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### **Essex Vicinage to Hold Drug Court Graduation Ceremony**

Essex Vicinage will hold its 19<sup>th</sup> annual drug court graduation ceremony on Wednesday, Dec. 9 at 1 p.m. at the Mary Burch Theater in Essex County Community College, 303 University Ave., Newark.

Honored at the ceremony will be nine graduates who have successfully completed the drug court program and 41 others who will be advancing to the program's fourth and final phase. The event marks the largest commencement ceremony in the vicinage's history.

Drug Court Judge Ramona A. Santiago will preside over the event. Assignment Judge Sallyanne Floria will address the graduates and Felicia Osborne, executive director and CEO of Bethel Counseling Services, will deliver the keynote speech. Also scheduled to perform is a choir from Straight & Narrow, a treatment provider servicing drug court participants.

The drug court program is a highly specialized team process within the existing Superior Court structure that relies upon a unique, collaborative relationship between criminal justice officials and drug treatment professionals to address non-violent, drug-related cases.

Drug court programs are rigorous, requiring completion of four phases during five years of intensive drug and alcohol treatment and random drug testing. Participants follow a tightly structured regimen of treatment and recovery. This level of supervision supports the recovery process, but also allows supervisors to react swiftly to impose appropriate therapeutic sanctions or to reinstate criminal proceedings when participants do not comply with the program.

Essex's drug court program has more than 460 active participants. Program graduates must comply with all treatment recommendations, attend meetings, gain employment, work toward a GED or high school diploma, and demonstrate a regular payment history on all court fines.

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**Arrangements will be made for reporters to interview willing graduates upon conclusion of the ceremony.**

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