

Improving Equitable Employment Outcomes for Transition-Age Foster Youth in L.A. County

Streamlining Access to Career Development Services

May 2021



Acknowledgements

The Opportunity Youth Collaborative 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.

Thank you to the many Foster Youth at Work partners who collaborated on the initial pilot of the foster youth Universal Referral Process, and who continue to partner on its continuous improvement.

- Alliance for Children’s Rights
- Foothill Workforce Development Board
- L.A. City Economic and Workforce Development Department
- L.A. County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS)
- L.A. County Office of Child Protection
- L.A. County Workforce Development, Aging & Community Services Department
- L.A. County Workforce Development Board
- Pacific Gateway Workforce Innovation Network
- SELACO Workforce Development Board
- South Bay Workforce Investment Board
- UNITE-LA
- Verdugo Workforce Development Board

THANK YOU TO OUR FUNDERS:

- ANGELL FOUNDATION
- BALLMER GROUP
- CALIFORNIA WORKFORCE ACCELERATOR FUND
- CONRAD N. HILTON FOUNDATION
- HIRE OPPORTUNITY COALITION
- PRITZKER FOSTER CARE INITIATIVE
- STUART FOUNDATION
- THE ASPEN INSTITUTE
FORUM FOR COMMUNITY SOLUTIONS
- THE CARL & ROBERTA DEUTSCH FOUNDATION
- THE RALPH M. PARSONS FOUNDATION

Contents

Executive Summary	1
Introduction	4
Foster Youth Referral Process	6
Referral Outcomes	8
Findings and Recommendations	11
Appendices	22
About the Co-Authors	26





Executive Summary

The L.A. Opportunity Youth Collaborative commissioned a case study of its efforts to connect foster youth to public workforce programs in L.A. County using a shared referral process across agencies. This brief describes the development and implementation of a process to coordinate and streamline foster youth referrals to workforce programs and includes specific recommendations for process improvement based on feedback from both network partners and foster youth themselves.

A History of Collaboration in Streamlining TAY Access to Workforce Programs

In 2014, the L.A. Opportunity Youth Collaborative (OYC) launched its inaugural campaign, Foster Youth at Work, to improve access to public workforce programming for transition-age foster youth (TAY). Convened by the Alliance for Children's Rights and UNITE-LA, Foster Youth at Work engages both public workforce and child welfare agencies in L.A. County to work together to devise collaborative, systemic solutions for TAY. Together, the OYC partners were able to establish additional funding specifically for foster youth, streamline enrollment verification documents, and implement a targeted outreach and awareness campaign, resulting in a ten-fold increase in the annual number of foster youth placed in a work experience, from just 80 in 2014 to nearly 800 in 2017.

Further Innovation: A Universal Workforce Referral Process

Building on this collaborative success and lessons learned, 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 was designed in 2018 and launched in March 2019.

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 of referral outcomes

Learning from the Referral Process

The OYC worked with Harder+Company Community Research to both document the outcomes of the universal referral process and gather feedback on its implementation through multiple data sources. Between December 2019 and January 2020, Harder+Company conducted interviews and focus groups with a total of 15 workforce and three DCFS staff who were involved in the universal referral process, both on the administration side and direct implementation. Harder+Company also administered two youth surveys: one with foster youth who were referred through the pilot (94 respondents) and a separate survey with foster youth who participated in a work experience (73 respondents). Finally, administrative data on foster youth referrals and program enrollments was provided by DCFS and L.A. County Workforce Development, Aging and Community Services (WDACS).

Between February and September 2019, DCFS generated 584 unduplicated referrals for foster youth to public workforce programs. Of these referrals, 118 youth, or roughly 20 percent, enrolled in a workforce program. About a quarter of youth (24 percent) did not complete the enrollment process, such as through not submitting required documentation or not showing up to orientation. Workforce center staff were unable to establish contact with about a third of youth (30 percent), suggesting substantial challenges with establishing and maintaining contact with youth. The initial pilot relied on excel sheets and emails to share referral information. Understanding the limitations of this design, WDACS worked with DCFS to launch a new and improved Automated Referral System (ARS) for foster youth in February 2020.

The OYC has utilized lessons learned from the universal referral process pilot to inform the following recommendations for the implementation and continual improvement of the new ARS, aimed at increasing the percentage of youth who successfully enroll in a workforce program and who are placed in a work experience after a referral is made.



10 Recommendations to Improve Foster Youth Access to Public Workforce Programs

- 1 DCFS and L.A. County workforce systems should jointly agree on a definition of “foster youth” to be used for both eligibility and prioritization for workforce services.
- 2 Develop a department-wide goal, implementation, and accountability plan within L.A. County DCFS to ensure that 100 percent of youth have vital documents in the custody of their caregiver by age 14.
- 3 Develop application programming interfaces (APIs) across multiple workforce data systems to reduce duplication of tracking and reporting mechanisms.
- 4 The ARS should send referrals directly to the workforce center, without the need for an intermediary to manually assign cases, and should re-route referrals if the center has exhausted its placement capacity.
- 5 The ARS should automatically check whether a youth is already enrolled in a workforce program to make the best match with a workforce center.
- 6 The ARS should include referrals to other workforce programs, such as Bridge to Work and the Department of Rehabilitation.
- 7 Monitor usage of the ARS across the workforce system and provide ongoing training to ensure all centers utilize the tool effectively.
- 8 Create a “batch notification” feature within ARS that quickly summarizes all outstanding referrals to alert a workforce center to actions needed on a daily and weekly basis.
- 9 Develop protocols for utilizing ARS for “reverse referrals” and external stakeholder referrals system-wide.
- 10 Create a user interface that allows youth, caregivers, and the referring individual to initiate a referral, check on the status, receive text and email notifications, and find important contact information.

Implemented together, **we believe these 10 recommendations will significantly advance the OYC’s goal of improving foster youth access to public workforce programs in Los Angeles County.** These publicly funded career and employment services are intended to serve our most vulnerable youth populations, providing supports to combat the inequitable education attainment and employment outcomes experienced by low-income youth of color, first-generation and undocumented students, and youth involved in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, among others. We know that many of these recommendations will require new investments in data infrastructure, but streamlining communication within the foster youth referral system should also improve efficiency of outreach efforts, save staff time, and result in more foster youth accessing early work experience programs that provide a foundation for life-long career success.

While the focus of the foster youth referral process and this evaluation was primarily on issues related to access and enrollment, this project also uncovered **several barriers related to youth engagement** that ultimately affect a youth’s chance of success in workforce programs. Part 2 of this brief, which the OYC will begin to develop in 2021, will focus on challenges workforce programs experience in effectively engaging youth in services and corresponding recommendations to advance youth-centered design principles across L.A. County’s public workforce system.

Introduction

Los Angeles Opportunity Youth Collaborative

The Los Angeles Opportunity Youth Collaborative (OYC) brings together a multi-sector collaborative to address the systemic barriers facing transition age foster youth (TAY) in Los Angeles County. The OYC has built unprecedented trust and collaboration between public and private agencies to improve TAY education and employment outcomes.

Through a collective impact approach, the OYC aims to move the needle on three overarching goals for TAY:

- 1** High school proficiency and graduation
- 2** Post-secondary education persistence and attainment
- 3** Employment and a thriving career

The inaugural Foster Youth at Work campaign was launched in 2014 by the OYC and examines TAY's access to subsidized work experiences. It is convened by UNITE-LA and the Alliance for Children's Rights, in partnership with L.A. County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and the County's seven workforce development boards. In 2015, the OYC launched the iFoster Jobs Program aimed at connecting TAY to private sector employment. In 2016, the OYC embarked on the Foster Youth College Advancement Project, led by John Burton Advocates for Youth, to address TAY access to post-secondary education.

Focus on Foster Youth Employment in the L.A. Region

Los Angeles County has the largest transition-age youth (TAY) population in the United States, home to 10,000 current and former foster youth, ages 14 to 24. Like their peers outside of the system, foster youth have hope, want a good education, and dream of a fulfilling and meaningful life, but systemic barriers can impact their ability to achieve their ambitions.

Education, workforce development and child welfare systems

often lack the capacity and resources to address the needs of TAY and, subsequently, TAY face a myriad of obstacles in navigating the bureaucracies intended to provide them support. These systemic barriers are frequently exacerbated by their personal experiences within the system.

