

# The Star-Ledger

**‘It saved my life.’ N.J. parolees just out of prison get extra help dealing with addiction.**

By Blake Nelson

NJ Advance Media for NJ.com and The Star-Ledger

Published March 8, 2020

Joy Thompson was at a loss.

Her opioid addiction had led to theft, and theft led to prison. She didn't have a job or an apartment when she got out in 2019, so she was all ears when her parole officer suggested she enroll in a program to help people struggling with addiction.

“It saved my life,” Thompson, 58, told NJ Advance Media. “I don't know what I would have done if I didn't have that.”

Thompson was one of dozens of parolees recently part of New Jersey's Swift, Certain, and Fair Supervision Program, which put her in constant contact with a social worker and addiction specialists in addition to the officer. The team worked in tandem to help her and others navigate life outside.

Out of 51 people, only six were ever sent back to prison, officials said. Nobody overdosed and died, despite opioid deaths generally being on the rise.

“Having that direct support is immeasurable,” said David Wolfsgruber, who helped run the program and was recently promoted as the parole board's executive director.

Samuel Plumeri, the board's chairman, said he was relieved not just to slow the death toll, but to fight the “revolving door” of parolees heading back to prison.

The program's numbers led to the state attorney general's office to recently give the board a new award.

Case workers interacted with the parolees about 4,000 times over two years, according to Kevin Lecorchick, a recovery specialist and manager with RWJ Barnabas Health's Institute for Prevention and Recovery. While the initial goal was just to stop people from dying, he and others also helped parolees find jobs and housing.

“As one of our clients so elegantly stated: ‘They send us to Hell and expect us to come out as angels,’” Lecorchick said.

He knows how hard it can be. Lecorchick used heroin for years and has spent time in jail, he said. But having someone available 24/7 built up a level of trust. One guy even invited him to his wedding, Lecorchick said.

Parolees were told to be honest if they'd relapsed, said Josie White, a social worker with the New Jersey Reentry Corporation. While returning to prison was always on the table, the parole board was always open to other ways to respond, she said.

The program was made possible through a \$600,000 federal grant. That money runs out at the end of the month, officials said, and the last new client was enrolled last August.

But advocates hope the program can eventually be expanded statewide.

Former Gov. Jim McGreevey said he's lobbying lawmakers and the governor's office to set aside funding in the future.

The best way to help addicts was for law enforcement to cooperate with drug treatment experts, not just rely on one or the other, he said.

Thompson, the former parolee, said she was often in daily contact with Lecorchick, White and her parole officer, Tom Bielskie. (Another recovery coach, Robert Carter, was also part of the team.)

During Thompson's nine months in the program, they helped her get an apartment, find her first job and sign up for government services, she said.

While she'd once taken "pills left and right," always having someone to call meant she was never tempted to use after getting out of prison, Thompson said. She hopes others will eventually get the same level of support.

"There's a lot of people, like myself, that want to survive and want to move forward with their life," she said.