



# Oregon

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This guest opinion was published Nov. 19 by the Salem Statesman Journal.

## **Young offenders learn valuable on-the-job skills**

By Rex Emery

When a waterline broke at Hillcrest Youth Correctional Facility in Salem, an immediate repair was needed. But the staff plumber was away, so a youth offender fixed the break.

It may surprise you, but this youth is among several dozen at Oregon Youth Authority facilities statewide who are eager to learn on-the-job skills working alongside maintenance staff who mentor them.

It is yet another way that OYA makes a positive impact on Oregon – by leading youth away from crime and into the job market.

Mentoring by maintenance staff lends quiet support to the formal treatment and education youth receive, with trades people who love their work teaching youth who want to learn. Maintenance staff enthusiastically take on this extra assignment, the youth offenders are eager to work and learn, and we couldn't get the work done without them.

After earning high school diplomas, youth can prepare for electrical and plumbing apprenticeships, earn industry-recognized certifications and prepare for good jobs on the outside.

Youth also earn the satisfaction of being recognized for a job well done by trusted adults whom they don't want to disappoint. A Hillcrest maintenance staffer reminds youth that their work product is their signature.

Youth learn how to get a job and how to get along on the job. They complete job applications and interviews. ("How would you handle a conflict with a co-worker?" is a frequent interview question.) One youth at MacLaren Youth Correctional Facility in Woodburn says this is the only work experience he's ever had. He isn't alone.

On any given day youth may repair a clothes dryer, paint a room or help install an HVAC system. One MacLaren youth was paroled with 15 certifications (no surprise, he got a job). Another youth got a job after a contractor saw his work in the facility and asked him to call when he was paroled (he did).

Offenders who won't talk in treatment may open up to an adult on the job site. The adult trades professional can counsel the youth, who in turn may gain the confidence to talk in treatment. This mentoring is so important that a desire to do it is a requirement for anyone applying for an OYA maintenance job.

No question, these incarcerated youth committed serious offenses. We hold them accountable. We require them to be in treatment. We expect them to make restitution to their victims. We never forget they have victims whose lives have been gravely impacted by the actions of youth in our custody. But we also remind these youth that their criminal pasts need not be their futures, and employers can further that promise by giving them a chance.

Thanks in part to the help of trades staff, these youth are investing the time, study and sweat needed to lead productive, crime-free lives. 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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