

# NEWS RELEASE

Delaware Department of Correction  
Commissioner Terra Taylor



Commissioner's Award for Heroism  
Staff Lieutenant Nathaniel Payton  
Sussex Correctional Institution



Correctional Officer of the Year  
Captain Brian Vanes  
Howard R. Young Correctional Institution



Probation Officer of the Year  
Senior Probation Officer Christopher Nichols  
Georgetown Probation & Parole



Employee of the Year  
Legal Services Administrator Tim Martin  
Administration Building



Team of the Year  
Criminal Investigation Division  
James T. Vaughn Correctional Center

## **DOC presents 2026 employee awards, pays tribute to fallen officers during *National Correctional Officers and Employees Week***

**Dover, DE** – The Delaware Department of Correction proudly marks *National Correctional Officers and Employees Week* (May 3-9) by shining a light on employees who have demonstrated excellence in service to others and by paying tribute to fallen officers who made the ultimate sacrifice in the line of duty. In 1984, President Ronald Reagan proclaimed the first "National Correctional Officers' Week" and in 1996 Congress expanded the annual commemoration to all correctional employees to recognize the contributions and accomplishments of men and women who work in all roles to meet a broad and

challenging mission. In Delaware, the Department of Correction is the state's largest law enforcement agency, employing more than 2,600 officers and non-uniformed employees who work together with hundreds more contracted medical and behavioral healthcare professionals, education partners, and program providers to meet the DOC's dual mission of public safety and rehabilitation.

On Thursday, May 7, during a ceremony at the Department of Correction Central Administration Building in Dover, DOC leadership presented annual departmental awards to six officers and three staff members for providing service above and beyond the call of duty. See the list of award recipients below.

“Our annual Department of Correction award winners were selected based on their outstanding performance and leadership, going above and beyond their responsibilities, and consistently demonstrating strong work ethic and integrity,” **Commissioner Terra Taylor said.** “Our employees and their commitment to excellence is what drives our collective success and our annual awards allows us recognize not only our employees of the year but to also pause and reflect on the high standards and core values we continually uphold together as a Departmentwide team.”

Earlier in the week, Correctional Officers, Probation and Parole Officers, and non-uniformed staff gathered at the DOC memorial wall at the James T. Vaughn Correctional Center for the annual fallen officers' memorial service. Together, they paid tribute to the members of the DOC family who made the ultimate sacrifice in the line of duty to protect others. This annual ceremony reflects DOC's promise to honor the legacy of its fallen heroes and to continue to support and lift up their families — today and always.

### **DOC Annual Recognition Award Winners:**

#### **Correctional Officer of the Year: Captain Brian Vanes, Howard R. Young Correctional Institution (HRYCI)**

For the Delaware DOC, maintaining safe and secure facilities is always a priority. When an uptick in contraband detection raised concerns at HRYCI, Captain Brian Vanes — serving as the facility investigator — went above and beyond to address the issue. He dedicated

countless hours on and off-duty reviewing phone calls and piecing together critical intelligence — connecting the dots and building a case. Partnering with the Delaware State Police, his individual diligence led to the arrest of multiple people for smuggling K2 into the facility, shutting down a contraband pipeline and protecting our staff, visitors, and incarcerated individuals. Captain Vanes' commitment, integrity, and relentless pursuit of accountability exemplify the very best of the Delaware Department of Correction and are truly deserving of recognition as Correctional Officer of the Year.

