Incarcerated Individual Program Manager Megan Ferri said.



Participants in the IGNITE program work on their resumes on Aug. 13.

Community Corrections Specialist Ali Patsos, a licensed clinical social worker, helps participants plan for reentry by connecting them with housing, therapists, employment and other resources they may need. She also stays in touch with participants after their release to continue supporting them.

“IGNITE is not just a program — it’s a different way of thinking about our participants,” Patsos said. “They go home, and they’re part of our community. We want to welcome them back as their best self.”

Participants often maintain relationships with the organizations that support them during their incarceration, said Amy Lenard, executive director of Ulster Literacy, which provides GED classes and writing and art workshops.

“Post-release, there’s a space for them to come to continue their education, to say hello, to just come in and sit down and have a friendly face at a time that can be complicated,” Lenard said. “It’s not a program that ceases once they’re released; it’s a relationship that’s just the beginning.”

About 10 participants have been released so far, Ferri said. Two are planning to attend college, while others have expressed interest in returning to the IGNITE program as tutors.

In addition to Ulster Literacy, several community organizations contribute to the program. Carpenters Local Union #279 offers a preapprenticeship program; Cornell Cooperative Extension has offered parenting classes; the Ulster County Office of Employment and Training provides a foundations of work program; and the Hudson Valley National Center for Veteran Reintegration offers peer support for incarcerated veterans.

Program administrators are also working to add Occupational Safety and Health Administration certificate training and virtual reality job training using Meta Quest headsets, Ferri said.

During his six months in the program, Andrew earned his GED diploma, CPR and automated external defibrillator certifications, and a ServSafe certificate, a food safety credential offered through Aramark.



Austin Andrew, center, with his family at his graduation ceremony at Ulster County jail.

More importantly, Andrew said, he gained a positive support system to help him stay on the right path. Since his release in July, he has been exploring becoming a certified recovery peer advocate.

“Sometimes people just need an open ear and somebody that’s been through the experiences that they’ve actually been through,” he said. “If I could be that for somebody, that would be great.”

His advice to other incarcerated individuals considering the IGNITE program is simple: Do it.

“If you’ve got the time, then use it wisely to take those opportunities,” he said. “You never know where it’s going to lead you.”

IGNITE event

Ulster Literacy is hosting a screening of “Redemption Time,” a film about the redemptive power of art in an incarcerated setting. A panel discussion with film director David Gonzalez and members of the incarcerated education program at the Ulster County jail will follow the screening.

When: Saturday, 4-6 p.m.

Where: Orpheum Theatre, Saugerties

Tickets: upstatefilms.org