

PROGRAM: The Choice is Yours

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PHILADELPHIA (KYW Newsradio) — A prison diversion program for first-time drug offenders celebrates 10 years of keeping people out of the system.

Graduates of "The Choice is Yours," operated by JEVS Human Services of Philadelphia, move forward with clean records and a second chance.

First-time, non-violent drug offenders between 18 and 30 years old who have been arrested and charged with possession with the intent to distribute can take advantage of the free 13-month program.

JEVS Human Services Senior Vice President of Communications and Public Affairs Kristen Rantanen said participants are required to be working or in an employment and training program.

“The first thing that happens with participants in the program is an assessment and a goal-setting process identifying what they want to work on over those next 13 months, and what’s going to make the biggest difference for them,” she said.

The program includes skills training and educational opportunities, job search and job placement help, as well as community service placement.

Once they complete the program, they have a new lease on life.

“One year post-graduation, if folks stay out of trouble and they aren’t re-arrested, they have the opportunity to have their record completely expunged,” Rantanen said. “At graduation, charges are dropped.”

Rantanen applauds the program’s success rate.

“We have an 85% graduation rate, and about a 12% recidivism rate one year post-graduation, which is extraordinary,” she said.

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She added that many participants return to be a mentor.

“It speaks to the value of their experience in the program that they want to stay connected and reach back, and help other young people who are traveling down the same path,” said Rantanen.

The Choice is Yours is run in partnership with the [Philadelphia District Attorney’s Office](#), Municipal Court, and the Defender Association of Philadelphia, and has recently expanded to [Montgomery County](#).