

Youth Services MLK Education Center

"Opportunity Partners Success"
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GUEST VIEWPOINT: Lane County jobs program for young offenders is working By Alex Cuyler

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I lobby state and federal lawmakers on behalf of Lane County government. This work brings me in contact with pretty much every aspect of the organization. I work on behalf of the Board of County Commissioners and the employees to promote, defend, suggest, amend or eliminate public policy. My work also involves seeking directed funding for specific projects of benefit to our community. These are the stimulus funds, grant programs or "dread earmarks," a term some politicians use when defending the practice of appropriating federal dollars for specific projects. One institution that has a particularly impressive story to tell is the Lane County Department of Youth Services, located on the John Serbu Campus off Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard in Eugene. Serbu is the relatively new building immediately across the street from Autzen Stadium. It was built using funds from a bond issue approved in one of the rare instances Lane County voters supported dedicated funding for public safety. The construction dollars were well spent, producing a building that has the ability to efficiently house and treat youth offenders. However, like many public institutions, the operating funds available for staff to reach the building's full potential have been elusive. That makes the success stories contained within the building all the more remarkable.

In 2007, Lane County staff applied for a federal Department of Labor grant designed to fund job training programs and alternative education programs for youthful offenders. They coined a name for it: the Martin Luther King Educational Center. The center was one of seven recipients of those funds, and the only juvenile department in the nation to receive funding. The grant recently was extended for one year by the Department of Labor. Those deserving thanks for the renewal include Sen. Ron Wyden, whose Eugene staff continued to inform Washington, D.C., staffers about the project and its success. As a result of that funding, the MLK Ed Center continues to succeed. MLK students gain skills through training in culinary arts, as veterinary technicians, in computer technology, and in horticulture programs. These programs support each other, and in some cases return revenue to the center. For example, the culinary arts program provides an excellent catering service using fruits and vegetables produced by the horticulture program's greenhouse and outdoor gardens.

Here are the numbers: More than 50 percent of the overall budget will be spent on job training and vocational opportunities for youth. Sixty percent of the youths, who enter the program without basic skills, will increase their reading and math scores by at least two grade levels. Staff members estimate that 65 percent of the young people participating in the program never will commit another crime. That last figure is important. For one thing, we know that the earlier in life that people engage in crime, the more likely they are to become part of an adult correctional system. Keeping youths out of the adult system saves taxpayer dollars from what has become a huge cost that is directly related to the volume of criminals we all pay to feed, house and keep healthy. It speaks to the value our community receives from the efforts to change criminal behavior at an early age.

To use a cliché, the MLK Ed Center literally is heading future crime off at the pass. Or, as Director Lisa Smith told me, "These kids are going from tax consumers to taxpayers." They in turn share their stories with policymakers regularly. During the last legislative session, I had the unique opportunity to show one of the youths the House and Senate chambers in Salem in a respite from her testimony to a Joint Ways and Means Committee debating Youth Authority funding. The look on her face that day as she gazed at the rooms where her, and indeed our, future is created told me she will be a participatory member of our community and not a liability against it. That image sticks with me to this day. It continues to give me hope, and makes me proud of the Lane County program that allowed her to see an alternate path for her life, while concurrently giving her the skills and the confidence to go down that path.

Alex Cuyler is Lane County's intergovernmental relations manager.

