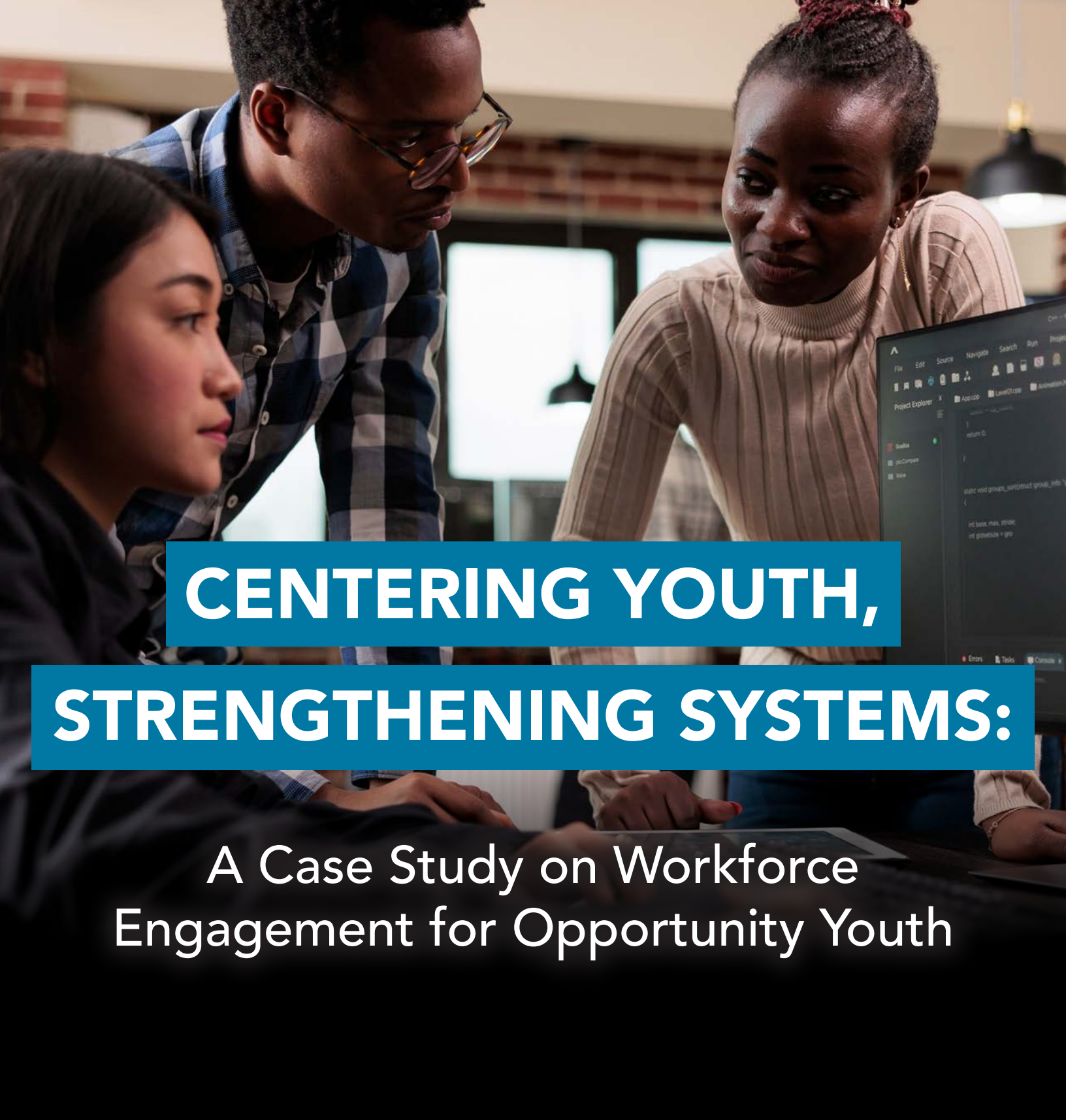




CENTERING YOUTH, STRENGTHENING SYSTEMS:

A Case Study on Workforce
Engagement for Opportunity Youth



The Los Angeles Opportunity Youth Collaborative (OYC)

The Los Angeles Opportunity Youth Collaborative is a network of organizations dedicated to creating more holistic and coordinated support for opportunity youth. By fostering partnerships with more than 100 public agencies, service providers, educational institutions, and employers, the OYC strengthens connections that help youth access education, employment, and broader opportunities. The OYC operates through a long-term, sustainable collective impact approach, focusing on five key areas: Amplifying Opportunity Youth Voice, Building Capacity, Making Connections, Promoting Awareness, and Transforming Systems.

Convened by the Alliance for Children's Rights and UNITE-LA, the OYC Foster Youth at Work Campaign engages public workforce and child welfare agencies in L.A. County in devising collaborative, systemic solutions to improve foster youth connection to work readiness training, early work experiences, and pathways to sustainable careers.



Social Policy Research Associates

Social Policy Research Associates (SPR) is a small, employee-owned research, evaluation, and technical assistance firm based in Oakland, California. We work on public and philanthropic efforts designed to improve people's health and livelihoods and enhance their schools, workplaces, and communities. Our approach is people-centered, learning-forward, and deeply collaborative. This ensures we help clients solving consequential human, economic, and environmental problems advance equity and deliver solutions that endure.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case study explores the barriers and opportunities within Los Angeles County's workforce development system for opportunity youth (OY), particularly focusing on those who are former foster youth. With approximately 143,000 young people, ages 16-24, disconnected from school and work in Los Angeles County, addressing these challenges is crucial for their long-term economic success.¹

Overview

Key findings from this study highlight significant barriers to youth engagement in workforce development programs, including inadequate outreach, enrollment challenges and misaligned program offerings. The study also uncovers successful strategies, such as the importance of warm handoffs between referring adults and workforce staff and the value of youth-centered communication and program design.

The recommendations presented here aim to redesign the workforce development system to better serve opportunity youth by prioritizing holistic support, enhancing cross-sector collaboration, and ensuring that programs are tailored to meet the specific needs and interests of young people. Implementing these changes can increase youth participation, retention and success in workforce programs, ultimately improving their economic and social outcomes.

The Youth-Centered Design Key Functions Framework² forms the basis for this case study. This framework emphasizes the customization of program services, support and opportunities to meet the unique interests and needs of individual youth. It highlights the importance of relationships among **frontline practitioners, engaged leadership, policy adjustments** and **data utilization** for continuous improvement. By prioritizing tailored programs, mentorship, vocational training and job prospects, the framework seeks to empower opportunity youth, enabling them to explore various career paths, develop essential skills and access critical resources for their professional growth. Additionally, the framework underscores the pivotal role of local Workforce Development Boards (WDBs) as catalysts for enhancing workforce development services, and ensuring successful transitions for opportunity youth.

¹Ari Malka and Robert Sainz, Los Angeles County - Disconnected Youth, April 2023, <https://laoyc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Los-Angeles-County-Disconnected-Youth-2023-1.pdf>.

²California Opportunity Youth Network. (2023). Youth-Centered Design Key Functions Framework. Retrieved from <https://www.caloycn.org/our-work/workforce-education/>.

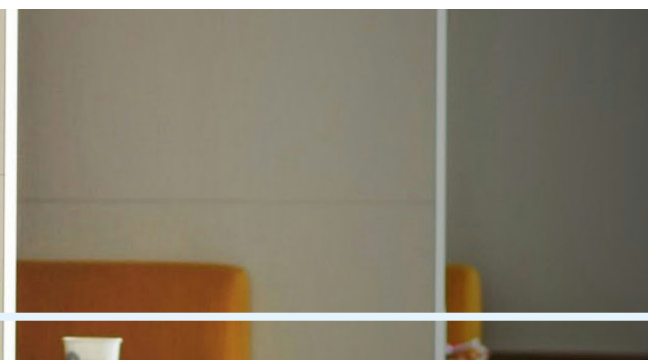
Summary of Findings

Barriers Identified

- **Comprehensive Support Barriers:** Young adults expressed a strong need for holistic services that provide stability and a sense of support and connection as they pursue their goals. Key elements of holistic stability include access to stable and affordable housing, health and wellness services, supportive long-term relationships, financial security, career exploration opportunities, persistence and completion of education, access to vital documents, reliable transportation and child care.
- **Barriers during the Referral Process:** Youth reported receiving limited information from the referring adult before being contacted by the workforce program. Without information, young adults face confusion and uncertainty about what to expect when participating in the workforce program.
- **Barriers during the Outreach Process:** Youth described inconsistent or overly complicated outreach messages from workforce programs, making effective program engagement difficult.
- **Barriers to Enrollment:** Young adults often perceived enrollment processes as burdensome, with extensive, unnecessary or duplicative paperwork, creating a significant barrier to starting in workforce programs.
- **Barriers to Persistence:** Limited flexibility in the types of work opportunities and time constraints made it difficult for youth to participate fully and complete programs.

