QUICK THINKING
Special Operations Group uses their diverse training to assist with a safety incident on the New Jersey Turnpike.

MOVING FORWARD
Technological upgrades provide an extra level of efficiency for the Central Transportation Unit.

BREAKING THROUGH
Peer Navigators serve at the forefront of treatment for those living with opioid use disorders.

FAITH
Reverend Victor M. Lee reflects on serving as a spiritual advisor for the incarcerated.

PICTURE THIS
Bishop James F. Checchio celebrates mass with inmates at Edna Mahan Correctional Facility.

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Inside Word
with Acting Commissioner Marcus O. Hicks, Esq.

Breaking Through
Peer Navigators are an important tool in NJDOC’s battle against opioid addictions.

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Special Operations Group Extrication Team thwarts the spread of a fire on a New Jersey Turnpike bridge.

Faith
An NJDOC chaplain recalls years of service to the inmate population and the importance of faith behind bars.

Moving Forward
NJDOC’s Central Transportation Unit to be the beneficiary of tech upgrades.

Picture This
Bishop James F. Checchio of the Diocese of Metuchen visits Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women.
I recently had an opportunity to take part in a daylong summit at which nearly 500 members of the medical community came together to share best practices in treating opioid use disorder. The event, held September 20 at the Atlantic City Convention Center, was highlighted by news of the Murphy Administration’s $8 million investment to partner with county jails to provide medication-assisted treatment (MAT) to individuals with opioid addiction who are justice-involved while in jail and post-release.

How urgent is the need for action to reduce the risk of post-release overdose for this population? Studies have suggested the risk of opioid overdose deaths for people shortly after leaving prison is as much as 129 times that of the general population.

The initiative builds on the New Jersey Department of Corrections’ MAT program, through which we partner with the Department of Human Services to bring addiction treatment into prisons. County funding supports the creation of an MAT program or enhancement of existing programs, reaching more people and providing sustainable solutions to address addiction issues.

There has been a paradigm shift in the treatment of incarcerated individuals with substance use disorders. With clinically proven MAT and a continuum of services post-release, this initiative has the ability to reduce recidivism rates and enhance public safety.
Peer navigators help inmates design a comprehensive plan that includes opioid use disorder recovery, wellness and reentry.

BREAKING THROUGH

Peer Navigators Complete NJDOC’s Recovery Toolbox

By: John Cokos

James Ryals sat across from an inmate who lived with an opioid use disorder for most of his life. Despite Ryals’ charisma and amiable introduction, the inmate offered no reply. Ryals wasn’t surprised by the response. In fact, it’s what he expected and exactly why the visit was scheduled.

“I know what it’s like to walk the yard,” Ryals said to the inmate, undeterred by the inmate’s guardedness, “and I know all too well what it’s like to be confined to a cell.”

Ryals is a peer navigator who works as part of the Intensive Recovery Treatment Support program, a joint collaboration between the New Jersey Department of Corrections (NJDOC), the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services and Rutgers University Behavioral Health Care. Positions exist for as many as 30 peer navigators to provide assistance to up to 600 inmates who require opioid use disorder services.

The NJDOC has taken significant strides to strengthen its approach to treating opioid use disorders and curtail the criminal behavior associated with it. It opened the state’s first licensed, clinically driven treatment facility for inmates at Mid-State Correctional Facility, expanded its medication-assisted treatment program and recognized that individual expressions of
addiction require tailored wellness plans for each person.

Since the establishment of the program, peer navigators have proven to be valuable assets for connecting released offenders with community services during the reentry process. Peer navigators can begin meeting with inmates six months prior to release and continue to provide assistance up to a year after the release date.

To achieve the best results, an additional concern needed to be addressed – the tendency of people living with opioid use disorders to resist treatment. That is where Ryals and other peer navigators come in. They all are in the lifelong recovery process, far removed from criminal activity, and they are opening up to inmates with opioid use disorders to help shepherd each individual journey to wellness, recovery and reentry.

The group is selected and trained by Rutgers University Behavioral Health Care. The unique program requires that peer navigators are either former inmates, in recovery or both.

“There’s often a communication barrier you have to navigate through,” Ryals said. “A lifestyle involving substance use doesn’t lend itself to trusting people. In order to build trust, you must be relatable, but you can’t feign genuine empathy. You have to understand first-hand what it’s like.”

Despite being raised by hardworking parents, Ryals took to the streets of his Harlem neighborhood at an early age. He sold drugs and used drugs. His tumultuous lifestyle led to several periods of incarceration.

“I recognized after 20 years in and out of prisons that if I didn’t change, I would spend the rest of my life in jail or worse,” Ryals said, “but you need someone in your corner to break the cycle. I’ve been blessed to have people in my corner, and the feeling to be able to offer that kind of support for someone else is indescribable.”