Consequently, youth exiting foster care face significant challenges reaching higher education and employment goals. A recent study of California foster youth found that only 29 percent were enrolled in a two- or four-year college, compared to 43 percent of their peers.¹ Meanwhile, only 54 percent of foster youth were currently employed working 10 or more hours per week and they only earned \$12.48 an hour on average.² In comparison, the living wage in California for a single individual supporting themselves is estimated at \$15.³

At the same time, TAY are resilient and full of potential. The OYC believes in our youth's capacity to overcome systemic barriers to achieve their dreams. If given the necessary supports, resources, and opportunities, TAY can make the transition to self-sufficiency. Changing the results for our TAY is achieved by working collaboratively across sectors and alongside TAY to promote comprehensive solutions.

OYC Foster Youth at Work

The Los Angeles region boasts a robust system of public workforce programs available to foster youth, including opportunities to participate in short-term, resume-building, paid work experiences, as well as programs with a high touch of supportive services to help youth achieve their education and career goals. At the same time, these essential programs are overseen by seven independent workforce development boards (WDBs), each of which operates one or more workforce programs accessed through more than 40 workforce center⁴ locations in the region, resulting in a public workforce system that is often difficult to navigate not only for youth, but also for social workers, caregivers, and community-based organizations. (See Appendix A for an overview of L.A. County's public workforce development system.)

¹ Courtney et al, *Findings from the California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study (CalYouth): Conditions of Youth at Age 21, 2018*, https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/CY_YT_RE0518_1.pdf

² Courtney et al, *Findings from the California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study (CalYouth): Conditions of Youth at Age 21, 2018*, https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/CY_YT_RE0518_1.pdf

³ MIT Department of Urban Studies and Planning, *Living Wage Calculation for California, 2020*, <https://livingwage.mit.edu/states/06>

⁴ The term "workforce center" is used throughout this case study to generally describe centers that may be called "American Job Centers of California (AJCCs)," "YouthSource Centers," "One Stop Centers," etc. Regardless of name, all these workforce centers operate some workforce programming for young adults ages 14-24 through a blend of local, state, federal, and private funds.

Each of the seven WDBs has jurisdiction over a defined, non-overlapping Local Workforce Development Area (LWDA) within L.A. County, although the areas covered by some LWDAs are non-contiguous (Exhibit 1). While each WDB is independent, they administer many of the same federal, state and locally funded workforce programs, though sometimes under different names and with varying practices and policies that are locally determined.

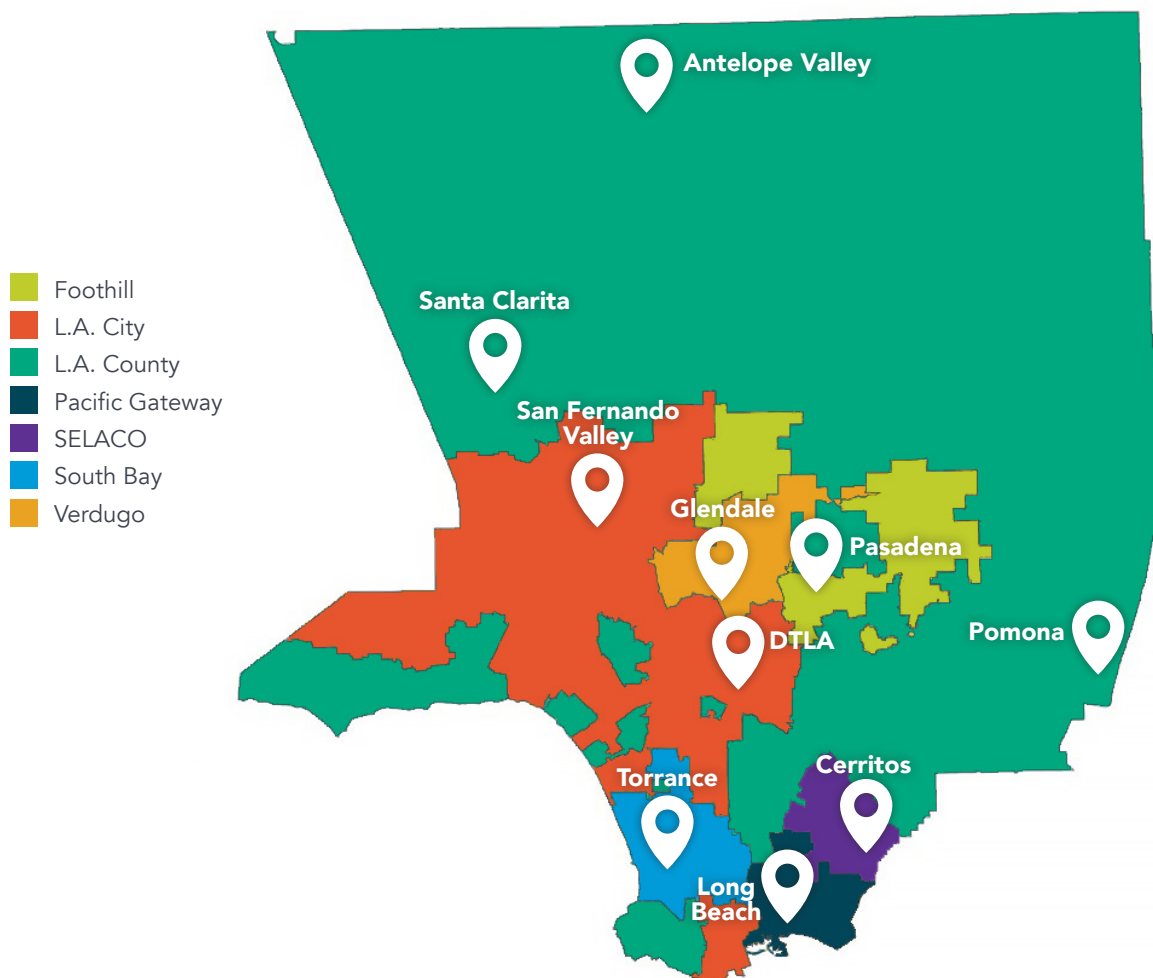
In 2014, the L.A. Opportunity Youth Collaborative (OYC) launched its inaugural campaign, Foster Youth at Work, to improve access to public workforce programming for TAY. Convened by the Alliance for Children's Rights and UNITE-LA, Foster Youth at Work engages both public workforce and child welfare agencies in L.A. County to work together to devise

collaborative, systemic solutions for TAY. Over the last five years, the campaign has celebrated a 10-fold increase in foster youth participation in the L.A. County Youth@Work Work-Based Learning program⁵, which provides an average of 120 hours of subsidized work experience and training.

Together, the OYC partners were able to establish additional funding specifically for foster youth, streamline enrollment verification documents, and implement a targeted outreach and awareness campaign. These innovations, among others, resulted in annual placements of foster youth, increasing from about 80 in 2014 to 772 in 2017. At the same time, there are an estimated 10,000 current and former youth, ages 14-24, who would qualify to participate, making it clear that the OYC partners have more work to do.

Exhibit 1:

L.A. County Local Workforce Development Areas (LWDAs)



⁵ Throughout this study, "Youth@Work" will be used to refer to the countywide program that provides an average of 120 hours of work experience for youth ages 14-24. L.A. County refers to this as their "WBL" or "Level 1" program.

Foster Youth Referral Process

An Idea for a Coordinated Referral Process

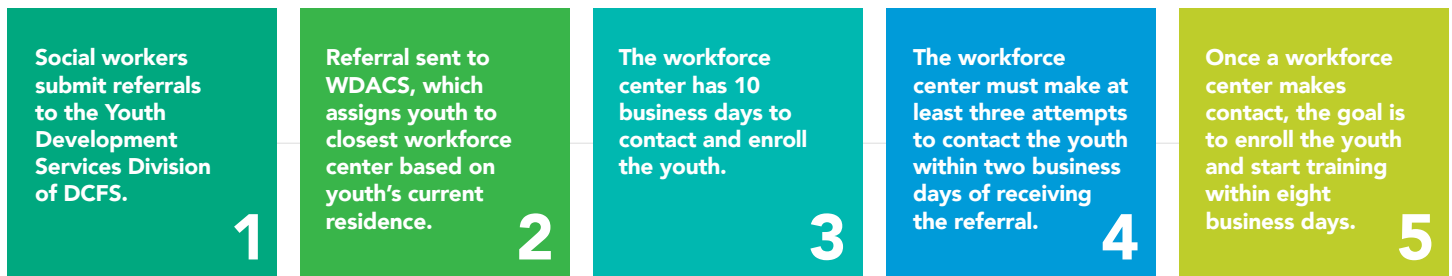
Building on this collaborative success and lessons learned, in 2018, the OYC Foster Youth at Work partners embarked on a **new strategy to develop a coordinated and integrated universal referral process** between L.A. County Department of Children & Family Services (DCFS) and the seven workforce boards in L.A. County. The universal referral process aimed to resolve several challenges the partners uncovered over the years of the campaign:

- 1** Workforce centers had a common way to verify a foster youth's status with DCFS, but DCFS lacked a common form and centralized process to refer foster youth since there is no single entry point for youth workforce services in L.A. County.
- 2** DCFS cases are assigned to regional offices based on the home address of the youth's mother, not the youth's out-of-home placement. This geographic misalignment inhibits the development of referral partnerships between DCFS's 20 regional offices and the more than 40 regional workforce centers in L.A. County.
- 3** DCFS-Youth Development Services leadership receives anecdotal feedback from social workers and other staff on successes and challenges in connecting foster youth with an individual workforce center but lacks comprehensive data on referral and program outcomes for foster youth.
- 4** The branding of the workforce system is inconsistent across the county and agency names and programming titles are varied with different enrollment platforms and documentation.
- 5** Many workforce centers operate multiple youth programs with varying criteria and services; however, program offerings differ across centers (See Appendix A). While this enables centers to assess the unique needs of each youth and match them with the best fit program, it also adds to the complexity of the workforce system.
- 6** Workforce centers also vary in the amount of funding they receive for different programs and the total number of participants they can enroll each year. While individual workforce centers have up to date knowledge of how many program slots they have remaining, particularly for foster youth, this information is not easily or regularly communicated to external partners to inform outreach efforts and referrals. While some workforce centers quickly fill up their slots available to foster youth, others struggle to meet their enrollment targets and it is difficult to reallocate funds throughout the system mid-year after contracts have been finalized.



The universal referral process was designed in 2018 and launched in March 2019 with the goals of 1) building greater efficiency in inter-agency communication; 2) increasing the likelihood that foster youth would enroll at their closest workforce center; and 3) providing DCFS with greater transparency in understanding referral outcomes.



Exhibit 2:**Referral Process****Implementing a Coordinated Referral Process**

In February 2019, OYC Foster Youth at Work partners officially launched the universal referral process between DCFS and the public workforce system. The goal was to coordinate and integrate one common referral and enrollment process for foster youth between L.A. County's child welfare system and the seven independent workforce boards to create a "no wrong door" process.

The initial pilot of the referral process ran from February to September 2019, which spans two fiscal and program years for workforce centers. Though OYC partners recognized there would likely be challenges in launching mid-program year, many workforce centers were still reporting unexpended funds and a need for foster youth referrals. At the same time, DCFS had identified \$1 million in one-time funds to ensure at least 400 foster youth referred through the process could enroll in the Youth@Work program, and these funds had to be expended by September 2019.

An important first step was the creation of a common referral form for DCFS staff. Historically, DCFS had only managed referrals to the Bridge to Work program⁶, which was directly funded by DCFS and designed to only serve foster youth eligible for Independent Living Program (ILP) services, limiting the program to participants ages 16-20. When it came to other workforce programs that serve a broader population of young adults from ages 14-24, like Youth@Work, Hire LA's Youth and WIOA, social workers and youth were mostly navigating the region's complex workforce system

on their own. Yet, the public workforce system also has the benefit of less restrictive eligibility definitions for participants and greater leverage of other local, state and federal resources for career and employment services. By creating one common referral form for foster youth to the broader workforce development system, DCFS could ensure three or more times as many TAY could access career services while reducing confusion for social workers.

The one-page referral form expedited the enrollment process as it served to confirm the youth's foster status, identified key contact information for the youth (such as social worker and other adult contacts), and included a comprehensive checklist of right-to-work documents so that social workers could ensure a youth had key paperwork in order, like a photo ID and a Social Security Card, before submitting a referral.

In order to expedite the launch of the referral process, the partners agreed to utilize a manual, common referral tracking sheet template, in Microsoft Excel, to track the status of their outreach to any referred foster youth and report back the placement status for each referral each month. Because the County's Workforce Development, Aging and Community Services department (WDACS), the administrative arm of the L.A. County WDB, had pre-existing contracts with the other six workforce boards to administer the County's Youth@Work program, DCFS decided to sign an MOU with WDACS to manage the assignment of referrals to workforce centers and ensure compliance of reporting through these existing contracts.

⁶ Bridge to Work is a work-experience program that provides up to 400 hours of work experience specifically for foster youth who are eligible for the federal Independent Living Program. DCFS contracts management of the program to the South Bay Workforce Investment Board, who then subcontracts with over a dozen workforce centers across L.A. County. Some of the Bridge to Work contractors are other Workforce Development Boards in L.A. County (Pacific Gateway, Verdugo, Foothill, SELACO), while others are nonprofit organizations that also contract with the City or County WDBs to provide WIOA workforce services within a certain region.

Referral Outcomes

Based on DCFS administration data, between February and September 2019, DCFS generated 584 unduplicated foster youth referrals.

Of these referrals, 118 youth, or roughly 20 percent, enrolled in a workforce program through one of three initiatives: Youth@Work Work-Based Learning, Bridge-to-Work or the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). The vast majority of youth were enrolled in Youth@Work Work-Based Learning, which is typically the entry point for youth workforce services and provides an average of 120 hours of paid work experience and training. This program is known as Hire LA's Youth in the City of Los Angeles and Youth@Work throughout the rest of L.A. County.

Exhibit 3:
Foster Youth Referrals by Month, February to September 2019*

Source: DCFS Foster Youth @ Work Referral Tracking Log

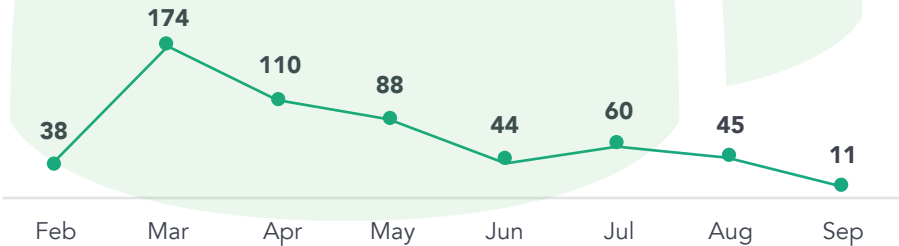


Exhibit 4:
Workforce Programs to Which Foster Youth Were Referred (N=112)

Source: DCFS Foster Youth @ Work Referral Tracking Log

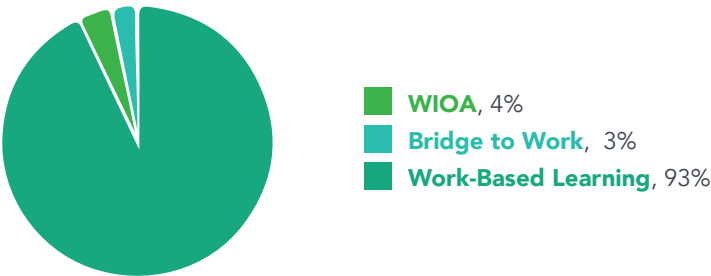
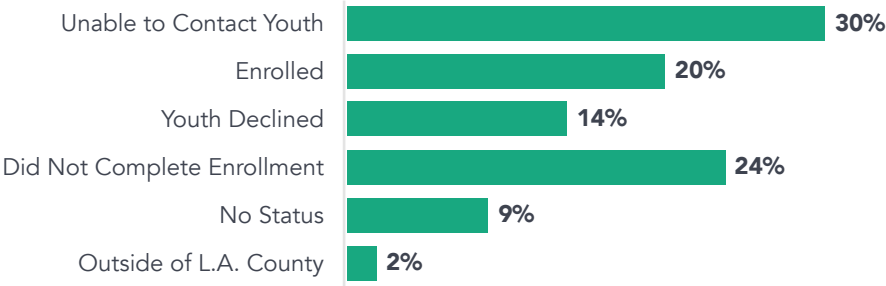



Exhibit 5:
Foster Youth Outcomes after Referral (N=584)