Recommendations

- 1 Comprehensive Support Services:** Provide youth access to stabilizing supports throughout their access to workforce programming to ensure successful connection and completion of programming.
- 2 Enhanced Communication and Support Systems:** Strengthen communication and coordination between supportive adults and workforce programs, develop partnerships to aid youth enrollment, and use peers to re-engage and support disengaged youth.
- 3 Improve Outreach Effectiveness:** Develop policies and personalized, youth-friendly communication strategies that use texts, calls and emails to ensure clear, engaging and repetitive outreach about program details and next steps.
- 4 Dynamic Enrollment Support:** Build relationships at all youth connection points, establish systems and partnerships to prioritize service needs, boost resources for supportive services and invest in workforce opportunities aligned with youth career goals and input.
- 5 Engaging and Responsive Work-Based Learning Experiences:** Develop diverse work-based learning opportunities and strengthen partnerships with employers in high-growth fields to align work experiences with youths' skills, interests and availability.





INTRODUCTION

In 2021, Los Angeles County was home to approximately 143,000 young people, ages 16 to 24, who were disconnected from school and work.³ Many other youth experience higher rates of disconnection due to their experience with foster care, the justice system or housing instability. Together, these opportunity youth face unique challenges that can impede their progress toward stability and success.

Disproportionate disconnection rates are the direct result of entrenched structural racism, which manifests in several ways, undermining young people of color's potential and sense of belonging.



9,000

OY identify as current or former foster youth⁴



37%

of incarcerated youth in L.A. County are Black, but only 7% of the overall youth population is Black⁵



31%

or one out of three Black young men are disconnected⁶



17%

or one out of seven Latino young men are disconnected⁶

³Malka and Sainz, Los Angeles County-Disconnected Youth.

⁴Jenny Serrano (Children Services Administrator III, Department of Children and Family Services, County of Los Angeles), email message to author, April 26, 2024.

⁵Dawnesha Smith and Wendelyn Julian, A demographic snapshot of the youth detained in LA County Juvenile Hall, March 12, 2024, <https://file.lacounty.gov/SDSInter/bos/supdocs/POC24-0033.pdf>.

⁶"2020 Disconnected Youth by Gender and Race," L.A. Compact Charting Progress Dashboard, accessed October 16, 2024, https://www.lacompact.org/2020rpt_goal4_dy2020genderrace.

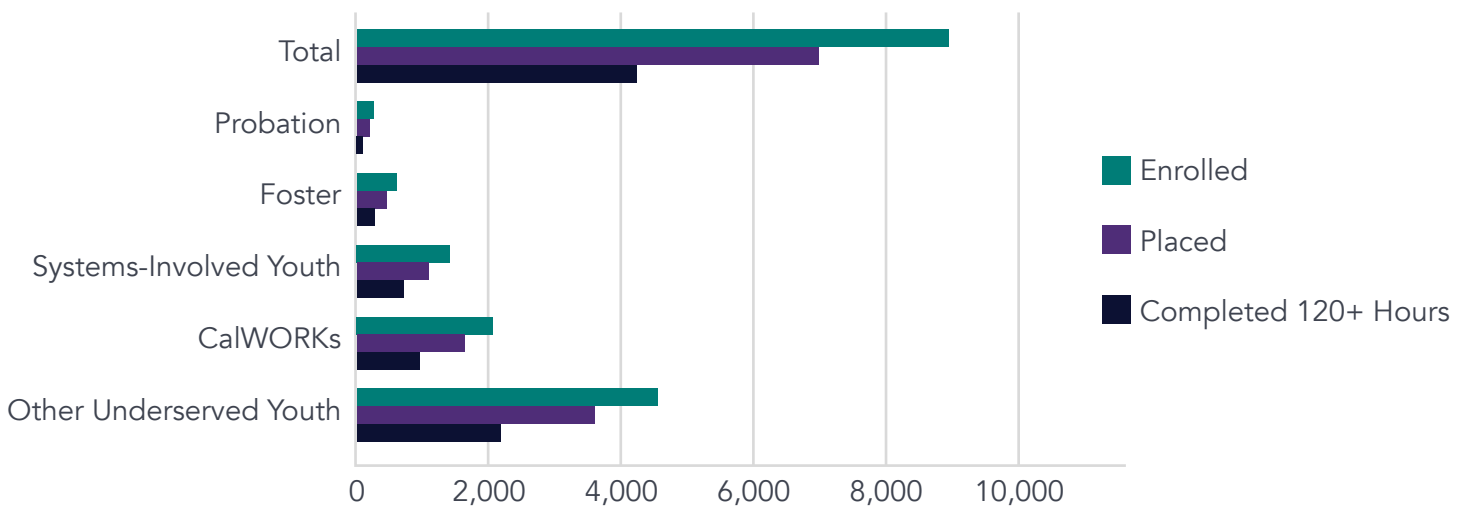
Between the ages of 16 and 24, youth are navigating a pivotal developmental phase, shaping their identities, making crucial life choices and setting the foundation for their futures. Yet, stark disparities in access to opportunities persist, especially for Black and Latino youth, highlighting an urgent need for equitable support and resources.

Los Angeles County's workforce system plays a crucial role in addressing these disparities by connecting youth to employment opportunities through public programs. These programs provide access to short-term training, resume-building assistance, paid work experiences and other supportive services, with a focus on opportunity youth, including those facing barriers such as low income, pregnancy, parenting, disability, and community or personal traumas. Despite the potential of these workforce programs, many eligible youth are not enrolling or persisting to completion.

For example, data from L.A. County Department of Economic Opportunity's (DEO) 2021-22 work-based learning program year showed that about one-quarter of foster, probation and systems-involved youth who enrolled in work experience programs never started their placement, and more than half did not complete the 120 hours of available work experience.⁷ This indicates a need for improved outreach, engagement and persistence strategies.

Number of Youth Enrolled and Placed in Work-Based Learning

Program Year 2021-22



⁷Vincent Malone (L.A. County Department of Economic Opportunity youth program staff), email message to author, March 19, 2024.

Background for this Case Study

In 2018, the OYC Foster Youth at Work partners embarked on a new strategy to develop a coordinated and integrated universal referral process between L.A. County Department of Children & Family Services (DCFS) and the seven workforce boards in L.A. County. The universal referral process and a web-based Automated Referral System (ARS) was designed in 2018 and launched in March 2019.

The L.A. Opportunity Youth Collaborative commissioned a case study describing the development and implementation of this process to coordinate and streamline foster youth referrals to workforce programs.

Foster Youth Universal Workforce Referral Process Goals:

- Build greater efficiency in inter-agency communication
- Increase the likelihood that foster youth enroll at their closest workforce center
- Provide greater transparency in understanding referral outcomes

Published in 2021, *Improving Equitable Employment Outcomes for Transition-Age Foster Youth in L.A. County: Streamlining Access to Career Development Services* includes specific recommendations for process improvement based on feedback from both network partners and foster youth themselves.⁸ The study found that 63 percent of foster and former foster youth referred to workforce programs were interested in long-term employment, 40 percent sought short-term paid internships or jobs, and only three percent were not interested in workforce services. **Despite the overwhelming interest, workforce program staff reported difficulties with engaging youth**, citing issues such as housing insecurity and disinterest during the enrollment process. Further evaluation of the effectiveness of the ARS revealed bottlenecks for youth entry into county workforce development programs along the enrollment continuum. Although the system was more readily identifying youth who qualify for enrollment in paid work experience, the handoff to the program presented challenges that discouraged youth from participating.

Building on initial OYC research examining successes and challenges with the Automated Referral System between L.A. County DCFS and workforce operators, **this case study broadens the focus to explore general youth engagement best practices across L.A. County's public workforce development system.** By adopting a targeted universalism approach, which sets universal goals pursued through targeted processes, this study aims to understand and address specific barriers faced by foster and former foster youth, aiming to solidify supportive strategies to reduce employment inequities for all opportunity youth.⁹

⁸Improving equitable employment outcomes for transition-age foster youth in L.A. County, May 2019, https://www.unitela.com/foster_youth_case_study.

