

## Find Out from Mike Feinberg What Unique Training Opportunity the Harris County Juvenile Justice System is Offering

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In Houston, Texas, the Harris County Juvenile Probation Department provides a number of community-based intervention strategies — including educational programs for young adults who have been placed in a county-operated juvenile institution, been expelled or are seeking an alternative to the traditional high school experience.

In addition to receiving core academic curriculum-based instruction, young people who are or previously have been involved in the justice system can take vocational education courses at the Harris County Juvenile Probation Department's The Opportunity Center campus.

The instruction is provided by WorkTexas, a nonprofit job training program launched in 2020. Participants can obtain both a GED and the skills to pursue a career as a child development



associate, plumber — or performing carpentry, commercial electrical, HVAC or masonry work.

“They’re working towards their academics for half of the day; and the other half, they’re in occupational skills classes,” says Yazmin Guerra, Harris County Director of Workforce Development for Harris County.

### **Tailored Tutelage**

WorkTexas conferred with area employers to develop the skills-based course content and ensure what students learn will be relevant to the local job market.

“We are employer-focused,” [WorkTexas co-founder Mike Feinberg](#) says. “Our mission [is] to help people get jobs, keep jobs, [and] advance careers.”

Course instructors have hired program graduates — who can be extremely loyal employees, due to the support and encouragement they received, according to Vanessa Ramirez, who co-founded WorkTexas with [Mike Feinberg](#).

“That’s because they were in their classes, building trust,” Ramirez says. “Community partners that work with justice-involved youth are the type of employer we need. We can’t work with the one-strike-you’re-out-and-you’re-fired [mentality]; [students] are going to make those mistakes because they’re unlearning unhealthy habits and learning new ones.”

While the classes held at The Opportunity Center were initially the same 11-week duration as the courses offered at WorkTexas’ other Houston location, program organizers decided to alter the format at The Opportunity Center.

“We learned the students there needed something different,” Guerra says. “The students needed to explore the concepts, be more engaged and work with their hands and do creative things. We [created] create mini classes so the students can start getting exposed to the trades.”

### **Live Lessons**

The hands-on training participants receive at The Opportunity Center, Guerra says, is a critical part of the program.

“[With] the high school student population at The Opportunity Center during the day, we experience a lot of truancy,” she says. “We experienced the youth definitely wanting to get engaged and start working with their hands early on.”

To ensure the instruction will ultimately be effective, program organizers work to provide practical, informative and interactive learning experiences.

“We vet the instructors to make sure they’re able to relate to the student — to have conversations, so they’re not reading a PowerPoint, or being lectured on how to behave or do X, Y and Z,” Guerra



says. "The instructor is modeling; and they're picking up on those things."

