



Oregon

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GUEST OPINION

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Guest opinion: OYA maintenance staff mentor youth with real work

By Rex Emery

A youth offender at the Oregon Youth Authority's RiverBend transitional facility near La Grande recently passed a DEQ test for wastewater collection. The youth is learning on the job at the facility's wastewater plant, and in March he will sit for the exam that would qualify him as an entry-level wastewater plant operator.

At the MacLaren Youth Correctional Facility in Woodburn, a youth earned 15 industry-recognized certifications in heating, air-conditioning and refrigeration. When he was paroled this fall he had a job right away.

And at Tillamook, youth offenders built a building shell that became part of the new Trask River High School, saving an estimated \$500,000 in construction costs.

These are only some of the many ways in which youth offenders benefit from working alongside OYA maintenance staff, who daily mentor them in trades skills, workplace expectations and what they need to know to succeed at work on the outside.

Youth in OYA close custody learn skills ranging from electrical, plumbing, painting and welding to carpentry, drywall, landscaping, heating, air-conditioning and refrigeration. It's a joy to see trades professionals who love their work training youth who want to learn. In fact, a former contractor joined OYA because he wanted to mentor youth, and that desire is a requirement for all maintenance staff we hire.

A maintenance staffer at Hillcrest Youth Facility in Salem reminds youth daily that their work is their signature.

For many of the incarcerated youth, this is their first work opportunity. “I knew nothing about any of this and I don’t know as much as I need to,” says one of the youth. “But I’ve got time to learn.”

A contractor observed one youth’s work and said “when you get out, look us up”; he did, and the youth is working today. Another contractor mistook a youth for a member of the OYA maintenance staff. Their work and attitude are usually that good.

Youth also learn the importance of pleasing the customer when installing a carpet, painting a room or repairing a dryer.

To get these jobs, youth offenders must complete applications and go through job interviews just as they will on the outside. “I didn’t have the best social skills growing up,” says one youth, “and I’m working on my language and how I act around people.” That will serve him well.

I would understand if people thought these were make-work jobs. They aren’t. We are minimally staffed and youths’ work is needed to get the job done.

However, we also remember these youth committed serious offenses that gravely affected their victims, and we hold youth accountable. They are required to be in treatment. We expect them to make restitution to their victims. They earn these jobs only if they have completed high school. But we also tell these youth, your criminal past is not your future.

Youth offenders in OYA facilities come from most Oregon counties, and employers statewide can support crime-free lives by giving these earnest youth a chance. As one youth said of his prospective employers, “They’ll know I was in jail, but they’ll also know what I did with my time.”

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