

News Release



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‘The Proudest Moment in My Life’ Drug Court Graduations Go Virtual During Pandemic

The Morris/Sussex Vicinage graduated six of its drug court participants on Tuesday in a virtual celebration that may have kept them apart physically because of the COVID-19 pandemic, but not emotionally.

Under normal circumstances, the four men and two women would have been in a courtroom with the rest of their fellow graduates, surrounded by friends and relatives acknowledging their achievements, dozens of other drug court participants cheering them on, and their probation officers praising their transformations.

Instead, they were on their computers or phones, some of them alone, others with loved ones, participating in a one-hour Zoom conference of more than 40 people that served as the virtual proxy for an in-person graduation.

Scenes like this are playing out across the state as the Judiciary’s vicinages are forced to forego the usual pomp and circumstance of drug court graduations and replace them with video or telephone gatherings to recognize the graduates’ success at conquering their addiction.

“We’d all like to have face-to-face contact with you and celebrate in a more traditional manner,” Superior Court Judge Michael Hubner told the. “But we can do this. This is worth it. Recognizing you is more important than waiting and waiting and waiting for things to ‘get back to normal.’”

Elizabeth Cervenak, a public defender in Morris County, noted that people can easily become overwhelmed by the desire to return to normal.

“But what struck me was that each one of you graduating today, the six of you, could teach us a thing or two about surrendering. To accepting the things you cannot change, to change the things you can, and (having) the wisdom to know the difference,” she told the group.

In addition to these graduates, the Morris drug court program held a graduation for another participant on April 24 and will hold another on May 12.

The Sussex County drug court is planning small ceremonies for between one and five graduates every Thursday in May.

The Somerset/Hunterdon/Warren Vicinage held five graduations for 10 participants in April and has one scheduled for May 7 in Warren County.

The Union Vicinage’s drug court program graduated seven participants on April 17.

The Burlington Vicinage graduated 18 people from its drug court program on April 2 but is planning a public ceremony in the future.

“These graduates have gone through a lot of hard work to get to this point and it is important that we still recognize the significance of their accomplishments,” said Morris/Sussex Assignment Judge Stuart Minkowitz.

Lauren F. called her graduation “the proudest moment in my life.”

She said drug court has provided structure and accountability, helped her mend relationships with friends and family, and allowed her to make a clean start to foster closer relationships with her children.

Lauren views the pandemic as a test.

“Life isn’t easy. What we’re going through right now isn’t easy,” she said. “To stay sober and to stay connected through a time like this is incredible.”

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(New Jersey Judiciary)

