

LONG ISLAND / NASSAU

Bail reform 'created an urgency' to provide support, advocates say

Aaron Vailes works at a construction site in Uniondale. Credit: Newsday / J. Conrad Williams Jr.

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As debate continues to rage over bail reform in New York State, Hempstead Village officials have taken steps to help those released as a result.

Late last year, after the state legislature abolished cash bail for those accused of misdemeanors and nonviolent felonies, the village convened a task force of local community organizations to coordinate efforts to support people returning to the village from jail.

Task force members provide a range of services, including enrolling participants in job training, mentoring them and connecting them with potential employers, said Charlene Thompson, commissioner of Hempstead's Community Development Agency, which oversees the task force.

The goal, Hempstead Mayor Don Ryan said, is to help those caught up in the criminal justice system stay out of it in the future.

"I wanted to make sure that [for] the individuals coming back into the community, that there was a plan for them, so that they would be able to get the guidance and help necessary so there wouldn't be a case of recidivism," Ryan said.

While the participating organizations already worked with formerly incarcerated people, bail reform "created an urgency for us," said Reginald Benjamin, executive director of the Hempstead-based ABBA Leadership Center, one of the groups involved.

Nassau County began freeing inmates from its jail late last year in anticipation of the law taking effect Jan. 1, Newsday has reported. On that day, it released around 30 more inmates.

A Nassau spokesman did not respond to an inquiry about how many of those released returned to Hempstead. Ryan said he did not know the number.

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lives, task force members said. Benjamin gave as an example Aaron Vailes, a Hempstead resident who served five years in state prison and was released more than a decade ago.

“It was hard to get back on my feet,” said Vailes, 50. Vailes said he sought help from ABBA, which referred him to Engel Burman, a development company. The company then hired Vailes as a labor foreman on a construction project in Uniondale.

“It’s helping me,” he said. “And I’m helping my community by being a productive member of my society.”

Scott Burman, a partner at Engel Burman, praised Vailes’ work and said prior entanglements in the criminal justice system should not disqualify those seeking to re-enter the workforce.

“At the end of the day, we’re looking for people who are hardworking, dedicated, have the right qualities,” he said, “irrespective of their past.”

Hempstead’s Workforce Re-entry Task Force members:

- ABBA Leadership Center
- Reign 4 Life
- Economic Opportunity Commission of Nassau County
- HEVN
- Leadership Training Institute
- Women’s Opportunity Rehabilitation Center

Critics of the reforms, including Democratic Nassau County Executive Laura Curran, have argued they go too far by allowing, for example, alleged burglars and drug dealers to await their trials outside of jail. Supporters of the law say it was unjust to imprison people accused but not convicted of the misdemeanors and nonviolent felonies just because they could not afford to pay bail.

Gainful employment can go a long way in helping those accused or convicted of crimes find new stability in their