Source: DCFS Foster Youth @ Work Referral Tracking Log

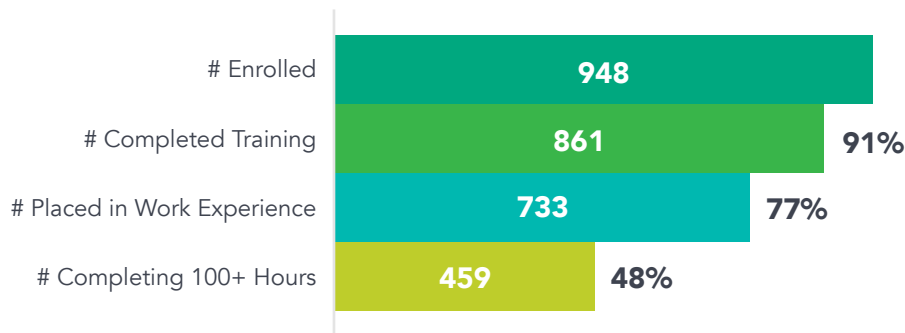
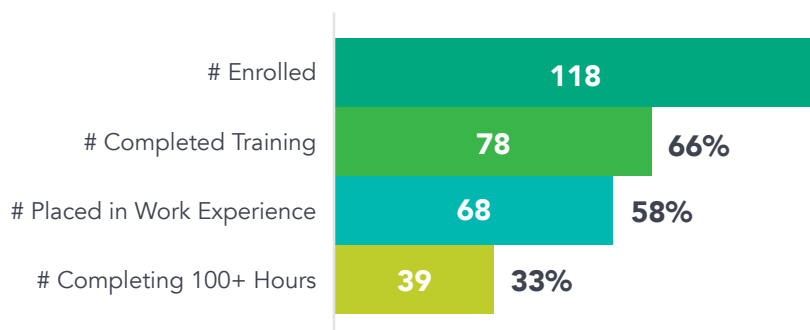




About a quarter of youth (24 percent) did not complete the enrollment process, such as through not submitting required documentation or not showing up to orientation. The remaining youth were not enrolled for various reasons. Agency staff were unable to establish contact with about a third of youth (30 percent). This data suggests substantial challenges with establishing and maintaining contact with youth. About 14 percent of youth were contacted but were reported as no longer interested in enrolling in the program, sometimes because they had already found employment, were enrolled in school without enough time or had moved out of the jurisdiction of the workforce agency. A small fraction of youth (2 percent) either lived outside of L.A. County or moved outside of L.A. County before they could be enrolled, and 9 percent contained no status report from the agency to which they were referred.

Enrollment Outcomes

DCFS had originally allocated funding for 400 foster youth to participate in a work experience through this coordinated referral process. Though only 118 were confirmed to be enrolled through this referral process, ultimately **a total of 948 foster youth enrolled in the Youth@Work Work-Based Learning program in the July 2018 to June 2019 program year** (Exhibit 6). These non-DCFS referrals are often known as “reverse referrals,” where a youth self-identifies as a foster youth upon contact with a workforce center and the center will then confirm foster youth status with DCFS before enrolling. These youth may be referred by other stakeholders, such as high schools, colleges, their children’s court lawyer or a caregiver. Because the coordinated referral process was only implemented during a partial program year (February to September 2019), the 948 number likely also includes connections made by DCFS staff prior to the launch of the DCFS universal referral form.

Exhibit 6:**Overall Outcomes for Foster Youth in Youth@Work Work-Based Learning (July 2018 to June 2019)****Exhibit 7:****Outcomes for Foster Youth Referred and Enrolled through DCFS Universal Referral (March to September 2019)**

As Exhibit 7 shows, foster youth referred through this pilot still faced significant barriers to success in workforce programs even after enrollment. Of the 118 youth enrolled in a workforce program through the coordinated referral process, 78 completed the training component (66 percent), 68 were placed in a work site (58 percent), and 39 completed at least 100 hours of work experience (33 percent).

Placement and completion rates were higher for the overall population of foster youth who participated in the Youth@Work WBL program in 2018-19 (Exhibit 6), though it is unclear if the variance in enrollment outcomes is due to data quality in the referral tracking system or actual differences in the demographics and experiences of foster youth who were referred by DCFS vs. foster youth enrolled as a "reverse referral" from some other source.

Outcomes reported for foster youth after enrollment through this referral tracking pilot may be undercounted because the referral database was managed separately from the web-based data systems utilized by workforce centers to track contractual program outcomes, such as CalJobs and the Youth@Work Web App. These data systems mandated by the State and County track client outcomes in the public workforce system, but not the outreach attempts with youth that occur prior to enrollment.



Findings and Recommendations

The L.A. Opportunity Youth Collaborative partnered with Harder+Company Community Research to conduct a case study of this effort, utilizing data from youth surveys, partner agency interviews, and focus groups with workforce center staff to document challenges and successes in the implementation of the universal referral process. See Appendix B for a full description of the research methodology.

While our research primarily focused on barriers and strategies to **improve foster youth access** to public workforce programs, we also uncovered several **barriers related to foster youth engagement and persistence** in programming that will inform Part 2 of this brief, focused on building the capacity of workforce programs to deliver quality services.

Many of the challenges related to the referral process that emerged during this case study can be attributed to the non-technological design of the initial pilot in 2019, which relied on excel sheets and emails to share referral information. Workforce center staff reported that the manual process of assigning referrals to centers sometimes resulted in delays and that it was difficult to keep track of which foster youth were directly referred from DCFS vs. foster youth referred from other sources. Understanding the limitations of this design, L.A. County WDACS prioritized the creation of a web-based automated referral system that resolved many of these challenges. WDACS and DCFS launched this new and improved Automated Referral System (ARS) for foster youth in the spring of 2020.

The OYC has utilized the lessons learned from the referral process pilot to inform the following recommendations for the implementation and continual improvement of the new ARS, based on feedback from both collaborative partners and foster youth themselves. Taken together, we believe these ten recommendations will significantly advance the OYC's goal of improving foster youth access to public workforce programs in Los Angeles County.

1 **DCFS and L.A. County workforce systems should jointly agree on a definition of “foster youth” to be used for both eligibility and prioritization for workforce services.**

While “foster youth” are often identified as a priority population for targeted interventions, who exactly is classified as a foster youth, and what supports they are eligible for, varies based on the youth’s legal status, placement status, and age that the youth was in foster care. Being “in foster care” is less a bipolar classification than a spectrum of involvement with the child welfare system. For example, L.A. County DCFS oversees 30,000 open cases each year. 11,000 of these are Family Maintenance cases, providing time-limited protective services to families while the children remain safely in their home. The long-term education and employment outcomes for these children who were never removed from their home may vary markedly from those children in out-of-home placements or in a legal guardianship with a relative caregiver. There are approximately 5,600 youth ages 14-21 each year in L.A. County who are eligible for federally-funded Independent Living Program (ILP) services. Youth who are ILP-eligible generally do not have a permanent support system upon aging out of care, in contrast to youth who remain with their families in Family Maintenance.

Unlike California’s K-12 and higher education systems, the state’s workforce development programs have by and large not delineated eligibility restrictions, or prioritization of services, based on different legal and placement statuses of DCFS cases. Under the state’s Local Control Funding Formula, students in Family Maintenance cases are categorized as “foster youth,” but only while they are currently receiving DCFS services. So a student identified by a school as a foster youth in April to be referred to the annual youth summer jobs program may no longer be a foster youth according to DCFS by June when the summer jobs program begins. Meanwhile, most post-secondary benefits exclude students with only a Family Maintenance case but include former foster youth who were in out of home care. DCFS itself only oversees open cases for youth until their 21st birthday through extended foster care, but youth may continue to receive post-secondary benefits and other federally-funded services from DCFS past age 21.

Because the youth workforce development system serves youth from ages 14-24, including high school age, college students, and disconnected youth, it makes sense to use

a more expansive definition of foster youth that includes both current and former foster youth. The youth workforce system can be both a preventive resource to provide early career training and exposure while foster youth are still in DCFS custody and a safety net to engage former foster youth who are struggling to connect to, or persist in, higher education or employment. However, as workforce and child welfare partners move forward to establish collective goals and baseline data for foster youth being served by the region’s public workforce systems, it will be important for both systems to agree on a common definition to guide strategy, prioritization for services, and accountability for outcomes.



2 **Develop a department-wide goal, implementation, and accountability plan within L.A. County DCFS to ensure that 100 percent of youth have vital documents in the custody of their caregiver by age 14.**

While workforce center staff appreciated that the universal referral form included a checklist indicating whether a youth had right-to-work documentation — i.e. birth certificate, Social Security card, photo ID, etc. — the form itself did not include access to those documents. Consequently, workforce centers still reported challenges with acquiring required documents from youth and DCFS staff, posing a challenge to enrollment. Of the 584 documented referrals, 67 youth were last updated as “pending documentation,” thus not enrolled in a program because of missing right to work documents. In order to streamline the process, workforce center staff recommended that ILP Coordinators or Social Workers have all the paperwork ready prior to referring the youth for workforce services.