Since the program’s inception, there have been nearly 1,300 inmates referred for navigator services, approximately 4,550 visits from navigators to inmates in prison and 3,300 community visits.

The program was also the driving force behind the pre-entry program that helps educate offenders during processing on the services available to them in prison.

Peer navigator Debra Pascarella became a recreational drug user at 13, but toward the end of that period in her life, she was using against her will. Due to traumatic events in her life and not knowing how to ask for help, she admittedly played a victim for many years.

“I suffered from the guilt, shame and consequences of addiction,” Pascarella said. “When the pain of addiction outweighed my fear of change, it forced me to reach out for help. It wasn’t until someone extended unconditional love and support and assisted me with identifying my positive traits and strengths, that I became empowered to change my life and set goals for myself. Now I do the same for others.”

Pascarella and other peer navigators travel throughout the state for visits with inmates
while they’re incarcerated and maintain the relationships after the inmates are released.

“It’s important to understand that relapse doesn’t define a person’s willingness to stop using drugs,” Pascarella added. “Learning coping skills such as putting space between thought and action and utilizing tools such as journaling changed my thinking and behaviors, which made all the difference. One of my favorite quotes is ‘If you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change.’”

Another peer navigator, Kelly Sottile, struggled with a cocaine and heroin addiction. She had a boyfriend who enabled her habit and a secret life her friends knew nothing about.

“I got to a point where I felt so alone that living was becoming unbearable,” Sottile said. “I wish I had had someone in my life earlier on who said, ‘Hey, there’s another way.’”

Sottile focuses on concepts like self-care and forward thinking during her visits with inmates.

“I don’t get into sharing war stories,” Sottile said. “We all know how to get high. We all have similar experiences. Let’s talk about how to get clean.

“Trust comes at a premium,” Sottile added, “A foundation of trust takes time, but it is the basis for positive outcomes. It’s very gratifying though when you can get through, watch the people with whom you build relationships steadily begin to realize that addiction doesn’t have to define them. It was simply a part of their life; it is not who they are.”
After a routine training exercise in mid-August, members of the New Jersey Department of Corrections (NJDOC) Field Force Extrication (FFE) team left the MetLife Stadium and headed for the New Jersey Turnpike. As the small convoy attempted to cross the Chaplain Washington Bridge, which carries the Eastern Spur over the Passaic River, the team’s multifaceted skills and versatility proved invaluable in responding to an incident that was anything but routine.

The FFE team is one of numerous specialized teams within the NJDOC’s Special Operations Group (SOG). The team is a statewide asset trained to control hostile crowds and remove protestors who have broken the law or become violent. As with most of SOG’s personnel, many FFE team members are cross-trained in a variety of other disciplines.

While crossing the bridge, the FFE convoy noticed smoke billowing from somewhere further along on the bridge. Senior Correctional Police Officer Richard Yacovelli, a SOG member and 25-year veteran firefighter, listened to the two-way radio chatter as the front of the convoy...
The team stopped the fire from spreading and maintained traffic control during the 10 minutes it took for the Newark Fire Department to get through the heavy traffic.

“We got the pump and the hose hooked up in about 45 seconds,” Yacovelli said. “Not only were we able to hold the fire down, we put it completely out.”

When the State Police and the Newark Fire Department arrived, the SOG team offered the responding authorities a synopsis of the incident before relinquishing control.

“The team trains with three objectives in mind,” McGowan said. “Safety, incident stabilization and property conservation are vital to managing any incident. With so many motorists in proximity, the possibility of hazardous cargo and the infrastructure of the bridge at stake, meeting those objectives was critical and accomplished successfully.”

Yacovelli described the scene. Only seconds later, the team members realized they were going to have to make a decision.

“There was a tractor-trailer on fire in the middle of the bridge,” Yacovelli said. “It was rolling pretty good, and the fire was starting to move into the trailer.”

Yacovelli was driving SOG’s versatile Hazmat response truck. The truck holds, among a variety of other equipment, a portable, 200-gallon container of water.

“The tractor-trailer likely had at least two high-capacity saddles of diesel fuel that we definitely didn’t want the fire to reach,” Yacovelli said. “With all those cars in the middle of the bridge, I made the decision to make my way to the scene.”

Yacovelli broke free from the bumper-to-bumper traffic and drove along the shoulder to the scene of the fire. As he positioned the Hazmat response truck a safe distance from the burning trailer, several others followed suit controlling the flow of traffic over the bridge and preparing to fight the fire.

“When a cargo truck is involved in a fire, you don’t always know if there are hazardous materials burning inside,” said Correctional Police Sergeant Kevin McGowan. “With that in mind, there couldn’t have been a more capable group of individuals at the scene. Some of the guys are also members of the Hazmat team, and several others also serve as volunteer firefighters in their hometowns.”

Shortly after leaving the MetLife Stadium on August 19, the SOG FFE team took control of an incident on the Chaplain Washington Bridge.
The King James Bible rests on a stand across from his desk.

