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Community Service Meets Public Service: Group Supervised by Probation Services Pitches In During the COVID-19 Health Crisis

Call it community service meets public service.

With the implementation of a statewide lockdown to prevent the spread of COVID-19, ISP Officer Donnie DeStefano wasn't sure how her clients in the Judiciary's Intensive Supervision Program would be able to continue performing their required community service.

So she was pleasantly surprised when she learned during one of her visits to a Cape May County sober house that her clients were continuing their community service by helping to make face masks for those on the front lines of the pandemic.

Despite the lockdown, DeStefano and the Judiciary's 1,900 ISP and probation officers across New Jersey continue to perform their duties supervising clients, conducting inspections and overseeing community service. But life after the lockdown has altered how the officers and clients interact with each other and with the community.

"This is a time when they didn't have to do community service but they took it upon themselves to do whatever they can," DeStefano said. "They're working on their recovery and they've never griped or complained to say 'We're stuck in this house 24 hours a day.'"

Several of the housemates had performed community service locally, but some of them lost those opportunities when many businesses were ordered shut during the lockdown.

They found a new opportunity when a housemate told them about a pitch a guest made at a Narcotics Anonymous meeting about making facemasks for Cape Regional Hospital.

Now the men are cutting more than 100 pieces of cloth a week that Doreen Verity and her friend Joe Fiedler are turning into facemasks and turning over to the hospital. Their church, The Lighthouse Church in Cape May Court House, runs Christians United for Recovery (CURE), a program that has helped get probation clients into treatment and sober living facilities.

“The true measure of success of a supervision program is when clients start taking positive steps on their own initiative,” said Rashad Shabaka-Burns, director of Probation Services. “We are very pleased that the individuals we supervise through ISP are making a contribution toward the larger effort of keeping the public safe.”

Verity said that because it takes nine stages to make one mask, she’s grateful for the help so that she can concentrate on the sewing stage.

“It’s a big help. They can be very happy that they were a part of it. It helped me,” she said. “It’s been a very unorganized team effort but it’s really coming through. It’s exciting to see the good things coming out of it.”

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