The problems experienced in accessing foster youth's vital documents through this referral process are indicative of a much broader, systemic challenge within DCFS: well-intentioned policies already in place that require youth to have access to their vital documents at age 14 as part of their Transition to Independent Living Plan (TILP), are not easily tracked and enforced. In order to improve tracking and accountability to solve this challenge, the OYC recommends that DCFS institute a department-wide MAPP (Management Appraisal & Performance Plan) goal that 100 percent of youth at age 14 have their right to work documents. MAPP goals are established annually or bi-annually by the L.A. County Board of Supervisors and used to track department performance related to key objectives. Establishing a MAPP goal around vital documents access is a way to increase transparency to more fully understand the scope and root causes of this continuing challenge, and to engage the entire department in identifying solutions to meet the 100 percent goal. We believe in addressing the many barriers that impede our young adults' progress because we know that when our young people have equitable access to opportunity, they are more prepared for college and careers.

3 **Develop API's across multiple workforce data systems to reduce duplication of tracking and reporting mechanisms.**

Our efforts began with a manual process for referrals from DCFS to the workforce development system, and we are excited that the process became automated

at the end of 2019. Along the way, we have come to understand workforce centers are tasked with tracking and reporting client and service data on a multitude of different platforms because no one system, Customer Relationship Management (CRM) platform, has had the capability to do everything. For example, a single workforce center contracted with the City of Los Angeles may be navigating the State's CalJobs system, the L.A. County Youth@Work App, separate registration portals or interest forms managed by the City's Economic and Workforce Development Department and WDACS, and the ARS which has eight different modules to track referrals from different county departments. The use of multiple databases to track the same clients has resulted in duplicative entries of client information into multiple databases, causing inefficient usage of staff time since currently there is no data sharing between systems. This is causing burdensome data management requirements for workforce centers and inevitably conflicting information across systems.

An **Application Programming Interface (API)** could significantly **increase the efficiency** of tracking referrals, enrollments, services received by a youth, and client outcomes by creating data bridges between these siloed data systems. For example, currently the ARS — WDACS' locally developed referral management system — does not connect with CalJobs, the client tracking tool mandated by the state. When a foster youth is referred by DCFS through ARS, workforce center staff will utilize the ARS to report on referral outreach case notes until a youth is enrolled.





Once a youth enrolls, the case information is re-entered into potentially two separate systems: CalJobs and the L.A. County Youth@Work Application. Each of these systems tracks varying levels of data related to a client's personal background, program metrics, and outcomes.

While the state's CalJobs system will track longer term outcomes and can link a client's record to state wage data, it won't allow centers to track just the number of hours that a youth has participated in a paid work experience. Because of this, workforce centers in L.A. County use their own locally developed data systems, such as the L.A. County Youth@Work App and the L.A. City Generic Module, to track locally determined program metrics. However, these data systems primarily used for program reporting are not linked to longer term education and employment outcome data that could inform program design.

Additionally, none of the information in either CalJobs or the L.A. County Youth@Work App is reported back to DCFS through the ARS. So while DCFS is notified when a youth enrolls, there is no easy data infrastructure for DCFS to see program information beyond the date of enrollment for individual case management purposes. WDACS has proposed the development of a Microsoft PowerBI dashboard that would provide DCFS with greater visibility into the ARS data; however, the department also has limited dedicated staff for web application development.

A key first step to developing APIs across these various workforce data systems will be to secure agreement on data sharing protocols and client data fields to be tracked across data systems, including how to securely link social security numbers to connect client data.

“

We get information piece by piece, and sometimes it comes from person x and person y, so there [are] a lot of different people providing information and referrals; so, it's hard to track who it's coming from. Also, the monthly report is hard to do when you are trying to remember all the referrals that you received and gather all of those and report back individually every month. It becomes quite burdensome.

- Workforce Center Staff



4 The ARS should send referrals directly to the workforce center, without the need for an intermediary to manually assign cases, and should automatically screen for workforce centers with remaining funds that can serve foster youth, re-routing referrals if the center has exhausted their placement capacity.

The ARS should have enough information about the public workforce system to eliminate the need for a person to manually look at each referral and make a match to the most appropriate workforce center, since any additional step in the referral process creates some delay. Currently, the ARS does not contain current updated information on each workforce center's available program funding and slots. DCFS staff shared stories of caregivers calling them because their youth were turned away from a workforce center due to enrollment capacity. Meanwhile, other workforce centers struggled to expend all their funds dedicated to foster youth. Furthermore, foster youth referrals should be assigned to workforce centers based off all eligible funding streams available, not solely dedicated foster youth funding. In interviews with L.A. County WDACS staff, they reported frequently reminding workforce centers that other funding streams can be used to enroll foster youth, such as funding for "System-Involved Youth" (SIY), a category open to any foster, justice-involved or homeless youth. Yet, WDACS and DCFS staff believed that centers that had exhausted foster youth funds, but still had remaining SIY funds, were turning foster youth away.

The recommendation to send referrals directly to a

workforce center is particularly important for implementing the ARS within the City of Los Angeles. Currently all ARS referrals are screened first through the City's Economic and Workforce Development Department before being assigned to one of their 14 YouthSource contractors. The ability to automatically assign cases to regional subcontractors would increase efficiency and timeliness of the ARS.

5 The ARS should automatically check whether a youth is already enrolled in a workforce program to make the best match with a workforce center.

Many workforce agency staff reported that some youth who were referred by DCFS were already enrolled with other workforce centers. For one workforce center, more than half of the referrals made by DCFS were for youth who were already enrolled in Bridge-to-Work through another center. While co-enrollment in multiple workforce programs is often helpful to leverage additional resources to support a foster youth, it is usually done within a single workforce center, not across two separate sites. If the ARS could flag youth as already enrolled upon referral, then DCFS could reach out to the identified workforce center to determine whether the youth was already participating or perhaps had disengaged from the program. Unfortunately, even if a youth has stopped showing up to a program, many workforce centers reported that they did not want to enroll a youth unless the youth had been officially "exited" from the other workforce center or their enrollment had been officially transferred. This further delayed the enrollment process for some youth and created extra follow up work for workforce centers.

6 The ARS should include referrals to other workforce programs, such as Bridge to Work and the Department of Rehabilitation.

Before the launch of the universal referral process, DCFS was already managing referrals for another youth workforce program, Bridge to Work, overseen by the South Bay Workforce Investment Board (WIB). Financed by the federally funded Independent Living Program (ILP), Bridge to Work only serves ILP-eligible foster youth — generally youth between the ages of 16-20 who were in a foster care placement at any time from ages 16-18. While the program provides youth with up to 400 hours of paid work experience, compared to Youth@Work's 120 hours, it also only has resources to serve around 150 youth annually while Youth@Work serves upwards of 10,000. Additionally, since Youth@Work uses more flexible funding sources, the program can enroll other current and former foster youth that do not meet the ILP eligibility definition, including youth ages 21-24.

The original intent of the “universal” referral process was to integrate referral processes for foster youth into both the Bridge to Work and Youth@Work programs, so that social workers didn't need to bother with understanding complex eligibility rules. Workforce centers that receive the referrals would have enough information about the youth to determine which program the youth would

be eligible for and best program fit. However, due to uncertainty about the implementation of the new coordinated referral process during the 2019 pilot, DCFS decided to continue processing referrals of ILP-eligible youth through its preexisting process with the South Bay WIB. Now that the ARS is up and running, DCFS should further streamline foster youth access to workforce services by formally integrating Bridge to Work referrals. Logistically, this would require the ARS to be able to flag youth who are ILP-eligible and assign the youth to a workforce center with a Bridge to Work contract, since only about 40 percent of workforce centers who run the Youth@Work program in L.A. County are contracted by the South Bay WIB to also operate Bridge to Work.

7 Monitor usage of the ARS across the workforce system and provide ongoing training and reminders to ensure all centers utilize the tool effectively.

The ARS closed a significant feedback challenge reported from the initial referral pilot, which was a month or longer delay in reporting back to DCFS once a placement had been successfully made. The ARS creates feedback loops by automatically notifying the Youth Development Service team at DCFS once a placement has been successfully made. However, this feedback loop only works if workforce centers utilize the ARS, which requires regularly checking the portal.

