

# Helping go from jail to jobs

Former inmates get 'Fresh Start' in extended setup

BY MICHAEL O'KEEFFE  
michael.okeeffe@newsday.com

A two-year program that has helped more than 100 former Suffolk County jail inmates find jobs will be extended, County Executive Steve Bellone said.

Suffolk's "Fresh Start" program, funded by a \$489,901 grant from the U.S. Department of Labor, expired in December, but Bellone said the program has been so successful that it will continue, with money from the federal government and county.

"It's been a really good example of how to use federal funding," Bellone said in a recent interview. "After two years, we have created a model that has helped us be successful in reducing recidivism."

One of those who benefited from the program is Jessica Chmielewski, 31, of East Northport, who was held in the Riverhead Correctional Facility for two months after being arrested for driving while intoxicated. Sentenced to 1½ years of probation, she said she chose to speed up completion of her sentence by serving two months in jail.

"It is overwhelming when you are in there," she said. "You want to get out and do the right thing, but you need guidance. To have somebody who wants you to succeed, that is what you need to move forward."

The program has not only strengthened families by keeping inmates from returning to



Angela DeVito, a rehabilitation counselor with the Fresh Start program, was credited by a woman with typing and submitting her resumé.

jail and turning them into gainfully employed taxpayers, but it also will save Suffolk taxpayers millions of dollars, Bellone said.

New York State had ordered the county to build another facility and add additional beds to ease jail overcrowding, but the state reversed that decision in 2015 after Suffolk launched initiatives to curb recidivism by offering help to low-risk, pre-trial inmates who could not afford bail or needed treatment or supervision instead of jail. Programs such as Fresh Start will continue to keep the jail population manageable, Bellone said.

"Investments like this pay

off," Bellone said. "I'd rather help someone get a job than pay for them to go to jail."

After applying for the federal grant in October 2016, officials appointed two full-time staff members and two part-timers to work with inmates in the county's Yaphank and Riverhead jails, said Senior Deputy Commissioner Beth Murphy of the Suffolk Department of Labor, Licensing and Consumer Affairs, which administered the program.

Since then, 355 inmates who participated in the program received vocational counseling and were taught how to write a resumé, prepare for a job inter-

view and other employment search skills. The participants also were introduced to case managers with the county's One-Stop Employment Center, which brings together employers and job-seekers. The center also provides job-seekers with free suits and other professional clothing they can wear to job interviews. At least 105 of those people received jobs in retail, manufacturing, construction, maintenance and other industries after their release, Murphy said.

"Having gainful employment is one of the factors that can reduce recidivism, and we are fortunate to have Department of

Labor staff working with us to improve outcomes for those transitioning from jail to our communities," said Suffolk Sheriff Errol Toulon, whose office oversees the Yaphank and Riverhead correctional facilities.

Chmielewski said she believes the program is worth continuing. She said Angela DeVito, a county career counselor, helped her prepare a "very professional" resumé that landed her a job with a contractor.

"I know I got the job I have because my resumé looked so professional," Chmielewski said. "She typed it up and even dropped it off. I was like, 'Who does this for criminals?'"

## Death in Nassau jail cell being investigated

BY BRIDGET MURPHY  
bridget.murphy@newsday.com

Authorities are investigating the death of a Nassau County jail inmate in custody, state and local law enforcement officials said Monday.

The man's death on Friday is the third jail custody death in Nassau in 2018, according to state Commission of Correction spokeswoman Janine Kava.

Nassau police spokesman Det. Lt. Richard LeBrun on Monday identified the deceased as Kevin J. Rollins, 28. LeBrun said homicide detectives are probing the nature of Rollins' death, and are awaiting toxicology reports and further information from the Medical Examiner's office.

Authorities found Rollins in cardiac arrest in his jail cell Thursday and took him to Nas-

sau University Medical Center, where he died the next day, the police spokesman said.

The West Babylon man pleaded guilty in 2016 in Nassau County Court to heroin-related charges and was remanded to a drug treatment program at the jail, according to court records.

On Dec. 19, Rollins appeared in Suffolk court, pleading guilty to operating a vehicle while impaired by drugs, records show.

Rollins' attorney, Matt Tuohy, on Monday described the man as a good-natured person from a close-knit family who had worked as an electrician but struggled with a drug addiction that landed him in jail.

Tuohy said Rollins' parents haven't gotten their son's autopsy results yet but have a lot of unanswered questions.

"He was doing well . . . He seemed in good health. He

seemed like a guy who was totally off drugs," the Huntington lawyer said.

The Commission of Correction also will do an investigation into Rollins' death, as is the case with all jail custody fatalities.

Before Rollins' death, a 57-year-old inmate died in Nassau custody in September, and a 54-year-old male inmate died in custody in August, according to authorities.