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FEATURED

Camp Tillamook offers youth new hope

Oregon Youth Authority
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Camp Tillamook youth participating in an Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife work party.
Photo courtesy Oregon Youth Authority

Camp Tillamook Youth Transition Program sits south of town, just across from the Tillamook Air Museum. While residents may not know it's there, it has been actively partnering to make Tillamook better for roughly 20 years.

This year, for Public Service Recognition Week, the State of Oregon honored that sustained dedication by naming the facility's leadership — Director Jim Sapper and Assistant Director Dean Jones — as "Public Service Ambassadors." Yet both leaders are quick to note that their

approach to public service requires robust partnerships with their staff, community organizations, and youth.

In Oregon's juvenile justice system, Camp Tillamook represents a distinct opportunity. Courts will commit youth with the greatest needs to a youth correctional facility. When youth are ready to leave that setting, they may not be completely ready to return to the community. Transition programs like Camp Tillamook serve these youth, providing greater freedom and flexibility to youth while keeping them in secure, supervised settings. Youth may go outside the fence to work, recreate and begin building the skills they need to live in the community.

At their core, these programs instill routine and structure. As Sapper explains, when youth arrive, staff get them doing "the stuff we have to do as adults": "get up every morning and make your bed, do your chores, and get working." Assistant Director Dean Jones notes this is a shift for youth coming from correctional facilities, where staff give directions and youth must follow. At Camp, Jones says, they want youth to say, "I need to get some things in order before I go out in the community and [staff] can help me do that."

Jones observed that, when he and Sapper began at Camp nine years ago, "we prioritized work," youth needed to have jobs. Thankfully, they didn't need to look far for opportunities: OYA's property included a native plant nursery, run in partnership with the Tillamook Estuaries Partnership (TEP), with room to expand it. At the time, four or five youth were working two to three days a week, but Sapper met with TEP, committed to staffing the nursery full-time, and encouraged them to, "just grow, grow, grow."

With youth working alongside TEP staff, the native plant nursery has grown significantly and now distributes over 75,000 plants each year – plants which leave both the environment and coastal communities stronger. TEP Nursery Crew Lead Steve Sprague views the nursery as the starting point for both the plants and youth: "we give them the best start we can" so plants and youth alike might "radiate out from this place and do good things everywhere."

"And if we let these kids fall through the cracks," Sprague reasons, "that's not good for anybody." "It's like this chain reaction," adds Claire Engelen, the nursery's partnership coordinator. But working together, TEP and Camp Tillamook produce a very different chain reaction – one where TEP-grown plants thrive along coastal estuaries while the youth who tended them as seedlings go on to live crimefree lives. These partnerships serve the public, Sprague notes, by leaving both environment and youth "better than how we found [them]."

Youth are also, hopefully, better connected to the public through their work for the US Fish and Wildlife Service. Camp Tillamook's crew maintains trails, clear brush, and keeps National Wildlife lands accessible, healthy, and safe. Visitor Services Manager Dawn Harris feels honored to help Americans access their public lands, and "I want [youth] to feel that sense of pride," she says, and for them to "feel some ownership." "Their hands, their time, their work made that change," and they can, "bring their family out here in five or ten years and say, 'I planted these trees.'" Harris hopes youth can turn inward and say to themselves, "I have made a connection with nature and now I care."

Caring is a hallmark of all Camp Tillamook's partnerships, which is one of the many reasons they are ambassadors of public service. Ultimately, though, their service is measured in healthier salmon, cleaner water, better access to public lands and in every crimefree life that unfolds after the person leaves.