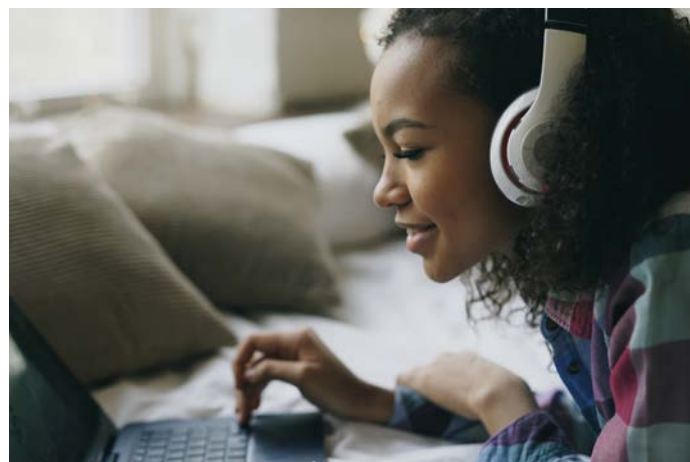




8 Create a “batch notification” feature within ARS that quickly summarizes all outstanding referrals to alert a workforce center to actions needed on a daily and weekly basis.

In order to expedite the process, during the initial pilot referrals were often sent one at a time via email, rather than in batches. This had the unintended consequence that workforce agencies sometimes overlooked referrals in their inboxes.

The new ARS mostly addresses this challenge by centralizing all DCFS referrals into one web-based system; yet, it still relies on case managers at workforce centers to continually log in and check to see if new referrals have been generated and to remember to input updates about outreach to the youth and enrollment status. A lesson from the initial pilot is that when referrals are addressed one at a time, it is difficult for case managers to see the big picture of follow up or reporting required across several cases. By creating an automatic daily or weekly email summary of ARS activity and reporting deadlines, case managers could be more effectively prompted to follow up on referrals that may have been overlooked and to input their case updates in a timely manner, reducing the probability of human error.



of the court letter). This is known as a “reverse referral.” But once the documentation was provided, there was no subsequent report back to DCFS on whether the youth enrolled. Protocols should be developed to universally use the ARS across all workforce centers for reverse referrals in order to verify a youth’s status as a current or former foster youth and to track the outcomes of the reverse referral. Integrating reverse referrals into the ARS will enable more holistic monitoring of how all foster youth are navigating the public workforce system.

9 Develop protocols for utilizing ARS for “reverse referrals” and external stakeholder referrals system-wide.

While nearly 600 foster youth were referred directly from DCFS during the initial pilot in 2019, during the same time hundreds of other foster youth were connected to workforce centers through alternative methods, such as referrals from community organizations, CASA volunteers, and schools or walk-ins. Previously, workforce centers directly emailed a contact within the DCFS YDS division to verify foster youth status if a youth did not have documentation on hand (e.g. an official ward

Additionally, currently, only DCFS can generate a referral through ARS. Creating a process for other stakeholders to generate a referral — such as minor attorneys, K-12 or higher education staff, caregivers, community based organizations and youth themselves — would enable more youth to get connected to workforce services, especially former foster youth who are out of DCFS’ jurisdiction. This expansion of the ARS would require additional processes to verify a foster youth’s status with DCFS. It is unclear if this verification could be automated or if it would require DCFS staff to manually confirm each referral.

10 **Create a user interface that allows youth, caregivers, and the referring individual to initiate a referral, check on the status, receive text and email notifications, and find important contact information.**

Most workforce staff reported that reaching youth via email or phone is difficult, because foster youth change phone numbers frequently and do not reply to emails often. Workforce staff identified the need to be persistent to ensure that they exhaust all modalities to reach foster youth. According to the referral tracking reports, workforce center staff were unable to establish contact with about a third of youth (30 percent). In a survey of foster youth who were referred to workforce programs through the initial pilot, 21 percent of youth reported never being contacted by a workforce center after the referral was made. It is clear that in many cases, outreach conducted by workforce centers is not reaching the intended youth, resulting in frustration on both the side of workforce center staff, referring DCFS staff, and youth themselves.

Workforce center staff also noted that even though youth might have been referred to the program, they had not been screened for “readiness” or “willingness” to enroll in the program. “Readiness” could be influenced by recent life events, such as becoming a parent, or other commitments, such as school. They also sometimes attributed challenges in contacting the youth to a lack of interest in the program. However, this stands in contrast to results from a survey of foster youth referred through this pilot, in which less than 3 percent of referred youth said they were not interested in any workforce services (Exhibit 8). Thus, “readiness” and “willingness” may be more appropriately described as “capacity” due to other barriers and life challenges experienced by foster youth.

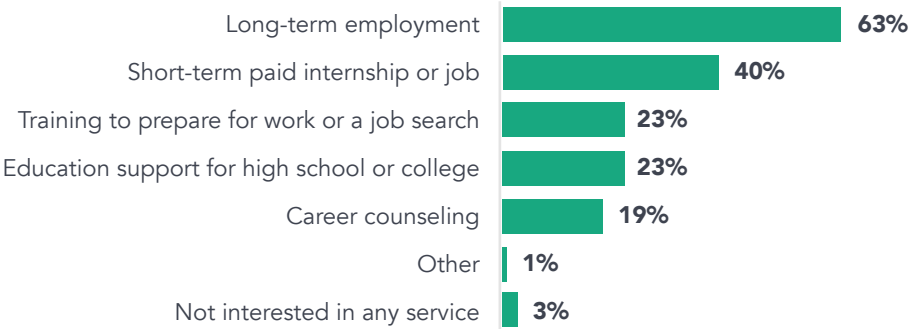
Workforce center staff thought that referrals would be more successful if they could connect with the referring DCFS staff or another supportive adult, share the program details and learn about the youth’s circumstances and needs up front. This knowledge would enable the workforce center to better support the youth and tailor their outreach and engagement.

An important innovation of the universal referral form was the inclusion of contact information for both the DCFS personnel making the referral and for another caring adult in the youth’s life, such as a caregiver or minor attorney. Yet, even when this information was included, workforce center staff reported consistent challenges in contacting the youth’s social worker or ILP coordinator. Workforce center staff also acknowledged that children’s social workers and ILP coordinators have a large caseload, and that “reaching social workers is a constant struggle due to their capacity.” Some workforce case managers shared success stories when they were able to engage with a foster youth’s caregiver or social worker to support enrollment and active participation in the program. As one workforce center staff observed:

“I feel that maybe just having either foster parents and social workers be as involved as they are now, that’s worked very well. In another situation, I had a foster youth the social worker called, and she wanted to schedule a meeting to see if we could enroll the foster into the program. What I loved is she was really very thorough. She made the contact and scheduled the appointment, and stayed through the whole process. You need someone who helps the youth follow through.”

Exhibit 8:
What Career and Job Services Were Referred Youth Most Interested In?

Source: Survey of referred foster youth (Dec 2019)





The ARS could improve upon the initial design of the referral pilot by increasing direct connection and communication between workforce case managers and adults in the youth's life who have first-hand knowledge of the youth's circumstances, needs and goals—including social workers, caregivers, minor attorneys and other caring adults. One way to accomplish this would be to secure funding to develop a user interface for the ARS that allows supportive adults to check on the status of a referral, receive email and text notifications, and find contact information for the assigned workforce center.

Automating notifications to additional adults in a youth's life would increase the chance of reaching a youth who may have missed an email, whose phone number has changed, who declines calls from unknown numbers, or who just didn't understand what the call was about. Increased communication with caring adults in a youth's life through the ARS may also facilitate enrollment even after a workforce center has contacted a youth. About a quarter of youth (24 percent) did not complete the enrollment process, such as through not submitting required documentation or not showing up to orientation. Supportive adults could be better utilized to secure required right to work documents and to help youth either physically or virtually "show up" at the center.

Implementation of this recommended user interface can be informed by lessons from a pilot the OYC conducted in 2019 of a web-based client communication platform called CareerHub. CareerHub is a virtual platform that streamlines communication to clients via email, text messages or phone calls. Eleven workforce centers and the DCFS Youth Development Services division received CareerHub for free to pilot during the first half of 2019 to engage youth and send

reminders for appointments, work fair announcements or gift cards. Many staff shared that the greatest benefit to the platform was the ease of sending out mass text messages to 50-100 youth at a time with the click of a button, saving valuable case manager staff time.

