

Diploma in Hand, But Still Left Behind: How the Youth Career Center Helps Young Adults Build the Skills They Need

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Every spring, thousands of young people proudly walk across a stage to receive their high school diploma. For many, high school graduation represents the beginning of new opportunities. However, for some graduates, the reality is more complicated.

Many young adults leave high school still struggling with basic reading, writing, math, workplace communication, or digital literacy skills. While they have earned a diploma, they may find themselves unprepared for college coursework, job training programs, or the expectations of today's workforce.

This challenge is not unique to Cumberland County. Across the country, employers report difficulty finding workers with foundational skills needed for entry-level positions, while many young adults struggle to navigate career pathways after graduation.

The Cumberland County Youth Career Center (YCC) was created to help address this gap. The program was successful in its first year and has now been awarded an additional WIOA grant, which allows them to provide services to Cape May County youth as well.

I was raised in Cape May. I look forward to the opportunity to bring the Youth Career Center to Cape May County because I know there are many youths who will benefit from our program.

Serving out-of-school youth ages 16 to 24, the program provides individualized support to young adults who need additional assistance reaching their educational and employment goals. Participants receive career exploration, job readiness training, workforce preparation activities, work experiences, educational support, and connections to community resources.

For some participants, the first step is strengthening academic skills. For others, it may be learning how to create a professional resume, prepare for interviews, communicate effectively in the workplace, or understand employer expectations. These are skills that can make the difference between obtaining a job and building a sustainable career.

The program recognizes that success looks different for every participant. Some youth are working toward employment, others are pursuing occupational training or post-secondary education, and some are overcoming barriers such as housing instability, transportation challenges, involvement with the justice system, or family responsibilities.

A key component to the program is connecting youth to community resources that can assist them in resolving the barriers that hinder them from moving forward in their education, training and employment. We spend a lot of time building relationships with other agencies in the county, so we know what each of them has to offer the youth.

Through partnerships with local employers, educational institutions, and community organizations, the Youth Career Center helps young adults gain the skills, confidence, and experience needed to move forward.

A high school diploma is an important achievement, but it is not always the finish line. For many young adults, it is the starting point. The Youth Career Center exists to ensure that young people who need additional support have access to the resources, guidance, and opportunities necessary to transform that diploma into long-term success.