⁹John A. Powell, Stephen Menendian and Wendy Ake, Targeted Universalism - Policy & Practice, May 2019, https://belonging.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/targeted_universalism_primer.pdf.



Purpose of this Case Study

To better understand the disconnect between foster youth referred through the Automated Referral System (ARS) and the workforce programs receiving these referrals, the OYC engaged Social Policy Research Associates (SPR) in early 2022 to conduct a comprehensive case study with the following objectives:

- 1 Identify Ineffective Processes:** Assess current processes in L.A. County's youth workforce development system to identify ineffective engagement strategies for opportunity youth, particularly the subset of opportunity youth who are in foster care.
- 2 Describe Best Practices:** Investigate and describe relevant best practices both locally and nationally for outreach, enrollment, program retention and completion among transition-age foster youth (TAY) and opportunity youth. This will help to understand effective strategies for engaging and supporting young people.
- 3 Recommend Improvements:** Provide recommendations for key program elements and policies to integrate into existing public youth workforce programs in L.A. County. The goal is to enhance program enrollment, engagement and completion rates among opportunity youth, with a particular focus on TAY.

Case Study Methods

As part of the OYC Foster Youth at Work campaign, *Centering Youth, Strengthening Systems: A Case Study on Workforce Engagement for Opportunity Youth* was developed using data gathered from interviews and a focus group comprised of 13 current and former foster youth referred by DCFS to the L.A. County's Youth at Work program through the ARS. Some youth enrolled in a workforce program, while others did not. Additional insights were obtained from interviews with workforce program staff who participated in a Youth-Centered Design Community of Practice (CoP) formed to improve the enrollment, retention and completion of youth in public workforce programs. The Youth-Centered Design CoP, facilitated by OYC consultant Ena Volic, included staff from two L.A. City YouthSource agencies and one L.A. County-based America's Job Center of California (AJCC) staff member who worked with ARS-referred youth. Over a five-month period between January and May 2022, the CoP met to explore challenges, best practices and the agency implications of implementing effective youth workforce programming.

The case study also incorporates input from interviews with three exemplary youth-serving organizations (both within and outside of California), and a review of literature detailing best practices for serving opportunity youth.

Youth-Centered Design

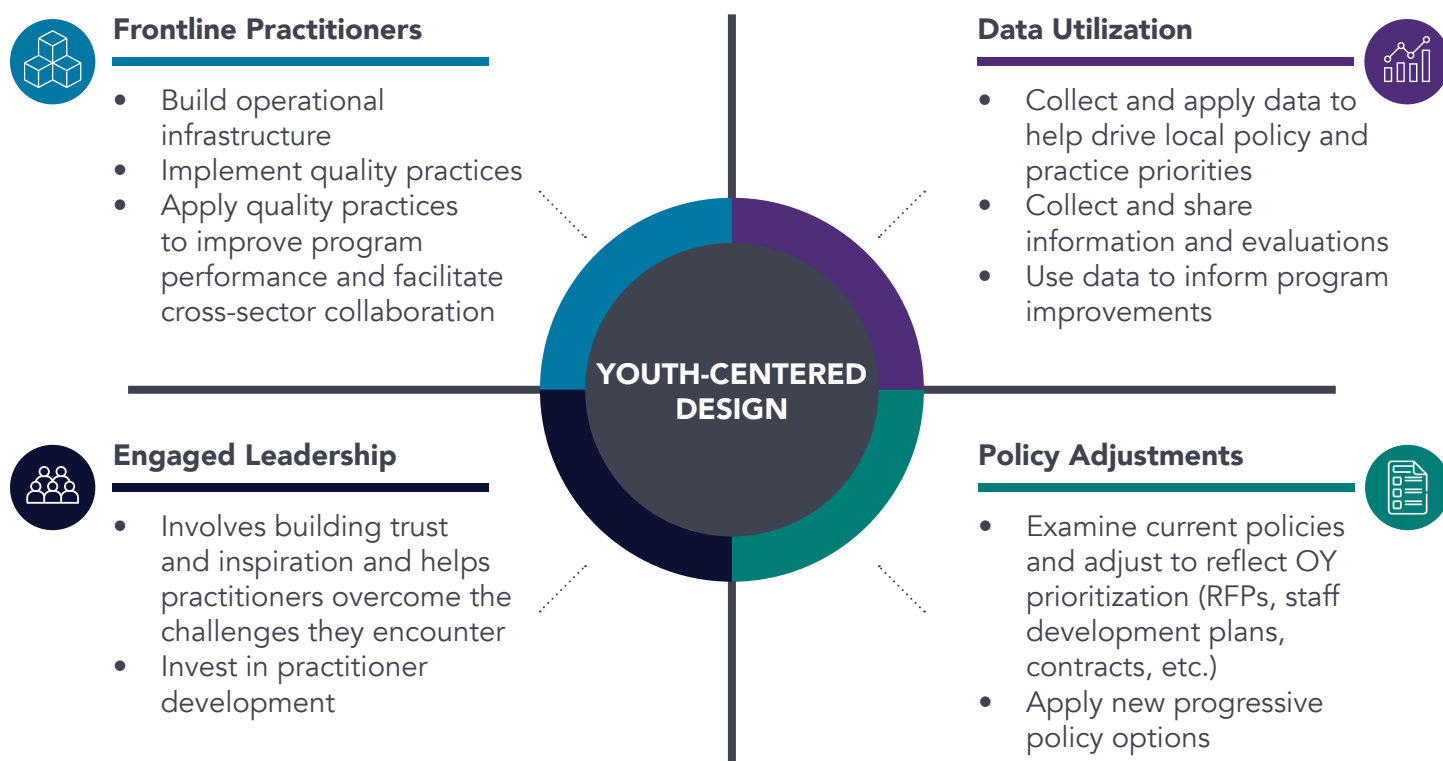
The Youth-Centered Design framework is a pivotal tool for analyzing findings and formulating recommendations. Drawing from California Opportunity Youth Network's guide, *Expanding Workforce and Career Development Pathways for Opportunity Youth*, the Youth-Centered Design framework emphasizes the importance of tailoring programs and services for opportunity youths' unique needs and aspirations.¹⁰ By focusing on youth empowerment, personalized career planning and a coordinated system approach, the framework provides a structured lens to evaluate current practices and identify areas for improvement. It explores how well existing programs engage youth, address barriers and integrate comprehensive support, ultimately delivering actionable insights for enhancing workforce development strategies and outcomes.

To build a well-coordinated system for opportunity youth, the Youth Centered-Design framework emphasizes:

- **Frontline Practitioners:** Developing strong connections between frontline practitioners and youth.
- **Engaged Leadership:** Supportive governmental and community-based organizational (CBO) leadership that prioritizes youth needs.
- **Policy Adjustments:** Adapting policies to reflect the priorities of youth-centered programs.
- **Data Utilization:** Using data to measure success and refine practices.

The framework highlights ways these elements are interconnected and flexible, designed to adapt to the evolving needs of youth.

Expanding Workforce and Career Development Pathways for Opportunity Youth



¹⁰Expanding Workforce and Career Development Pathways for Opportunity Youth, March 2022, https://jbay.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/COYN-Action-Guide_Digital73.pdf.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Across the nation, many workforce boards struggle to serve opportunity youth with higher acuity needs and barriers due to the rigidity of public funding streams. L.A. County workforce providers, like others throughout the country, face significant challenges with engaging opportunity youth who experience the child welfare system. Data collected alongside our workforce partners highlights five major categories of barriers encountered by OY who experience foster care: structural barriers, referral-related challenges, outreach barriers, enrollment-related problems, and challenges with ongoing engagement or persistence.

Summary of Findings

Barriers Identified

- 1 Comprehensive Support Barriers:** Young adults expressed a strong need for holistic services that provide stability and a sense of support and connection as they pursue their goals. Key elements of holistic stability include access to stable and affordable housing, health and wellness services, supportive long-term relationships, financial security, career exploration opportunities, persistence and completion of education, access to vital documents, reliable transportation and child care.
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- 4 Barriers to Enrollment:** Young adults often perceived enrollment processes as burdensome, with extensive, unnecessary or duplicative paperwork, creating a significant barrier to starting in workforce programs.
- 5 Barriers to Persistence:** Limited flexibility in the types of work opportunities and time constraints made it difficult for youth to participate fully and complete programs. Additionally, some placements were described as unengaging or misaligned with stated career goals, reducing motivation and persistence.

