



## MAKING **G.R.E.A.T.** Progress IN PETERSBURG



In a building on the stately campus of Virginia State University, a half dozen teens recently embarked on a 15-week mission to carve out lives away from gangs, crime and violence. The 15- and 16-year-olds, representing the 11th District Court Service Unit, became the Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice's first cohort of the Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT) program outside of the 4th District Court Service Unit in Norfolk.

The program's implementation in the 11th District CSU – which serves the city of Petersburg and the counties of Amelia, Dinwiddie, Nottoway and Powhatan – came two months after Dr. Deyonta Johnson became DJJ's statewide violence intervention specialist. Johnson previously led gang intervention efforts within the 4th District CSU, where he successfully adapted and implemented GREAT for youth in DJJ's care.

In late February, 11th District CSU Director Tracy King and another member of her staff attended DJJ's first weeklong GREAT training; two others are slated to attend the next training in May. King credits her team's hard work and dedication for the swift implementation of the program.

"The 11th CSU's team **G**enuinely provides **R**edirection through **E**ngagement, **A**ccountability and **T**imelines. In other words, the CSU 11 Team is GREAT," King wrote.

DJJ Director Amy Floriano said the rollout of GREAT is uplifting to see. "I'm continually impressed with the work ethic and dedication of Director King," Floriano said. "She has risen to every challenge we have placed in her path with grace and ingenuity. She is a shining example of the DJJ spirit."

In looking for space to provide the program, King said she approached VSU's criminal justice program about forming a partnership that would "allow our young people to see something a little different outside of their norm ... to give them a little hope" by meeting on a college campus.

"DJJ has grabbed a hold of a program that is helpful and youth friendly. It has captured my team's attention in wanting to deliver it," King said. "DJJ has gained momentum in doing a lot of prevention work with this program."

While originally developed as a school-based, law enforcement officer-instructed classroom curricula, GREAT is an evidence-based intervention program used to address potential gang involvement, criminal activity and violence by juveniles through developing positive relationships with law enforcement and instilling life skills, goal setting, empathy and pride for the community, violence-intervention and conflict-resolution techniques, decision making and problem solving. It is coupled with the Casey Life Skills curriculum, which is facilitated in the 11th District CSU by AMIkids- and Evidence-based Associates-approved vendor In My Corner Mentoring.

Johnson said the implementation of GREAT by King and her team illustrates how each CSU can customize the program to fit the unique needs of their respective youth, families and communities. He commends members of the 11th District CSU for being passionate and thinking outside the box to make it happen.

"It's authentic. You can feel the authenticity in the room," Johnson said. "And that's what's going to make the difference in the lives of our youth."