

PROGRAMS: OYA

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Program helps Atlantic County youth overcome criminal records to find employment

by Claire Lowe



Erica Hoskins, 21st Century Skills coordinator for JEVS Human Services, meets online with the six participants in the new Opportunity YOUth Academy that began last month. The workforce development program, in partnership with the Atlantic City Police Athletic League, helps local youth between the ages of 16 and 24 who have been or are currently involved in the criminal justice system.

ATLANTIC CITY — A new workforce readiness program is helping young Atlantic County residents who've been arrested find new footing.

“These types of programs are important because often times, the young people in the community feel like, ‘I got in trouble, and I just ruined my life,’” said LaToyra Smith, director of the Opportunity YOUth Academy that began last month with with six people between the ages of 16 and 24.

“Programs like this help them understand: You had a stumbling block, but you can still reach your goals and overcome those barriers,” Smith said.

The Academy, facilitated by JEVS Human Services in partnership with the Atlantic City Police Athletic League, gives the participants virtual training in skills needed to obtain and hold a job, work in hospitality or start their own businesses. The program is funded through a federal grant.

Throughout the region and the state, there are many programs dedicated to helping those who have been in the criminal justice system reintegrate into the community, including the state’s drug court system for qualifying offenders and NJ-STEP, which helps those who are incarcerated obtain a college degree.

Research has shown that for those with criminal records, finding stable employment can be difficult, which leads to many issues including increased recidivism, as well as housing and food insecurity.

Although not the first of its kind, the Opportunity YOUth Academy program specifically targets young people in Atlantic County who are not currently enrolled in high school and either have been or are currently involved in the juvenile or adult judicial systems.

JEVS also helps those who did not graduate obtain their high school equivalency diploma.

Each week, the participants meet with instructor Erica Hoskins, 21st Century Skills coordinator for JEVS for virtual training.

“We’re talking about communication, listening, work ethic, how to behave in the work place and knowing what gets you angry and how to handle that in different ways than maybe you’ve been handling it,” Hoskins said. “Then we will get into customer service certification.”

The certification is through the National Retail Federation.

Eventually, the students begin paid internships with area businesses such as MudGirls Studio, Atlantic Cape Community College, Borgata and AtlantiCare, among others.

They also receive mentoring during their journey, which the organizers says helps the participants interact with people who have been in their shoes, and succeeded.

“The program is another opportunity for young people to have an advocate,” said Smith. “It also offers the opportunity for someone in a nonparental role to help them put the pieces together.”

Smith said that JEVS sees success as young adults getting into college or getting a job. She said that after program completion, JEVS offers a Job Club where they share the resources.

Although the first cohort of students is virtual due to the COVID-19 pandemic, JEVS plans to offer a blended program at the Atlantic City PAL in the future.