The Findings and Recommendations section outlines possible solutions identified during the study to address each of these barriers, drawing from youth feedback, literature and successful programs in other cities.

Proposed solutions address not only the engagement of OY who experience foster care but also opportunity youth more broadly, organized across the **four pillars of youth-centered design**:



Policy Adjustments:

Adapting policies to reflect the priorities of youth-centered programs.



Engaged Leadership:

Supportive governmental and community-based organizational (CBO) leadership that prioritizes youth needs.



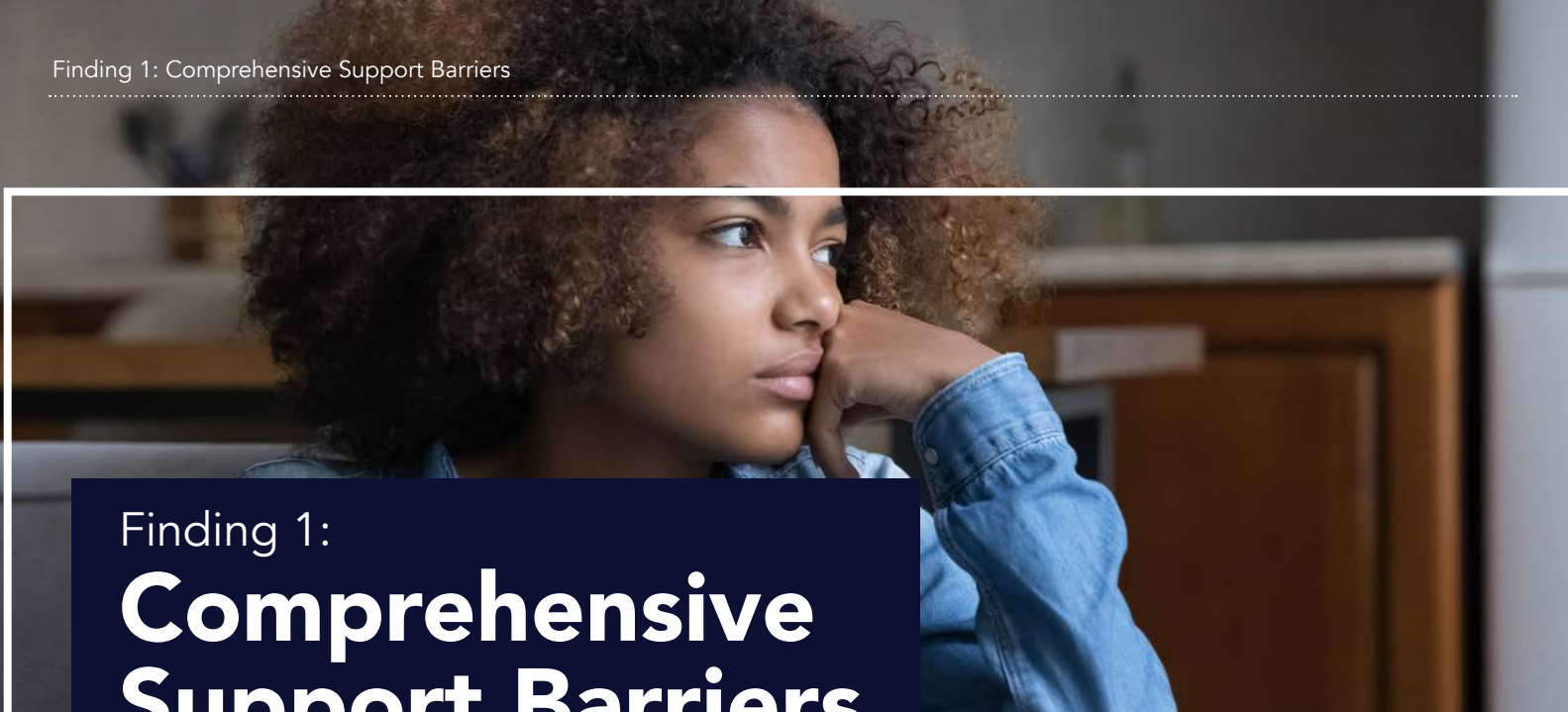
Frontline Practitioners:

Developing strong connections between frontline practitioners and youth.



Data Utilization:

Using data to measure success and refine practices.



Finding 1:

Comprehensive Support Barriers

Opportunity youth encounter significant structural barriers impeding access to employment and career preparation resources. Barriers include unstable housing, lack of mental health support, limited supportive relationships, missing vital documents, unreliable communication methods, insufficient child care and unreliable transportation. Each barrier adds complexity for youth seeking programs to find and obtain employment.

One youth interviewed for the study said, “It’s very hard to get established. Like, you can’t really get a car unless you have credit. And you can’t get an apartment or a place to live unless you have references or credit or money.”

The size and scale of L.A. County cause dispersed resources and services, which exacerbate the impact of these barriers. Opportunity youth must often commute to access employment and career preparation resources, making reliable transportation critical.¹¹ While the COVID-19 pandemic led to some virtual services, several foster youth and workforce staff members reported that many services and work experience opportunities still require in-person attendance, creating additional barriers to engagement. While workforce programs have access to dedicated funds for “supportive services,” funds can only be used after a youth has enrolled. Consequently, young people facing transportation barriers may not enroll because they cannot access a workforce center’s physical location to complete paperwork.

¹¹Gary Painter et al., Opportunity Youth in the City of Los Angeles, May 4, 2017, https://la.myneighborhooddata.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Opportunity-Youth-in-the-City-of-Los-Angeles_5.4.17.pdf.

Comprehensive Support Recommendations

Overall Recommendation:

Provide Holistic Support

- Ensure youth have access to housing, transportation and other resources to successfully enroll and engage in workforce programs.
- Equip workforce programs with flexible resources, such as supportive services dollars or community partnerships, to address structural barriers.
- Provide holistic support services before and during program participation to improve outreach, persistence and completion.



Policy Adjustments:

- **Funding and Partnership Match:** Encourage workforce providers to actively support youth success by requiring them to demonstrate a percentage match of funding or partnerships. This commitment will enhance youth enrollment and retention efforts by ensuring that resources are adequately allocated and that providers are invested in the outcomes of the youth they serve.
- **Flexible Service Hours:** Establish clear expectations for workforce programs to provide varied days and service hours. This should include offering both virtual and in-person orientations and enrollment appointments, making it easier for youth to access services at times that are convenient for them.
- **Transportation Solutions:** Identify and implement strategies to cover transportation costs for youth enrolling in workforce programs. This can include reallocating existing supportive service funding specifically for transportation needs or forming partnerships with rideshare companies to facilitate travel for youth, thereby removing a significant barrier to participation.



Engaged Leadership Should:

- **Prioritize Regional Partnerships:** Leadership should actively seek and prioritize partnerships with local organizations to streamline referrals and consolidate resources. By collaborating with community stakeholders, leaders can create a cohesive support network that enhances the accessibility and effectiveness of services for youth.
- **Document and Implement Needs:** Leaders should systematically document the needs of youth and analyze lessons learned from past participants. This information should be used to develop a consistent and accessible service delivery schedule, ensuring that programs are responsive to the needs of the youth and providing them with reliable support.
- **Emphasize Youth-Centered Leadership Decisions:** Leadership must consistently prioritize the needs of youth in decision-making processes. This involves actively seeking youth input, being responsive to their feedback, and building supportive relationships with them and their advocates. By fostering a youth-centered approach, leaders can ensure that services are tailored to effectively support the diverse needs of youth participants.



Frontline Practitioners Should:

- **Establish Baseline Knowledge:** Practitioners should develop a foundational understanding of the holistic supports necessary for youth engagement, including resources related to housing, transportation, mental health, education and employment. This knowledge will enable them to effectively identify and address the diverse needs of youth, ultimately improving enrollment and persistence in workforce programs.
- **Assess Youth Needs and Barriers:** Frontline practitioners must confidently assess the individual needs and barriers faced by youth. This includes conducting thorough evaluations during initial meetings to understand each youth's unique circumstances and challenges.
- **Referral to External Support:** When necessary, practitioners should be prepared to refer youth to external support services that complement workforce offerings. By establishing a network of community resources, practitioners can provide youth with additional assistance that addresses barriers outside of workforce programming, enhancing their overall success and engagement.