A user interface for youth and supportive adults, combined with automated text status updates and easily accessible phone and email contact information to inquire about a referral, would go a long way to improving the referral process. This could look much like a modern-day pizza delivery tracking website, where customers can easily visualize what step of the process their order is in (preparing, baking, out for delivery) and can opt in to text notifications for status updates.



Workforce staff did share that some youth were confused who the CareerHub number belonged to, which resulted in the youth not following up or understanding who was texting them. This is especially a risk with L.A. County's current workforce development system, which uses several different names for similar workforce programs and has more than 40 different agencies providing services. Youth and supportive adults may better recognize the automated texts if they are identified as coming from "DCFS" or "DCFS Workforce Services" rather than any single program from the workforce development system.

Looking Ahead: Beyond “Access” to “Persistence” and “Success”

Taken together, these 10 recommendations proposed by the Opportunity Youth Collaborative could significantly improve foster youth access to public workforce programs in L.A. County, while also saving time for DCFS and workforce staff. We know that many of these recommendations will require new investments in data infrastructure, but streamlining communication within the foster youth referral system should also improve efficiency of outreach efforts, save staff time, and result in more foster youth accessing early work experience programs that provide a foundation for life-long career success.

We also know that **access to workforce resources** is only part of the puzzle that is contributing to such inequitable employment outcomes for TAY. In the course of conducting research on the implementation of the universal referral process, we uncovered several barriers related to foster youth **engagement and persistence** in programming. Most notably, many workforce development services, policies and processes are not optimized for the reality of youths’ experience. We will dive deeper into this topic in a subsequent brief focused on building the capacity of workforce programs to deliver quality services.

For example, when we began exploring stakeholders’ experience of the referral process, we also asked about other barriers to serving foster youth or to their success. These questions elicited a few themes which will be explored in our next brief:

- ▶ During interviews, workforce center, WDACS and DCFS staff acknowledged that working with **foster youth requires a higher level of engagement** than with other populations. This sentiment is supported by the research literature on best practices when working with this population. Foster youth need more frequent and intensive contact with staff in order to build trusting relationships with them. Staff must simultaneously provide unconditional support while maintaining high expectations of youth, and help them keep on track.^{7,8}
- ▶ In surveys of foster youth who were referred to workforce services and of foster youth who participated in the Youth@Work program, most reported they were primarily interested in either long-term or short-term employment, and the vast majority of youth were satisfied with the program’s services. However, **youth cited several outside barriers that interfered** with their ability to access competitive employment after the program, such as transportation, difficulty in passing a drug test, and mental health challenges.
- ▶ Some workforce staff were concerned that their workforce centers **lacked enough funding and capacity** to adequately meet the needs of foster youth who require higher levels of social and emotional support, as well as wraparound supports, than other youth.





The barriers to employment are complex for transition age foster youth, and the workforce system has made significant steps already in transforming their programming to attract, engage and serve transition age foster youth. Workforce system leaders have embraced an evidence-informed, trauma informed, work readiness curriculum and the universal referral process was adopted to streamline processes between DCFS and the public workforce system. In addition, workforce systems in L.A. County championed the creation of the Los Angeles Performance Partnership Pilot (LA P3), which has worked to create regional collaboratives aimed at creating a local comprehensive support network of resources for workforce centers serving opportunity youth.

L.A. County's workforce systems have already taken bold steps in recognition that we must move the conversation beyond access for our county's most vulnerable populations to focus on persistence and success. As the new referral process was being implemented in 2019, L.A. County's seven workforce boards signed a landmark agreement with DCFS, LACOE & Probation committing to the following joint metrics to support academic progress and career-readiness for foster and other system-involved youth through the following benchmarks:

- 1 By the age of 16, foster and juvenile justice involved youth shall have 100 completed hours of work experience;
- 2 By the age of 18, foster and juvenile justice involved youth shall have completed 300 hours of work experience; and
- 3 By the age of 21, foster and juvenile justice involved youth shall have graduated from high school, have permanent housing, and be connected to post-secondary education and/or have subsidized employment earning a living wage.

“

The personal lives of foster youth are too complicated to allow them to handle all of this on their own without more assistance. If their support system is lacking, I would like it if we can call them more often. I wish I could, [but] I just have a lot of people on my personal caseload.

- Workforce Center Staff

Achieving these ambitious, and much needed goals will require moving beyond issues of access to the workforce system, to truly promoting success and self-sufficiency for foster and other system-involved youth. We believe that some of the challenges experienced by foster youth, and observed by workforce center staff, can be mitigated by **incorporating youth-centered design and evidence-based practices for working with foster youth** that involve a more holistic assessment of youths' experiences and circumstances in order to deliver more individualized tailored programming with **comprehensive wraparound support**. Additionally, we recommend L.A. County's public workforce system **assesses the true cost of providing a youth-centered design** that truly meets the needs of the hardest to serve youth that it aims to serve. Part 2 of this brief will further explore these recommendations and others to advance our collective goal of ensuring all foster youth are supported on a path to self-sufficiency where they have the skills and resources to achieve their dreams and thrive.

⁷ Casey Family Programs, Foster Youth Demonstration Project, Final Evaluation Report, July 2008, http://www.ncwd-youth.info/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/casey_foster_care_full_report_july_2008.pdf

⁸ Hadley et al. What works for older youth during the transition to adulthood, Child Trends, March 2020, https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Child_Trends-2010_03_09_FS_WWOlderYouth.pdf

Appendix A

Understanding L.A. County's Public Workforce System

The public workforce development system aims to serve both the needs of workers and employers—helping job seekers access the education, training and supportive services they need to succeed in local labor markets, while matching employers with the skilled workers they need to compete in a global economy.

A network of more than 40 workforce centers in the L.A. region provide access to a myriad of public workforce programs for young adults and adult workers, summarized in the table below. Some centers may be contracted to provide all of these programs (or more) under one roof, while others may only administer a few of these programs. Youth may co-enroll in multiple programs at once, depending on their eligibility and needs, or a workforce center may opt to sequence program enrollment to extend career development services to youth.

L.A. County Youth Workforce Programs

Short-Term Work Experience Programs for Young Adults

Youth@Work Work-Based Learning (WBL).

A work experience program sponsored by L.A. County, which provides an average of 120 hours of job skills training and subsidized work experience for youth ages 14-24.

Hire LA's Youth. A work experience program sponsored by the City of Los Angeles that blends L.A. County Youth@Work funds with City general revenue funds to expand access to early paid work experiences for youth ages 14-24.

Bridge-to-Work. A work experience program managed by DCFS and the South Bay Workforce Investment Board, which works specifically with foster youth who are eligible to enroll in the Independent Living Program and provides up to 400 hours of work experience.

