



MIDDLESEX COUNTY IMPROVEMENT AUTHORITY
101 INTERCHANGE PLAZA • CRANBURY, NEW JERSEY 08512
Telephone: (609) 655-5141 • Fax: (609) 655-4748
Website: www.mciauth.com • E-mail: mciaadmin@mciauth.com

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Career Hunting in Middlesex County

MIDDLESEX COUNTY – As far as dreams go, cosmetology school was within grasp for the Perth Amboy youth.

Even so, everything changed for 21-year-old Vivianne Velasquez six years ago, when her mother suffered three heart attacks, the last of which caused extensive paralysis.

Caring for a physically challenged parent forced Velasquez to rethink her goals, convinced her to trade in a stylist's apron for scrubs and led the would-be nurse to the Youth One-Stop Training Center's door. These centers, overseen by the Middlesex County Office of Workforce Development, give the area's 16-to-21 year-olds, who hail from lower-income households, a leg-up with in-demand training, work opportunities, general education diploma assistance and more.

Accompanied by about thirty of her fellow peers, Velasquez sat in a Roosevelt Care Center meeting room in Edison Wednesday morning, hanging on the words of the same industry professionals she hoped to one day call colleagues.

"Once my mom got sick, it changed my whole perspective," Velasquez said. "I just feel like helping people. Now, I want to get my feet wet."

During a lengthy presentation, a revolving line-up of experienced long-term care staff covered a range of internal departments, such as administration, recreation, housekeeping, dietary and nursing.

Their audience represents only a segment of the approximately 180 Youth One-Stop enrollees, who attend the regionally-based training centers.

"About half are interested in the medical field," said Shamar Spencer, Youth One-Stop coordinator. "Others are interested in hands-on training, computer networking and security."

Places like Roosevelt, the Heldrich Hotel and Rutgers University are among the pit stops for these budding professionals on their path to finding a career.

For his part, Roosevelt Licensed Administrator Dr. Frank Damiani discussed how students' spanning interests all had a place in health care, from nursing to marketing to security and accounting.

"There's a wide-variety of opportunity for all of you," he said.

Mary Pinner, a seasoned Roosevelt certified nurses' assistant, led most of the day's presentation as well as a campus tour at two facilities, operated by the Middlesex County Improvement Authority.

Attendees like Velasquez listened on as Pinner offered up insight on a field she's devoted much of her life to.

"If you can earn your living helping others, especially when they're not feeling well it's a great way to make a living," Pinner said. "We all started out here thinking we wanted to take care of people."

MEDIA CONTACT: Jane Leal, 609-655-5141, jl@mciauth.com