Utilize Data To:

- **Measure Program Success:** Implement a robust data collection system to monitor key performance indicators related to youth engagement, including enrollment numbers, attendance rates and program completion rates. This data will provide insight into the effectiveness of workforce programs and highlight areas needing improvement.
- **Analyze Barriers:** Regularly collect qualitative and quantitative data on the barriers youth face when accessing and participating in programs. This may involve surveys, interviews or focus groups that explore challenges related to transportation, housing, mental health and other factors. Understanding these barriers will allow programs to tailor support services more effectively.
- **Evaluate Outcomes:** Analyze outcomes related to youth success, such as job placements, skill acquisition and overall satisfaction with the program. Comparing these outcomes against the initial goals of the workforce programs will help identify best practices and areas for enhancement.
- **Inform Continuous Improvement:** Use the collected data to regularly review and refine program practices. Establish a feedback loop where data insights lead to actionable changes in program design, service delivery and resource allocation. This commitment to continuous improvement will enhance the overall effectiveness of workforce programs and better support youth in achieving their goals.

By implementing these comprehensive support recommendations, organizations will ensure access to essential resources like housing and transportation, and equip workforce programs with flexible resources to address structural barriers. This will enable better support for youth throughout their enrollment and participation.

Finding 2:

Barriers during the Referral Process

With the creation and adoption of the ARS by the L.A. County Department of Economic Opportunity (DEO), the county aimed to streamline access to workforce programming for OY who experience foster care. The ARS was envisioned as a practical tool to operationalize a “no wrong door” approach, facilitating more efficient coordination between the DCFS and the county’s seven independent workforce boards.

While the system marked a significant step toward integration, findings from this study reveal that its implementation introduced new challenges. Youth referred through the ARS often faced barriers that limited their ability to successfully engage with workforce services. Interviewed participants described issues such as unclear communication from workforce staff, delays in follow-up and a lack of personalized guidance—factors that contributed to a disconnect between referral and actual service delivery. These challenges were compounded by the absence of a “warm handoff” between referring adults and workforce program staff, leaving many youth without the support or clarity needed to navigate the process.

When asked how social workers described the workforce program, one youth reported, “I don’t know ... I’m not sure if they said anything.” Another youth indicated their social worker “didn’t say anything about it [the workforce program]. They just sent me the resource [flyer] via email.”

In other cases, youth recalled being told broadly that workforce program participation would serve as a “rewarding” experience or help them get a job, without complete information about program structure or the enrollment process.

The implementation of the ARS for youth who experience foster care made it easier to track referrals but did not ensure youth received a “warm handoff” between the referring adult and workforce program staff. As a result, some youth who were interviewed said that they would have preferred to be connected to the workforce program via someone they knew. Research and the experience of youth-serving organizations interviewed for the study indicate establishing connections between referring adults and workforce programming staff is crucial yet challenging. The lack of clear communication and warm handoffs during the referral process creates significant barriers for opportunity youth, hindering engagement with workforce programs.¹² When connections are in place, referring adults are more likely to have information about relevant workforce programs, enabling staff to clearly explain the program’s purpose to referred youth. One participant in the Youth-Centered Design CoP found communicating with the referring adult—and, if possible, arranging an in-person introduction with the youth—helped provide clarity and establish a main point of contact at the workforce program. The in-person introduction also delineated steps for enrollment prior to program kick-off.

“Young people are more successful when they know somebody.”

Norman Clark, Director of Opportunity Youth and Employment at Thrive Chicago

Another CoP participant found success by engaging youth through peer navigator networks, which supported young people who became disengaged during the referral process. The organization also invited program alumni to speak at orientation, providing insight into available opportunities.



¹²Priscilla M. Little, Larry Pasti and Lee Pearson, “Launch: An Innovative Approach to Reaching Opportunity Youth Final Evaluation Report April 2021,” The Forum For Youth Investment, May 11, 2021, <https://forumfyi.org/knowledge-center/launch-an-innovative-approach-to-reaching-opportunity-youth-final-evaluation-report-april-2021/>.

Referral Recommendations

Overall Recommendation:

Enhance Communication and Support Systems

- Improve communication between referring supportive adults and workforce programs to facilitate enrollment.
- Coordinate messaging around benefits and opportunities for engaging in workforce programming.
- Develop partnerships to support youth through the enrollment process.
- Utilize peers to follow up with disengaged youth and offer support for re-engagement.



Policy Adjustments:

- **Two-Way Policy for Referrals:** Referring agencies should develop a clear policy that ensures case managers are familiar with available workforce programming, including detailed procedures for making referrals. This policy should include training sessions to help frontline practitioners understand the goals, processes and eligibility requirements of workforce programs, allowing them to effectively guide youth into appropriate opportunities. The referring party needs a procedure for making a referral and the receiving party needs a complementary procedure.
- **Establish Common Language:** Create a standardized, shared language between workforce programs and DCFS to ensure clear communication. This common language should include terminology used in both systems, helping social workers and workforce staff to better understand each other and collaborate efficiently. These terms and definitions should be formalized in policy documentation and training materials.
- **No “Blind Referrals”:** Referring agencies should have a policy that supportive adults meet with young people to discuss youth needs, goals and available services before making a referral.



Engaged Leadership Should:

- **Build Partnerships:** Leaders should actively engage with workforce programs, community organizations and supportive adults, such as mentors, social workers and educators, to establish formal partnerships. This can include developing agreements, coordinating meetings and aligning goals to ensure a collaborative approach in guiding youth through enrollment and program participation.
- **Facilitate Joint Engagement:** Leadership can organize joint orientation sessions where workforce staff, DCFS representatives and other supportive adults are present to assist youth. By inviting DCFS staff to these sessions, leaders ensure that youth have familiar, trusted adults with them during the initial engagement, reducing anxiety and increasing their comfort.
- **Provide Resources and Training:** Leaders can allocate resources, such as funding for orientation events and transportation, and ensure that staff and partners are trained to effectively support youth through the enrollment process. This includes offering communication strategies, trauma-informed practices and collaborative planning tools.
- **Monitor and Adjust the Approach:** Leadership should consistently evaluate the effectiveness of these partnerships and the involvement of supportive adults, using feedback from staff and youth to make adjustments. This ensures that the process remains youth-centered and responsive to their evolving needs.



Frontline Practitioners Should:

- **Coordinate Enrollment Efforts:** Establish a clear and streamlined enrollment process where all stakeholders—youth, supportive adults and workforce program staff—know their roles. Practitioners should develop a step-by-step guide to make enrollment simple and straightforward. Coordination among teams ensures consistency and regular check-ins with all parties help keep the process on track.
- **Develop Consistent Messaging:** Create standardized communication materials that explain the benefits, opportunities and goals of workforce programs in youth-friendly language. This can include brochures, presentations and videos that are easy to understand and that address the concerns and interests of both youth and supportive adults. Make sure all staff and partners are trained to use the same language and terminology to describe the program, reinforcing key messages throughout the enrollment and participation processes.
- **Ongoing Support and Follow-Up:** After the initial meeting, practitioners should maintain regular communication with all parties. This could include follow-up meetings, emails or phone calls to check on the youth's progress, clarify expectations and offer additional resources as needed. The ongoing involvement of supportive adults strengthens youth engagement and accountability.

Implementing these recommendations will create a more youth friendly program environment, fostering sustained youth engagement and participation. By enhancing communication between supportive adults and workforce programs, coordinating messaging, developing partnerships and utilizing peers for re-engagement, organizations can better align with youth interests and needs. Establishing regular feedback systems allows for real-time adjustments, ensuring that youth receive the tailored support necessary to thrive. Ultimately, these strategies will lead to improved program efficiency, higher enrollment and retention rates, and stronger long-term outcomes for participants.



Finding 3:

Barriers during the Outreach Process

Youth described several barriers to communication between social workers and workforce staff, and between workforce staff and the youth during the outreach process. Understanding youths' preferred methods of communication will support workforce staff with overcoming current barriers during the outreach process. Identified barriers include:

- Youth reported inconsistent ARS automated notification messages and phone calls from workforce staff. Youth referred to workforce programs should receive text and email messages automatically generated by the ARS to inform them about the referral. However, the youth in this study did not recall receiving these messages. Several youth also noted workforce staff callers appearing as spam or scams, leading them to not answer or recognize the call originated from the workforce program.
- Outreach emails and other communications were not always clear, engaging or youth-friendly. Some youth reported receiving unclear or impersonal emails and text messages from workforce staff members. Specifically, some youth felt lacking one-on-one support during enrollment contributed to disinterest and misunderstandings.