Enhanced Career Development Services for Youth & Adult Workers

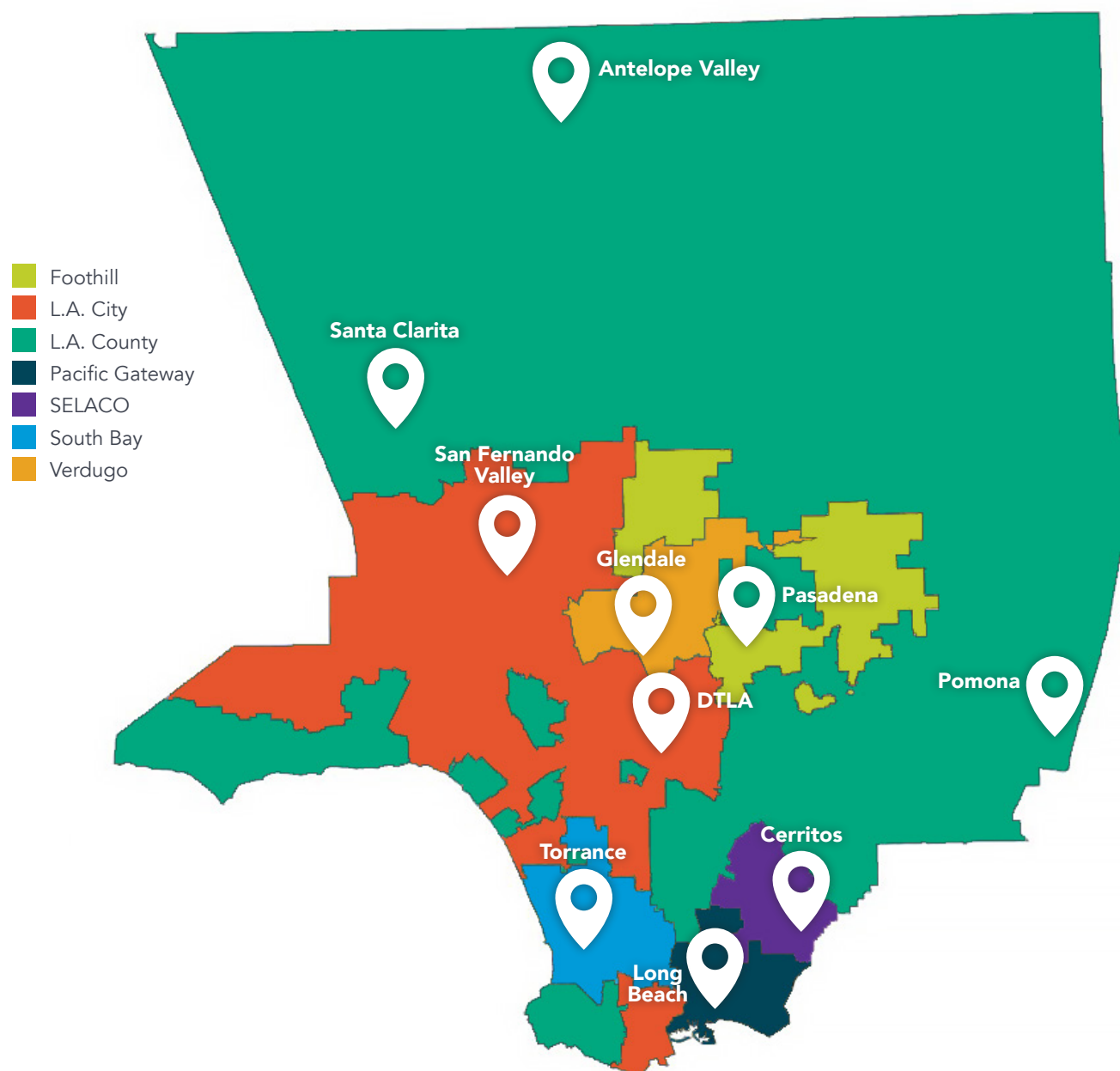
Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Youth Program. A federal program which provides a comprehensive array of supportive services and case management to youth ages 14-24 with a focus on helping youth achieve an outcome related to employment, training or education attainment.

WIOA Adult Program. A federal program that provides job search assistance and training opportunities to adults over age 18, with less case management and supportive services offered by the Youth program.

WIOA Dislocated Worker Program. A federal program that assists individuals who have lost employment due to job loss, mass layoffs, global trade or transitions in economic sectors.

How these programs are administered, who they serve, how well they integrate with other supportive services for workers, and how they track success are all determined by multiple layers of funding, policy and priorities that begin with the U.S. federal government and then flow down through the State of California, the L.A. Basin Regional Planning Unit and to seven independently governed Workforce Development Boards (WDBs) in the L.A. region. Each of the seven WDBs has jurisdiction over a defined, non-overlapping Local Workforce Development Area (LWDA) within L.A. County, although the areas covered by some LWDAs are non-contiguous, as illustrated in the map below.

L.A. County Local Workforce Development Areas (LWDAs)



L.A. County Public Workforce System 101

Workforce Innovation & Opportunity Act (WIOA)

Approved by Congress in 2014, WIOA outlines the vision and structure through which state workforce training and education programs are funded and administered regionally and locally.

California Unified Strategic Workforce Development Plan

The California Workforce Development Board (CWDB) assists the governor in implementing the requirements of WIOA. The CA Strategic Workforce Plan has three primary policy objectives: 1) Foster demand-driven skill attainment; 2) Enable upward mobility for all Californians; and 3) Align, coordinate and integrate programs and services.

L.A. Basin Regional Workforce Development Plan

In California, federal WIOA funding and programs are administered by 45 local areas, each with its own Local Workforce Development Board (WDB). The state has organized these WDBs into 14 Regional Planning Units (RPU), tasked with coordinating employers, training and education providers and job seekers to grow the region's economy and provide workers' pathways to upward mobility. Seven WDBs in L.A. County comprise the L.A. Basin RPU, covering 88 cities and unincorporated areas.

L.A. County's Seven Local Workforce Boards

Each of the seven WDBs in L.A. County has jurisdiction over a defined, non-overlapping geographic area. These boards collectively operate more than 40 workforce centers for youth and/or adults with varying names. While each WDB is independent, they administer many of the same federal, state and locally funded programs, though with varying practices and policies that are locally determined. Each of the WDBs is responsible for achieving individual service goals for WIOA within their region, as well as collaborating on joint strategies aligned to the Regional Workforce Development Plan.



These locally funded programs are designed to provide short-term job preparation training and subsidized work experiences to young adults.

These federal programs are governed by WIOA and the U.S. Department of Labor and funded by Congress. They provide a greater level of supportive services and aim to serve youth and adults with the greatest barriers to employment.

Appendix B

About the Case Study: Research Methodology

The case study was guided by a set of five research questions (see below). The findings reported here are based on data collected between December 2019 and January 2020 from youth surveys, partner agency interviews and focus groups conducted with staff from Youth Source Centers. This mixed-methods approach was intended to include the experiences of a broad range of stakeholders, with a focus on youth participants. All materials were developed in collaboration with partner agencies to ensure relevance.

Youth surveys: Two forms of the youth survey were developed, one to capture the experiences of youth who experienced the referral process, regardless of whether they successfully entered a workforce program. A second survey was developed to capture the experiences of youth who enrolled in a workforce program, regardless of their referral source. Links to these online surveys were distributed through email and text message. Some youth may be duplicated across the two groups of participants as it was not possible to assign unique identifiers, since recruitment was done independently for the two surveys due to confidentiality.

A total of 530 foster youth referred to a workforce center through the universal referral process, regardless of whether they subsequently enrolled in a workforce program, were invited to complete the referral experience survey. Of those, 94 youth completed the survey, for a response rate of 18 percent.

Additionally, a total of 301 foster youth enrolled in the Youth@Work program, regardless of how they were referred to the program, were invited to complete the program experience survey. Of those, 73 youth completed a survey, for a response rate of 24 percent.

Altogether, 167 youth surveys (referred and enrolled combined) were returned.

Workforce and child welfare partner interviews: Interviews were 60 minutes in length and were conducted both individually and in small groups. Six small group interviews were conducted with 10 workforce center staff members, including career coaches, case managers, coordinators, supervisors and directors; one individual interview was conducted with a member of the WDACS management staff; and one group interview was conducted with three DCFS staff in the Youth Development Services Division.

Workforce Center staff focus group: Five staff representing five L.A. City workforce centers (known as YouthSource Centers) participated in a 90-minute focus group in January 2020.

Research Questions

- What are some of the individual barriers foster youth experience in accessing workforce services?
- What are some of the systemic barriers foster youth & DCFS experience in gaining or providing access to workforce services?
- How was the proposed innovation, a universal referral process, implemented?
- What challenges arose during implementation, and how did partners respond to these challenges?
- How did various stakeholders experience the referral process?

About the Co-Authors

This report is a collaboration among UNITE-LA, the Alliance for Children's Rights and Harder+Company Community Research on behalf of the L.A. Opportunity Youth Collaborative.



unitela.com

UNITE-LA's mission is to ensure the continuous improvement of effective and aligned cradle-to-career public education and workforce development systems in Los Angeles, resulting in all children and youth having access to a high-quality education, with a priority focus on underserved populations. UNITE-LA leads collaborative systems reform efforts to achieve equity in education and career outcomes for underserved students in the L.A. region. UNITE-LA co-convenes the OYC Foster Youth at Work campaign.

ALLIANCE for CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

allianceforchildrensrights.org

The Alliance's mission is to protect the rights of children in poverty and those overcoming abuse and neglect. Through free legal services, supportive programs that create pathways to education and jobs, advocacy, and systemic solutions, the Alliance aims to level the playing field and ensure that children who experience foster care can fulfill their potential. The Alliance serves as the backbone to the L.A. Opportunity Youth Collaborative and co-convenes the OYC Foster Youth at Work campaign.

harder + co | community research

harderco.com

Harder+Company Community Research works with public- and social-sector organizations across the United States to learn about their impact and sharpen their strategies to advance social change. Since 1986, our data-driven, culturally responsive approach has helped hundreds of organizations contribute to positive social impact for vulnerable communities. Harder+Co conducted primary research, including interviews, focus groups, and surveys, to inform the findings and recommendations presented in this case study.



