

# McNeil To Lead Creation Of DJJ's New Workforce Development Center For Youth

Ashaki McNeil has led DJJ's Reentry Unit since 2011. She recently was named the Director of Reentry Services, which comes with some expanded duties. One of the most important new initiatives will be designing and implementing a Workforce Development Center (WDC) for youth, and a statewide mentoring program.

In collaboration with the Division of Education, youth will have the opportunity to engage in vocational skills training while in direct care and will transition into community skill programs and job placements. "Our Division of Education will provide our young people with courses to meet credentialing requirements, and then the WDC will provide a space for students to learn and practice the skills to be successful in the workplace," McNeil says. The WDC will replicate centers found in the community and will provide the same services and resources to promote job readiness. To increase the likelihood of our youth being matched to employers in their field of interest, the Community Business Developer, another new DJJ position, will create partnerships with community-based employers to create positions, job shadowing, internships and training programs in the communities in which youth are returning.

"We know that youth who are committed to our system miss critical points in their life when most kids are preparing for their future," Ashaki notes. "The Workforce Development Center will fill in those gaps by equipping youth with the soft and hard skills needed to be marketable in the workforce." Soft skills include such things as communication, time management and how to work as a team. "It's important to ensure youth also have 'hard skills' like basic computer skills and effective writing that can be listed in their resume," she says.

Ashaki brings to the new role more than 25 years of experience working in the criminal justice field. She began her career in 1995 working for the Virginia Department of Corrections as a correctional officer. Ashaki joined DJJ in 1997 as a juvenile correctional officer where she decided on a career in the field of juvenile justice. After leaving DJJ she worked for the Virginia Department of Correctional Education (DCE) as a substitute instructor and special projects coordinator. Ashaki subsequently joined the Governor's Office for Substance Abuse Prevention, as the Kidsafe Initiative Coordinator.

In 2005 Ashaki joined the Department of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS) as a grants coordinator to manage the federal funding stream awarded to DCJS to support juvenile justice delinquency prevention and intervention programs. In 2011 she transitioned back to DJJ as the Reentry Program manager tasked with managing the development and implementation of a statewide reentry service delivery system that supports the effective transition of juvenile offenders from commitment to parole. In 2012, the Virginia Juvenile Justice Association awarded her the 2012 Meritorious Service Award in the field of Administration to acknowledge her outstanding leadership practices. In 2022 she received the Paul W. Keve Distinguished Service Award for outstanding commitment to providing assistance to families and children of incarcerated individuals in the Commonwealth of Virginia.



*Ashaki McNeil*