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N.J. holds a career day for incarcerated youth. It's a new approach to juvenile justice.

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A small crowd walked into a Monroe Township gymnasium on a recent Friday morning.

One young man was interested in cutting hair. Another had heard there was money in plumbing. A third thought about massage therapy.

Waiting to meet them were gatekeepers for many of those industries, for a first-of-its-kind career day for kids who have committed crimes.

"Events like this are needed," said Tremaine Harrison, education director for the Juvenile Justice Commission. The group runs the New Jersey Training School in Monroe, the state's largest secure facility for youth.

"The ultimate goal is to have kids leave here with skills," he said.

Juvenile justice is at a crossroads in New Jersey.

Gov. Phil Murphy recently signed a bill into law (S48) that limits when young people can be locked up. There's an ongoing debate about shutting down some locations. The state just wrapped up listening sessions about youth rehabilitation, and a task force continues to weigh reforms.

Regardless, the teens and young adults currently in the system know their release date is coming, and that they need a plan.

On Jan. 10, nearly 70 young men and women were driven in from more than a dozen other facilities, Harrison said. They joined the 121 who live at Monroe, which is also known as "Jamesburg." Residents spent hours questioning members of nine state licensing boards about their jobs.

"Once you get your plumbing license, the sky's the limit," said Peter Voros, chair of the plumbing board, as he handed a flyer to a young man in a hoodie.

Within the state's consumer affairs division, about 50 licensing boards and committees regulate a host of professions. Nine board representatives told NJ Advance Media that they'd never participated in an event like this before.

“They have the talent,” Marisol Rodrigues, who works for the cosmetology and hairstyling board, said about the residents. “I think some of them didn’t know we existed.”

Many are teenagers. Others are in their 20s. (You’re allowed to stay in a juvenile facility after you turn 18 in some circumstances.) One said he had been arrested for a gun charge, another said murder, another, robbery. A handful were shackled during the ride over.

Jaheim, 18, said he worried the day would be a waste when he had to wake up before 6 a.m. (Officials asked that residents’ last names not be used, to protect their privacy when applying for jobs.) Then a presenter explained how to improve credit scores, and Jaheim perked up.

Jacques, 24, said he’d known for years that he wanted to run his own business, but he never had clear direction about how. The Jan. 10 event was put together partially because he had asked officials for more career help, and he was glad to learn that a criminal record didn’t automatically block him from many licenses.

Guards roamed the halls, occasionally calling out the end of a session. After one 16-year-old with face tattoos walked by, an officer said, “I’m rooting for him. He’s got a good heart.”

Last month, the commission also announced that it had up to \$315,000 in grants to bring arts, sports and other programs to its facilities.