



CENTERING YOUTH, STRENGTHENING SYSTEMS:

A Case Study on Workforce Engagement for Opportunity Youth

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.

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 Framework 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.

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.



THANK YOU

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