Filled with more than 25 years of notes and highlighted passages, the book has become more than just evidence of Reverend Victor Lee’s faith. It represents Lee’s enduring quest to bring spirituality into the lives of individuals behind bars.

“Studying God’s holy word keeps me grounded and rooted in Him,” said Lee, who started working for the New Jersey Department of Corrections (NJDOC) in 2008 as a chaplain.

Throughout his employment, Lee has worked with faith-based leaders and nonprofit organizations across the state to help inmates during their journey to discover their own faith and reenter into society.

Lee has escorted some prominent names in the religious community during visits to NJDOC facilities, including Newark Archbishop Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin.

“We as chaplains in the Department have been gifted to be able to do the Lord’s work,” Lee said.
In 2016, he was promoted to State Coordinator for the Office of Chaplaincy Services. A job, yet, Lee finds it a calling with its own rewards.

“I love the ability to come to work and do the work of the Lord,” Lee said. “It’s a humbling experience.”

Besides his full-time job with the NJDOC, Lee is the pastor of St. Paul's Baptist Church in Cinnaminson.

Inmates tend to embrace a form of religion while incarcerated, Lee stated.

“I would say that 90 percent of the inmate population embrace some form of religion while they are incarcerated. Many of the inmates find the Lord or spiritual identity while in prison,” Lee said. “The inmates have the time to study the Bible, spiritual books or religious book of choice.”

As part of the prison ministry, chaplains go from cell to cell to see if the inmates want prayer or to take part in a religious service.

“The inmates light up when they see a chaplain roaming through the prison halls,” Lee said.

One of the many highlights of Lee’s career in the NJDOC happened when he taught a month-long Bible study on the Book of Revelation.

“The inmates loved it, and the class kept growing,” Lee said. “The inmates kept coming back and asking more questions. saw the excitement on their faces.”

Chaplains in NJDOC prisons include hundreds of volunteers who come from all faiths.

To show appreciation to NJDOC volunteers, the Department holds an annual Volunteer Appreciation Ceremony for its volunteers.

“Our Chaplains are always recruiting more volunteers,” Lee said.

Those interested in working as a volunteer should contact Melinda Myricks in the Office of Volunteer Services 609-292-4036, ext. 5304.
The New Jersey Department of Corrections (NJDOC) will implement a Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) program within the Department’s Central Transportation Unit (CTU) as part of a series of information technology modernizations planned by the Department. The project is scheduled to begin early next year.

Developed by Motorola through Spillman Technologies, the program will be made possible by an operational improvement grant received from the New Jersey Office of Information Technology.

Since its inception in 1986, the CTU has served as the Department’s primary system for transporting inmates to court appearances, medical appointments and facility transfers throughout the state and beyond. Utilizing its extensive fleet of vehicles, the unit frequently transports more than 200 inmates a day and logs millions of travel miles each year.

The system through which the CTU plans and carries out each day’s
movements is crucial. One of the most challenging facets to keeping the unit operating smoothly is maintaining the hundreds of daily schedules, logs and communications that are currently manually completed and distributed on paper.

In addition to the efficiency and savings using the greener CAD program represents, it’s expected to provide an even more significant benefit.

“The program will offer huge safety benefits to inmates, staff and the public,” said NJDOC Office of Information Technology Assistant Director Keith Mercantante.

Currently, the CTU depends solely on radio communications and hand-written updates if there is an unexpected change in a scheduled route, vehicle breakdown or other emergency.

“With the new program, we’ll be able to track vehicle movements in real-time,” said Correctional Police Sergeant Edward Doran, who oversees training for the CTU. “If a vehicle travels outside of its scheduled route or stops for an unusual length of time, the system will alert dispatch automatically.”

Dispatch personnel will also be able to generate and distribute daily travel agendas electronically and track vehicle maintenance schedules more efficiently.

Transport vehicles will be equipped with Windows-based laptops on which drivers will be able to quickly send and receive up-to-date information.

A version of the Spillman CAD program is currently being used by the New Jersey State Police.

“I was mesmerized when I saw the program in use at one of the State Police operational dispatch units,” Doran said. “It is exciting to know the NJDOC will be able to operate with that level of control and efficiency and be one of the first correctional agencies in the country to use the program.

“Thanks to the approval and forward thinking of our unit’s Major, Thomas Holovacko, and the support of the administration, we will be at the forefront of correctional transportation technology,” he continued. “It’s exactly the type of developments we should be looking at, especially when human lives are involved.”
Bishop James F. Checchio of the Diocese of Metuchen celebrated mass for inmates at Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women on the morning of August 28. The mass was held in the Good Shepherd Church on the grounds of the facility. Father Jonathan S. Toborowsky and Deacon Michael Meyer, both from the Immaculate Conception Parish in Annandale, assisted the bishop. (Photos by Ed Koskey Jr.)