As one youth stated while following up with questions about the program, he would have liked for workforce program staff to be more “interactive.”

Research indicates using multiple communication methods, such as texts, calls and emails, can be effective in engaging and reengaging youth.¹³ Our local CoP with workforce CBOs highlighted the importance of utilizing a range of tools, including social media and texting, to engage youth in a workforce program. These tools increased youth understanding of the program, generating interest in participation.

¹³Amy M. Salazar, Sara S. Spiers and Francis R. Pfister, “Authentically Engaging Youth with Foster Care Experience: Definitions and Recommended Strategies from Youth and Staff,” *Journal of Youth Studies* 24, no. 8 (July 13, 2020): 1015–32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2020.1792863>.

One organization participating in the CoP created a YouTube video showcasing a youth participant interning with the L.A. Rams.

Workforce programs can encourage youth participants to create Instagram Reels, TikTok videos and YouTube videos about their work experiences as marketing and outreach tools for other youth. Additionally, a survey of 60 youth by one of the CoP participating organizations found **youth preferred texting as their primary mode of communication, suggesting workforce programs could benefit from utilizing texting in communication strategies.**

Research also suggests policies must allow program staff to meet youth “where they are,” engaging young people in developmentally and circumstantially appropriate manners.¹⁴ As Liz Jackson-Simpson from Success Center San Francisco notes, in terms of making change, “it’s not on our time, it’s on their time.”

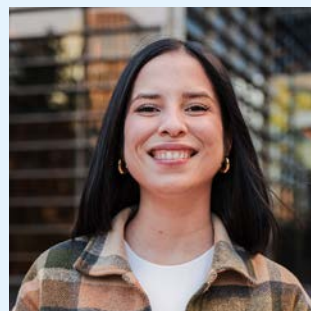
For additional insight into referral and outreach barriers, see Daniella’s story.¹⁵

Youth Persona #1: Daniella

Daniella wants to open her own business; she considers herself to be multifaceted and wants to do various business ventures. She has participated in a handful of youth programs previously, one of which she described as helping her to get back on track.

Why did Daniella not enroll in a workforce program?

She didn’t receive enough information about the program so didn’t see how it was better than her current part-time job. Daniella recalls her previous social worker mentioning the workforce program, but she was not given many details. When a workforce program staff person reached out, the person didn’t tell her much about the program. Because she had recently been assigned a new social worker whom she did not know, she felt she couldn’t reach out to that person for more information. No one told her that the workforce program could also help her get her GED and learn about how to start her own business.



Age: 19

Gender: Female

Race/Ethnicity: Latinx

Education:

Does not have high school diploma, but is hoping to acquire her GED

Prior Experience:

Hair cutting and styling; various other informal, part-time jobs

¹⁴“The Road to Adulthood,” The Annie E. Casey Foundation, July 23, 2017, <https://www.aecf.org/resources/the-road-to-adulthood>.

¹⁵Youth personas are fictional examples of potential youth experiences, based on our research findings. These are not profiles of particular youth.

Outreach Recommendations

Overall Recommendation:

Improve Outreach Effectiveness

- Develop policies for workforce and DCFS staff so youth receive clear and engaging communication.
- Develop and utilize personalized and youth-friendly outreach emails and text messages.
- Use engaging language and provide clear information about the program and next steps.
- Utilize multiple communication methods, using texts, calls and emails to notify youth about referrals. Repetitive communication helps mitigate missed messages.



Policy Adjustments:

- **Enhance the Automated Referral System (ARS):** Upgrade the ARS to ensure reliable delivery of text and email notifications. This includes implementing features that track delivery status and confirm that messages have been sent and received, thereby increasing communication efficiency with youth and stakeholders.
- **Add Feedback Loop Features:** Consider integrating additional features into the ARS that allow staff to confirm receipt of messages and provide feedback loops. This could include options for youth to acknowledge receipt of information or respond to messages, ensuring clear communication and engagement.
- **Follow-Up Policy:** Implement a policy requiring staff to follow up with texts and emails if phone calls go unanswered. This policy will ensure that youth are informed of all contact attempts, reinforcing the importance of communication and helping to build rapport between staff and youth.
- **Update DCFS Contractual Language:** Amend DCFS contracts to require that “transition meetings” are conducted for all referrals initiated by DCFS. These meetings would involve DCFS social workers, supportive adults and the youth. During the transition meetings, workforce program goals (as defined in the youth’s “case plan”) will be discussed, ensuring alignment among all parties. This policy ensures that everyone works toward the same objectives, providing youth with a coordinated support system for successful workforce transitions.

L.A. County Probation requires a probation officer to meet with the youth and workforce program in making a referral.



Engaged Leadership Should:

- **Train Staff for Effective Communication:** Provide comprehensive training for staff on how to create interactive and engaging communications. This training should emphasize personalizing messages and offering one-on-one enrollment support, ensuring that youth feel valued and understood throughout the enrollment process.
- **Review and Update Outreach Strategies:** Establish a regular schedule for reviewing and updating outreach strategies based on feedback from youth. This process will ensure that communication methods remain relevant, effective and engaging, allowing programs to adapt to the evolving needs and preferences of the youth they serve.

- **Foster a Culture of Continuous Learning:** Leadership should promote a culture of continuous learning by providing ongoing resources and training opportunities for staff. This includes access to best practices in youth engagement, innovative outreach techniques and professional development.
- **Set Clear Expectations and Provide Feedback:** Offer clear expectations for staff regarding their roles in engaging youth and communicating effectively. Regular feedback sessions should be implemented to recognize staff efforts and provide constructive guidance, helping them improve their skills in working with opportunity youth.
- **Encourage Open Communication and Innovation:** Create an environment where open communication is encouraged, allowing staff to share ideas, challenges and successes. By fostering innovation and collaboration, leaders can empower staff to develop creative solutions for engaging youth and enhancing program effectiveness.



Frontline Practitioners Should:

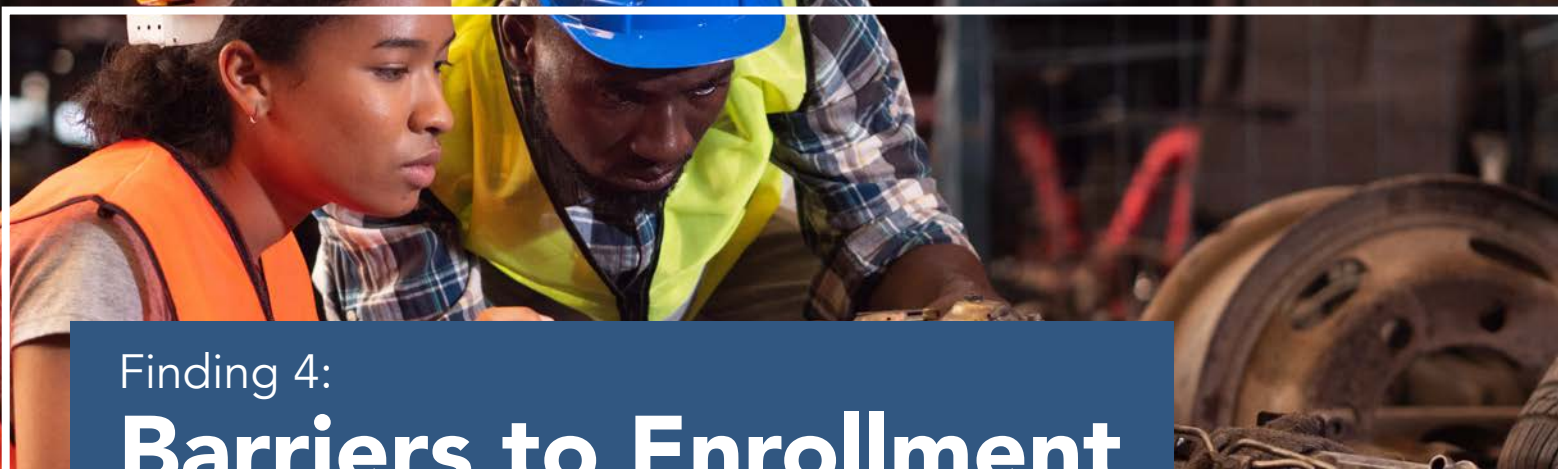
- **Personalize Outreach Efforts:** Frontline practitioners should tailor their outreach communications to ensure they are clear, engaging and relevant to each individual participant. By personalizing messages, practitioners can help youth feel more connected to the program, increasing their interest and motivation to participate.
- **Follow Up on Missed Communications:** Establish a systematic approach for following up on missed communications by sending timely follow-up texts and emails. This will ensure that participants are aware of their referrals, understand the next steps in the process and feel supported in their journey.
- **Partner with Agency Leadership:** Practitioners should actively collaborate with agency leadership to enhance outreach and enrollment efforts. By working together, practitioners can receive guidance, resources and support that strengthen their ability to engage youth effectively and ensure a smoother enrollment process.



