

# Dept. of Military Affairs: Wisconsin Challenge Academy marks 25th anniversary of redeeming at-risk youth

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An innovative program to help students learn valuable life skills and get back on track toward high school graduation began its 50th class this week.

The Wisconsin National Guard Challenge Academy is a two-part 17-month voluntary program for youth ages 16 years nine months through 18. The first part is a 22-week residential phase at the Academy's Fort McCoy campus.

In a structured, military-styled environment, youth develop the courage to change, unlearn bad habits and cultivate skills and attitudes to help them succeed, as well as earn their high school equivalency diploma (HSED) and a minimum of seven free, fully transferable college credits.

“When candidates arrive here at the Challenge Academy, opportunities abound,” said Edwin Maciosek, Wisconsin Challenge Academy commandant. “We teach, coach and mentor. We afford them the opportunity to develop numerous soft skills that employers are looking for. Through our military model, cadets are taught teamwork, resilience, self-control, listening skills and time management — to name a few.”

The Challenge Academy reshapes the lives of at-risk students who are not on track to graduate high school on time. Students must not be currently charged, indicted or convicted of a felony — as a juvenile or an adult. Students must reside in Wisconsin and be a legal U.S. resident, willing to be free from illegal drugs and

substances.

Joni Mathews, a retired Wisconsin Army National Guard brigadier general, believes in the Challenge Academy so much that she became its director last year.

“I’m very excited to welcome our youth as they arrive to begin a new chapter in their lives,” Mathews said. “I enjoy learning their stories and watching them grow as they progress through the 22 weeks here at the Challenge Academy.”

In celebration of the program’s 25th year, Mathews said the Academy plans to make Class 50 “very special.”

Early in the residential phase, youth who decide to commit to the remainder of the program earn the title of cadet. As the residential phase progresses, cadets spend half their day in classrooms, and half their day performing service to community or participating in other activities to develop the Academy’s eight core components — academic excellence, physical fitness, leadership and followership, responsible citizenship, job skills, service to community, health and hygiene, and life coping skills. Cadets also develop a post-residential action plan — a road map for their future — with the assistance of Academy staff members.

Upon graduation from the residential phase, cadets enter the year-long phase two of the Challenge Academy program, and implement their post-residential action plans with the guidance of a community mentor. These plans range from finding employment or a place to live to enrolling in college.

“Youth speaker and teen expert Josh Skip states that ‘every kid is one caring adult away from being a success story,’” Maciosek said. “The Challenge Academy offers the cadets numerous adults to connect with to help them become a success story.”

More than 4,776 mentors for Challenge Academy cadets have been trained statewide since the program began — more than 1,000 over the past five years alone.

Beginning in 1998, the Wisconsin National Guard Challenge Academy has operated two classes each year. Since then, 4,454 at-risk youth have graduated from the Challenge Academy, and 3,538 cadets earned a high school equivalency degree.