

## **New resource center helps city youths make career connections**

**By Rosa Nguyen** Globe Correspondent July 27, 2015

Unemployed youths now have a new resource to help them succeed: the Connection Center, located inside the Ruggles MBTA station and designed to guide young people toward career independence.

The center, officially launched Monday by Mayor Martin J. Walsh, will refer 20- to 24-year-old high school graduates to job training, post-secondary school, and employment programs.

That demographic is “invisible” to many policy makers, said Neil Sullivan, executive director of the Boston Private Industry Council.

“There’s no place for these young men and women to go,” Sullivan said. “The 21st-century labor market is unforgiving to people with only high school diplomas. We have a shrinking workforce and we need as many high school graduates as possible.”

Though retiring baby boomers will leave large spaces in the national labor force, 6.7 million Americans between the ages of 16 and 24 remain unemployed. These “opportunity youth” — people in that age range who lack jobs and college degrees — include high school and college dropouts, though according to the Boston Opportunity Youth Collaborative website, most are 20- to 24-year-olds who have high school diplomas.

More than 9,000 young Bostonians were estimated to be out of school and out of work in the US Census Bureau’s 2011-2013 American Community Surveys. Among them are 4,747 young adults who graduated from high school without entering the labor market or higher education.

“Too many of our young people are still struggling because of competition for jobs and for college,” Walsh said in a statement. “For the future of our city, we must create opportunities to prepare our residents for our workforce. The Connection Center will help young people find direction and the road to success.”

A project of the Boston Opportunity Youth Collaborative, the center is part of Walsh’s local efforts for fulfilling President Obama’s My Brother’s Keeper Initiative, which focuses on helping youth complete postsecondary education and successfully enter the workforce. The center had a preliminary opening in February.

Mentored by “success coaches,” many of whom are former opportunity youths themselves, Connection Center participants will get their needs assessed before being matched with compatible programs.

Participating college, vocational, and career readiness programs include College Bound Dorchester, Inquilinos Boricuas en Acción, the Asian American Civic Association, and pharmacy technician training in the Jewish Vocational Service.

Shantari Jones, 21, knew she wanted to enter the medical field, but had no clue where to start. After a friend referred her to the Connection Center, a success coach connected her to College Bound Dorchester, a college preparatory program that helped enroll Jones in Bunker Hill Community College.

“It made me feel more confident,” said Jones, who plans to dip her toes in certified nursing assistance, medical assistance, and phlebotomy. The success coaches “believe in you, stay on top of you, and check on you. I recommend [the Connection Center] to everybody.”

Kareem Lewis, 36, once an opportunity youth, now works as the center’s lead coach. After dropping out of college when he couldn’t afford the tuition, he graduated with high honors from Bunker Hill Community College.

“I didn’t have anyone to speak to regarding college and student loans,” said Lewis, who is still paying off his student loans. “We try to get them to avoid going through the same pitfalls that we did.”

Since February, success coaches have placed 12 to 15 youths in college preparatory and training programs, Lewis said.

Rommel Glover, 25, who advocated for the creation of the center, spent his early twenties working toward his GED after dropping out from a high school in a gang-ridden neighborhood.

“In the area I grew up in, I was always told I wasn’t going to make it,” Glover said. “I feel there’s not enough opportunities out here. We need to focus on graduates from high school who no longer have connections.”