Utilize Data To:

- **Collect and Analyze Communication Effectiveness:** Implement a system to collect and analyze data on the effectiveness of various communication methods used to engage participants. This should include tracking metrics such as response rates, engagement levels and enrollment outcomes for each method (e.g., texts, emails, phone calls, social media).
- **Integrate Satisfaction Surveys:** Incorporate satisfaction surveys into the outreach process to gather feedback from participants on their experiences with different communication methods. These surveys can help identify which approaches are most effective in reaching and engaging youth, providing valuable insights for future strategies.
- **Continuously Refine Outreach Practices:** Use the data collected from both engagement metrics and satisfaction surveys to continuously refine and improve outreach practices. Analyze trends and patterns to determine what works best, and adjust communication strategies accordingly to enhance participant engagement and overall program effectiveness.

Implementing these recommendations will enable organizations to significantly enhance their outreach effectiveness and create a more adaptable and responsive system for youth. This approach will improve communication, engagement and program efficiency, ultimately leading to better outcomes for youth. By fostering a supportive environment, leveraging data-driven insights, and promoting continuous learning and innovation, organizations can build sustainable pathways to meaningful employment. This ensures that youth receive the tailored support they need to thrive in workforce programs, paving the way for their long-term success.



Finding 4: Barriers to Enrollment

Youth described several barriers during the enrollment process, highlighting various challenges stemming from competing priorities, program requirements, generic and low-wage opportunities, and missed enrollment opportunities. Collectively, each barrier hindered youths' ability to engage fully with the workforce programs.

- **Competing Priorities:** Many youth were successfully contacted by workforce staff but found themselves unable to enroll due to other pressing priorities. For instance, one youth shared that she had dismissed the opportunity because she had "other goals to accomplish," such as retrieving her I.D. and driver's license, which highlights how immediate personal tasks often take precedence over enrollment.
- **Program Requirements:** The enrollment process itself sometimes posed significant barriers. One youth recalled being asked to complete lengthy, overly personal surveys, which made them question the program's legitimacy, feeling it seemed like a scam to steal personal information. Another youth expressed concerns about COVID-19 vaccine requirements, stating, "It [the job] wasn't permanent. And to get a vaccination [because of the] AJCC, it was just risky because we were just getting hours in temporary jobs." Program requirements were seen as disproportionate to the perceived benefits.
- **Generic and Low-Wage Opportunities:** Youth often viewed work experience opportunities offered by programs as too generic and low-wage, similar to jobs they could find on their own. One youth remarked, "...when I saw the types of jobs, it didn't really correlate with my major. It would just be jobs that I could find, I guess, by myself, like fast food restaurants or, I think, construction work." Another youth described the available jobs as "random," indicating a disconnect between the opportunities provided and their career aspirations.
- **Missed Enrollment Opportunities:** Some youth intended to participate later when they were less busy but thought they had missed the enrollment deadline and did not bother to contact the program. Many recalled being occupied with other tasks or facing life challenges, leading to missed enrollment opportunities.

Organizational and program requirements within the broader L.A. County workforce system further compound barriers. Research suggests such requirements, including performance goals, might limit workforce staff's resources to enroll opportunity youth. For example, a recent study of America's Job Centers of California (AJCCs) in Los Angeles found that "AJCCs have limited resources and must prioritize enrollments and services to those most likely to result in attainment of the performance targets."¹⁶

¹⁶Jessie Oettinger, Kris Palmer and Kate Dunham, Evaluation of the Los Angeles County America's Job Centers of California, September 2021, <https://file.lacounty.gov/SDSInter/bos/supdocs/148540.pdf>.

Conversely, when programs utilize resources to tailor programming to youth, it builds youth program interest. Existing research suggests centering youth resiliency and assets is key to increasing engagement. One recent approach, healing-centered engagement, suggests moving away from deficit-based models focused on addressing traumatic experiences. Instead, it advocates for practices centering youth strengths, assets and agency, facilitating their ability to become agents in their own well-being and healing.¹⁷

A strengths-based approach is particularly relevant for workforce programs effectively engaging opportunity youth. It underscores the importance of building upon youths' interests and experiences and working collaboratively with them to identify resources and develop career development plans. As Jasmine Joseph-Forman, Chief Program Officer at the Newark Opportunity Youth Network (OYN), states, "You can't assume for a young person [what they need or want]. You need to involve them in the process." Empowering program staff to connect with youth helps them better understand youths' interests and goals. Understanding a youth's perspective enables workforce staff to utilize various strategies, including building empathy and trust, sharing personal stories, encouraging youth to dream and imagine, and helping build cognitive and social-emotional competence. Culturally grounded practices, such as connecting youth to their communities and linking them to caring adults with shared key identities, are also essential.

One CoP participant organization provided an example of a staff-led approach to offering tailored work experience opportunities. The approach successfully re-engaged a youth participant who had become inactive after one month of program participation. When the program reconnected with the participant several years later, they sought to understand the youth's professional goals and developed a work experience opportunity at a local music studio that aligned with those goals. The youth excelled and, upon completing the required program hours, was hired as a part-time employee and given free studio time as part of the role.

See Jeremy's enrollment experience ...

Youth Persona #2: Jeremy

Jeremy is interested in being a mechanic; he relates this interest back to his passion for cars. He is also currently preparing for independence. While Jeremy did well in high school, he does not like school and is not currently interested in going to college.

Why did Jeremy enroll?

He received clear information about the program from his social worker and how it could help him. Initially, Jeremy did not see the email sent from the workforce program. However, after hearing from his social worker that he should have received a message and that the program could help him achieve his goal of becoming a mechanic, he looked through his email and found it. He then called the workforce program using the number in the email to schedule an appointment to learn more about the program. He was able to obtain an exemption needed to meet enrollment requirements. Although Jeremy did not have the required COVID-19 vaccination, he was able to successfully enroll after obtaining an exemption.



Age: 18
Gender: Male
Race/Ethnicity: African American
Education: Currently finishing high school
Prior Experience: None

¹⁷Myra Soto-Aponte, "Youth Thrive & Healing Centered Engagement Crosswalk: A Focus on Building Young People's Strengths and Healing," Center for the Study of Social Policy, May 2021, <https://cssp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Crosswalk-Youth-Thrive-and-Healing-Centered-Engagement.pdf>.

Enrollment Recommendations

Overall Recommendation:

Improve Outreach Effectiveness

- Focus on building relationships at all youth connection points, pairing transactional needs with transformational conversations.
- Establish systems and partnerships to prioritize service needs, supporting workforce program enrollment.
- Boost resources for supportive services by modifying policy to allow some funding to support a participant prior to their enrollment in the workforce program.
- Invest in and strengthen workforce opportunities for youth, guided by youth input and aligned with youth career goals.



Policy Adjustments:

- **Implement an All-Electronic, Universal Application:** Develop an electronic, universal application to streamline data entry, minimize duplication and ensure that data systems are interconnected. This will create a more efficient enrollment process and facilitate better data tracking and analysis across programs.
- **Establish a Participant Re-Engagement Policy:** Create a structured re-engagement policy, with annual plans to reach out to youth who have paused or stopped the enrollment process. This policy should outline specific strategies and touchpoints for reconnecting with participants, encouraging them to complete their enrollment and stay engaged.
- **Set Data Entry Standards for Opt-Out Participants:** Define data entry standards for youth who temporarily opt out of program enrollment. This should include a formal pre-assessment and a preliminary service plan, providing a structured approach to tracking and addressing their needs should they choose to re-enroll.
- **Track Preferred Communication Methods:** Ensure that preferred communication methods, such as texting or email, are recorded and consistently used in engagement efforts. Tailoring outreach to youth preferences can improve response rates and enhance engagement.
- **Regional Employer Engagement:** Convene regional partners to develop the regional infrastructure to facilitate and maintain strategic engagement with emerging industries, set employer engagement strategies and develop strong business relationships. The aim is to identify career pathways for youth and strengthen their entry into careers aligned with their interests and skills.



