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First Graduates of Solutions to Poverty/Financial Management Program at DCI

As Louisiana continues to grapple with poverty issues in the state, Reentry Benefiting Families, an initiative of Refined By Fire Ministries, Inc., a long time community partner of the department, made a conscious decision to expand their scope of work to include substantive programming that assists incarcerated populations and their under-resourced families discover for themselves solutions out of poverty. By providing access to financial literacy education and the tools they need to move from poverty to prosperity, they will gain a clearer understanding of how poverty impacts their lives and how to make better choices when it comes to money. The end result will be improved quality of life for them, their families as well as economic benefits for the communities in which they will return to live, work and raise their children.

On Monday, March 21, 2011, the inaugural class of 12 men graduated from the in-depth 24 week program which includes 10 modules of the FDIC Money Smart, financial literacy curriculum and 14 modules of the solutions to poverty, Getting Ahead In A Just Getting By World. The Getting Ahead curriculum was written by Phillip DeVol, an internationally recognized expert in the field of poverty research and working with under-resourced populations. Because of Mr. DeVol's interest in the work that RBF is doing utilizing this curriculum in a prison setting, he videoed a special message for the graduates that they viewed prior to receiving their certificates. The second class of Getting Ahead which includes 12 men also at DCI, but who have not completed all modules, were invited to attend the graduation and to hear comments from the graduates as to how the program has benefited them.

Comments from some of the first class members speak the loudest about the effectiveness of this program:

- Colby: "Even though I knew about banking and had an account, I never realized how budgeting and saving could benefit me. I will definitely use this information when I go home and I know it will help me do better in my life."
- Dwayne: "Not only did I learn money management skills I also realized that I could be successful in managing my life once I returned home. After being locked up since I was 18 and now I'm 32, it was pretty scary to think how I was going to be able to make it. I now am home with my family, I have a job, a checking account and a check card. These classes made that possible."
- Walter: "I had never looked at my life like I have now. Learning about the resources I need to take better care of my family and to keep me from coming back has really changed how I look at life. I knew life should be better than I had, but didn't know what to do. When I go home this time, it will be different because I'm different."
- Steve: "I thought I had it all together when I was on the streets, but I was just fooling myself. I've never had to think about life like I have since starting this class. It is helping me finally grow up."
- Gillis: "Even though I had my own business before coming to prison, I was always living on the edge of poverty. I'm seeing the difference in just getting by and really being able to live."

The Getting Ahead curriculum is very unique and includes topics such as: Theory of Change, The Rich/Poor Gap and How It Works, Hidden Rules of Class, Identifying Available Resources and Building Resources, Stages of Change, Creating Mental Models for Your Personal Path Out of Poverty. Other key aspects of the "Getting Ahead" program include:

- Each participant, including the facilitators, are co-investigators meaning the group works together as a team to "investigate" the reasons for poverty
- Upon release, the graduates of both the Financial Management and Getting Ahead programs will be referred to community organizations in their hometowns that would benefit from the skills these men have learned with the end result of the graduates providing similar training to under-resourced community members

Additionally, in February, 2010, RBF CEO Elain Ellerbe submitted the program for consideration by the Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections as a certified program garnering good time for offenders completing the program. On March 22, 2010, the Solutions to Poverty/Financial Management program was accepted and certified by DOC.