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Easing the Passage From Prison

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As family and friends made their way through the metal detector and past the uniformed guards, Lloyd Williams sat off to the side, going over his speech, mumbling to himself. In a few moments, the courtroom in the [Harlem Community Justice Center](#) would be filled with parolees turned graduates. After spending half his life in prison, Mr. Williams, 46, wearing a crisp suit and tie, was the valedictorian of sorts, one of the night's guest speakers.

Almost a year ago, the 53 parolees walked out of prison and into this program run in East Harlem. They are part of the churn of incarceration data, prison costs and bad decisions. And even though [New York State statistics say](#) that within seven years, nearly two-thirds of former offenders are rearrested and more than half are again convicted, the program seeks to help parolees returning to the Harlem community make the transition from their time spent behind bars.

The nine-month program, one of about two dozen specialized "re-entry courts" in the country, is a collaboration between the State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision and a public-private partnership, [the Center for Court Innovation](#), with support from other groups.

"When I came through here, I didn't think I was going to make it," Irving Brewster, 49, told those gathered as he accepted his certificate at the ceremony on Wednesday.

"But because of my two little babies in the back," he said, pointing to his 6-year-old son, Irving Jr., who stood on a chair grinning at him, and his 5-year-old daughter, Innocence, "I'm determined to move forward."

Mr. Brewster lives a short walk from the courthouse. For him, the certificate means almost a year clean, and almost a year out of trouble. He now has a temporary job, through the program, as a maintenance worker, and a curfew of 9 p.m. to 7 a.m. as part of his parole. His life was once spent mostly on the streets; now he spends time going over homework and getting his children ready for school. He planned to hang his certificate up in the living room.

Each parolee is assigned a case manager and a parole officer and regularly stands before the administrative judge. The program helps with everything from emergency housing to

mental health services, from getting a MetroCard to rebuilding battered family relationships and rewiring criminal thinking. A recent evaluation showed that parolees who completed the program were less likely to be rearrested, to be convicted again or to violate parole.

Finding employment is a critical challenge, said Christopher Watler, the project director at the Justice Center. Only about half of the graduates were employed.

"Work is a real need in Harlem, particularly if you're someone with a criminal conviction," Mr. Watler said. "If these guys aren't working, it's a problem long term. Just keeping someone problem-free while they're on parole is not enough. You actually have to help them to reintegrate into society."

Over the years, Mr. Watler said, parolees in the program have been coming in younger and younger.

Some of those who have come through the program were career criminals, upending families and neighborhoods through violent crimes. Some were nonviolent first-time offenders. This week's graduating class of 53 was the largest in the history of the program, which began in June 2001. They were mostly African-American or Hispanic; four were women. They had a variety of offenses in their criminal histories, and ranged in age from high school seniors at 18 to grandparents at 60.

The two-hour ceremony began with a prayer, followed by a hymn from the choir standing in the jury box. A string of noted speakers from the criminal justice system offered words of warm encouragement and cold reality. After graduation, the participants finish off their sentences in the regular parole system.

Terry Saunders, who is chief administrative law judge for the Corrections Department - and is known in the program as "the hugging judge" - reminded the graduates of the difference between talk and action. "The change has to be permanent," he said. "This has to stick for life. Failure is not an option."

The four parole officers in the program called up the graduates; only about half showed up for the ceremony. But one by one each spoke, if only to say thank you. They thanked the program. They thanked the staff. They thanked their parole officers. They thanked their mothers, wives, girlfriends and children. Families smiled, clapped, cheered and snapped pictures.

For Jaquan Roberts, who from his boyish looks and grin appeared to be in his early 20s, the ceremony marked "the first time in five years I am proud of myself," he said as he held his certificate. Another graduate, Cisco Sabater, with headphones around his neck, handed his parole officer a bouquet of fresh flowers "for being patient with me, and for being genuine."

Mr. Williams, who spent a total of 30 years of his life in prison or on parole and is now a husband and father who holds down two jobs, as an exterminator and a buildings superintendent, peered over his glasses and told his story.

"I ran those streets," he told the crowd, as his mother, who for years cried for him and visited him in prisons throughout the state, looked on.

"From murder to robbery," he continued, "from shooting people to selling drugs - that was my life. And I'm deeply sorry and ashamed of the actions that I have caused, for I hurt a lot of people."

But that has changed, he said. "I'm inspired by you brothers and sisters," he said. "Because it has taken you a less time to do what it took me 30 years to do."