Engaged Leadership Should:

- **Update Re-Engagement Strategies Annually:** Regularly refresh re-engagement strategies to support targeted outreach and connect with youth who may have paused or disengaged. This annual update allows leaders to incorporate lessons learned, optimize resources and leverage new engagement opportunities that align with youth needs.
- **Coordinate Safety Net and Service Program Training:** Facilitate comprehensive training for staff on available safety net programs and service opportunities, equipping them to better connect youth with essential resources that support their workforce and personal development needs.

- **Provide Youth Development Training:** Offer specialized training on youth development frameworks, such as healing-centered engagement and motivational interviewing. This equips staff with the tools to build meaningful relationships, foster resilience and center youth strengths, making program interactions more supportive and effective.
- **Simplify and Streamline Enrollment:** Simplify enrollment paperwork by providing electronic forms that are easy to navigate, and consider adding video or audio explanations to guide youth through the process. This approach makes program access straightforward, reducing barriers and enhancing accessibility for youth of all backgrounds.



Frontline Practitioners Should:

- **Assess for Readiness for Enrollment:** Practitioners should begin by identifying each youth's unique needs and barriers to determine if they are ready for program enrollment. This assessment allows practitioners to provide appropriate guidance and resources, ensuring youth are prepared and able to engage meaningfully.
- **Stay Informed on Program Timelines and Enrollment Procedures:** Frontline staff should be continuously updated and trained on program timelines, new enrollment procedures and re-engagement strategies. This knowledge ensures that practitioners can navigate and support youth effectively through program entry and beyond.
- **Implement Case Management Data Entry for Partial Enrollments:** Develop a process to document key information for youth who begin but do not complete enrollment. This documentation should include personal details, initial assessments, reasons for non-completion and follow-up actions. Tracking this data will enable practitioners to identify common barriers, allocate resources more effectively and maintain accountability to support future re-engagement efforts.



Utilize Data To:

- **Develop APIs for Streamlined Data Integration:** Create application programming interfaces (APIs) across multiple workforce data systems to minimize duplicate tracking and reporting mechanisms. This integration will improve data accuracy and reduce administrative burden, allowing staff to focus more on youth engagement.
- **Gather Youth Feedback on Communication:** Consistently collect feedback from youth about their communication preferences and experiences to help refine and enhance outreach and enrollment processes. This continuous input allows programs to adapt methods to better resonate with and engage youth.
- **Analyze Data from Non-Enrolled Youth:** Regularly review data from youth who did not complete program enrollment to identify and address common barriers. This analysis helps practitioners adjust outreach and support strategies to improve enrollment outcomes and remove obstacles.

Incorporating these recommendations can create a more efficient and youth-centered program environment. By streamlining data systems, programs can allocate resources more effectively, allowing staff to focus on supporting youth. Gathering direct feedback enhances engagement by tailoring communication strategies to better resonate with participants. Additionally, analyzing barriers to enrollment enables practitioners to proactively address obstacles, making the program more inclusive and accessible, ultimately leading to higher enrollment and retention rates.

Finding 5:

Barriers to Program Persistence

Youth described several barriers to persistence in workforce programs, highlighting critical areas for improvement. Inflexible program schedules often conflict with their existing commitments, such as school. Some youth found work experience placements unengaging or misaligned with their career goals. For instance, a youth placed in a warehouse job noted significant downtime between tasks, while another expressed frustration over the lack of opportunities in tech for women and underrepresented groups.

Firsthand accounts underscore the need for more adaptable, responsive program structures. Research and conversations with youth-serving organizations further illuminate the importance of providing scaffolded engagement opportunities, or opportunities offered in layers rather than all at once. The Workplace Center at The Columbia School of Social Work found combining peer groups with independent learning provided foster and former foster youth with the flexibility needed to remain engaged in job readiness programs.¹⁸ Similarly, Newark Opportunity Youth Network (OYN) uses a “continuum of engagement,” a series of checkpoints to ensure youth stay connected to programming over time.

One youth shared, “I was confused because they said [the employer] would work around [my] schedule, but then they gave those minimum requirements that conflicted with my existing commitments.”

¹⁸rep., Los Angeles Transition Aged Youth Curriculum: An Evaluation, November 2017, <https://acrobat.adobe.com/id/urn:aaid:sc:VA6C2:16ceeb9b-9506-4690-803e-715e773ea5f3>

Building on these insights, Liz Jackson-Simpson of Success Center San Francisco emphasized the necessity of offering a range of options and opportunities to keep youth engaged. She noted programs should “commit to providing something tangible by the time [youth] leave,” such as phones or financial incentives. Jackson-Simpson’s approach incentivizes participation and provides immediate, practical benefits. Research also suggests youth benefit from access to different types and levels of work experience opportunities, from entry-level positions for those with limited experience to more challenging roles for those with developed career interests.

Learn more from Jessica’s experience ...

Youth Persona #3: Jessica

Jessica is interested in going to college to pursue a career supporting and advocating for foster youth, particularly in the realm of mental health services. She works 30 hours per week and generally ignores phone calls from numbers she isn’t familiar with.

Why did Jessica not enroll in a workforce program?

Referral methods did not succeed in reaching her: Jessica does not recall receiving an email or phone call for the workforce program. She says she does check her email regularly and did not receive anything. She also believes she was too busy at the time to notice any incoming calls from an unknown number. Her perception of workforce programming is that it would not be tailored to her current schedule and interests. Jessica prefers to utilize other services (such as those offered by staffing agencies) to find employment, based on her view that these services are more likely to be tailored to her interests. She does not think workforce programs would be flexible enough to fit within her part-time work schedule.



Age: 21
Gender: Female
Race/Ethnicity: Latina
Education: High school diploma; plans to go to college
Prior Experience: Foster youth camp leader; medical receptionist

Persistence Recommendations

Overall Recommendation:

Engaging and Responsive Work-Based Learning Experiences

- Develop a range of work-based learning opportunities to cater to different skill levels and career interests, avoiding a “one-size-fits-all” approach.
- Strengthen partnerships with employers in high-growth fields to create work experience opportunities aligned with youths’ interests and availability.



Policy Adjustments:

- **Ensure Flexible Program Schedules:** Design program schedules that are adaptable and considerate of youths’ existing commitments, promoting sustained engagement and persistence in their participation.
- **Utilize Peer Support Specialists:** Establish a peer network system to incorporate peers in helping youth navigate their first work experience. This can be done through Peer Support meetings that are co-hosted with youth who have completed the program.



Engaged Leadership Should:

- **Enhance Employer Engagement:** Strengthen partnerships with employers by assigning specialized staff to coordinate and maintain high-quality work-site relationships.
- **Provide Layered Engagement Opportunities:** Create a progression of engagement opportunities that build over time, avoiding overwhelming youth with all program requirements at once.
- **Check-Ins:** Ensure at least two check-ins with youth throughout their work experience to understand their experiences, what they are learning, the challenges they are facing and their aspirations beyond the internship.



Frontline Practitioners Should:

- **Solicit Youth Feedback for Worksite Placements:** Involve youth in the process of finding worksite placements and empower them to act as ambassadors to secure sites that interest them.
- **Implement Checkpoints for Continuous Participation:** Establish a series of checkpoints to keep youth connected to the program over time, ensuring ongoing participation and support.
- **Engage with Employer Partners Regularly:** Hold regular discussions with employer work-site partners about youth performance and skill development, ensuring these conversations include input from the youth.



Utilize Data To:

- **Set Up Regular Feedback Systems:** Create mechanisms for collecting real-time input from youth, allowing for timely program adjustments that better meet their evolving needs.

Implementing these recommendations will create a more adaptable and nurturing program environment, fostering sustained youth engagement and participation. By improving communication between supportive adults and workforce programs, coordinating messaging, developing partnerships and utilizing peers for re-engagement, organizations can better align with youth interests and needs. Establishing regular feedback systems allows for real-time adjustments, ensuring that youth receive the tailored support necessary to thrive. Ultimately, these strategies will lead to improved program efficiency, higher enrollment and retention rates, and stronger long-term outcomes for participants.





CONCLUSION

Effective OY workforce program engagement is dependent upon a strong, thriving workforce development system. This case study includes recommendations around key areas for capacity building, informed by data, to understand issues, spot trends and hold systems accountable to ensure young people's success. The case study's recommendations draw from youth experiences, outlining the diverse, complex reasons behind limited youth workforce engagement. At both program site and system levels, leaders must cultivate frequent, consistent opportunities for collecting youth feedback, influencing program design, and coordinating policy and engagement practices.

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