**Probation Officer of the Year: Senior Probation Officer Christopher Nichols, Georgetown Probation and Parole**

Senior Probation Officer (SPO) Nichols is assigned to the Sussex County Electronic Monitoring Unit, where he supervises a Level 4 Home Confinement caseload along with DOC's Sussex County participants in Delaware Judiciary's Veterans Treatment Court. As an Army veteran with service in a foreign theater of operations, he brings a personal commitment and unique perspective to his work, ensuring justice-involved veterans are connected to critical resources and support systems that promote accountability and successful reentry. SPO Nichols is an active member of the DOC Veterans' Coalition and Veterans' Response Team, and he has completed Crisis Intervention Training (CIT). Over the past year, he developed and delivered a comprehensive Veterans Awareness training curriculum for Probation & Parole Officers — strengthening staff knowledge and enhancing services for those who have served. SPO Nichols is a valuable contributor to the Sussex Veterans Court Team, and he has spearheaded a pilot initiative to improve early identification and supportive intervention for veterans under community supervision, ensuring hundreds of additional individuals have opportunities to connect with benefits, services, and support they've earned. His leadership and innovation have gained national recognition, with his selection to present Delaware's cross-system veteran support program at a national American Probation & Parole Association Conference. SPO Nichols' dedication, initiative, and passion for serving the veteran population exemplify the very best of Probation & Parole.

**Employee of the Year: Legal Services Administrator Tim Martin, Central Administration Building**

In 2025, Tim managed an extraordinary workload — processing over 700 subpoenas, 120 FOIA requests, and providing administrative support and oversight for 60 cases of active litigation. Working closely with Deputy Attorneys General and the Department of Justice,

Tim ensures timely, accurate responses to complex legal matters that are critical to the Department's operations. Beyond his core responsibilities, Tim played a key role in mentoring an intern, sharing real-world insight and professional guidance that reinforced his value as both a leader and subject matter expert. He also helped develop FOIA procedures that have improved program efficiency. Tim's expertise, reliability, and commitment to excellence make him an indispensable part of the DOC team.

**Team of the Year: James T. Vaughn Correctional (JTVCC) Center Criminal Investigation Division (CID) - Capt. Brian Reynolds, Sgt. Kristin Burtell, Sgt. Marvin Mejia, Sgt. Brandon Dugan, Ms. Sarah Gonzales, and Ms. Karen Spears**

This highly motivated team of sworn and non-sworn professionals sets the standard for investigative excellence across the Department. CID leads critical investigations and provides reliable, actionable intelligence that supports not only JTVCC operations, but also partner agencies at the local, state, and federal levels. Over the past year, this team has collaborated extensively with other DOC units — including the Special Operations Group, Intelligence Operations Center, Correctional Emergency Response Team, FIT, Internal Affairs, and Probation & Parole—as well as outside partners such as Delaware State Police, DIAC, the Department of Justice, Department of Homeland Security, FBI, and U.S. Marshals Service. Through their coordinated efforts, dangerous contraband has been identified and removed, including weapons, illicit substances, and electronic devices, activities that threatened facility safety have been disrupted. Their work has made a notable impact, strengthening security and enhancing safety for both staff and the incarcerated population. Our facilities and the entire Department are stronger and safer because of this team's dedication, expertise, and commitment to the mission.

**DOC Heroism Award: Staff Lieutenant Nathaniel Payton, Sussex Correctional Institution (SCI)**

When notified of a rapidly evolving incident in a SCI housing unit, Staff Lt. Payton acted without hesitation — immediately responding on-site despite limited information and uncertain conditions. He jumped in action, coordinating with the Watch Commander and working alongside senior leadership to make critical, real-time decisions. He assumed a key on-site leadership role — bringing stability through disciplined action, clear communication, and a strong command presence. His efforts were instrumental in deescalating the situation and a return to normal operations, ensuring the safety of both staff and inmates. Staff Lt. Payton's leadership extended beyond the immediate response.

He provided clear direction to inmates, reinforced expectations, oversaw safe and orderly search operations, and remained a steady, supportive presence for staff. He further demonstrated his commitment by volunteering for post-incident operations, including inmate transports, helping ensure continued stability. His swift and decisive actions and his willingness to step forward in a critical moment made a meaningful impact and reflect exceptional professionalism, courage, and dedication.

**Attached photos:** DOC Tribute to Fallen Officers ceremony and annual DOC award winners.



Fallen Officers Ceremony 1



Fallen Officers Ceremony 2



Fallen Officers Ceremony 3



DOC Award Winners

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