



STAFF PHOTOS BY KEVIN R. WEXLER

The Straight and Narrow Choir performing Wednesday at Passaic County Community College in Paterson, where a ceremony was held Wednesday for graduates of the Superior Court's county-based drug program.

# Addicts turn lives around

## 24 success stories graduate from state's drug court

By **MATTHEW McGRATH**  
STAFF WRITER

**PATERSON** — Keith Jones stood at a lectern in a Passaic County Community College auditorium in front of friends, family, police officers, prosecutors and judges to proudly declare that he has a job, he has credit and he has respect.

The reason, he said, was that he had turned his substance-abusing life around, thanks to the state Superior Court's county-based drug court program — on Wednesday, the 45-year-old grandfather was one of 24 people graduating from the program.

"I learned how to be responsible," Jones said. "I was a 40-year-old man living with my parents. I took the opportunity to change my life."

He's now a truck driver for a company in Wayne. He worked up to that position during the past two years. He started as a package handler and then as a machine operator.

"I have credit," Jones said as his voice boomed over the packed room. "I bought two new cars in the past year. ... It's just from paying my bills on time."

It's successes like Jones' that lead many involved in the drug court program, including Judge Rudolf Filko, to declare, "Drug court works."

Statewide, there have been 3,400 graduates from state drug courts, and 379 of them have come from Passaic County, Filko said. What's most important, said the judge, is that 144 parents have regained custody of their children and 286 drug-free babies have been born to drug



Governor Christie greeting a graduate. "We have an obligation as a society to help" addicts, Christie said.

court alumni.

The county's drug court is one of three programs set for a mandatory expansion next year under a law signed by Governor Christie that requires non-violent drug offenders to be sentenced to treatment programs instead of prison. The Atlantic and

Cape May counties' joint court and the Mercer court are the others. The full expansion will be rolled out over five years.

Christie, who has made drug-offense prosecution one of the cornerstones of his administration, was the keynote speaker at Wednesday's graduation. Speaking before Jones made his presentation, Christie noted the need to stop the cycle of drug abuse and incarceration, which puts the same people in front of the same judges time and again. He said the solution to the state's drug problems cannot be to put them out of our sight "and feel that we're fixing the problem."

"They don't want this," Christie said referring to addiction. "We have an obligation as a society to help them get over this."

Regardless of the humanitarian reasons for drug court, the governor said there are financial considerations, too. Keeping a drug offender in jail for a year costs about \$49,000. Rehabilitation for an addict costs about half as much. It helps people take control of their lives and gets them off the streets and back to work.

Jones called the opportunity to go through drug court a blessing. He was either drunk or high when his two older sons, now 25 and 22, were growing up. Jones has been able to rebuild a relationship with them, he said. His oldest lives in Virginia with his four children, and Jones has the opportunity to drive there and see his grandchildren.

"They will be able to know me," Jones said. "I can be there for them."

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