



# SPREADING INNOVATION THROUGH COLLECTIVE IMPACT:

STORIES OF COLLABORATION BETWEEN COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS  
AND PUBLIC SYSTEMS

By Adria Steinberg and Cheryl Almeida

  
**Jobs for the Future**

  
**THE ASPEN INSTITUTE**  
Forum for Community Solutions



## JOB'S FOR THE FUTURE

**Jobs for the Future** is a national nonprofit that works to ensure educational and economic opportunity for all. We develop innovative career pathways, educational resources, and public policies that increase college readiness and career success, and build a more highly skilled workforce. With over 30 years of experience, JFF is the national leader in bridging education and work to increase mobility and strengthen our economy.



The mission of the **Aspen Forum for Community Solutions** is to support community collaboration—including collective impact—that enables communities to effectively address their most pressing challenges. The Forum works to accomplish this mission by pursuing four complementary strategies including: 1) building awareness by documenting and lifting up proven strategies and stories of success; 2) mobilizing stakeholders through knowledge and network development; 3) removing barriers by advocating for effective policy; and 4) catalyzing investment by encouraging funder partnerships.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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# INTRODUCTION

In cities and towns across the country, community and civic leaders are doubling down in the search for cross-sector solutions to pressing social and economic issues. Many are turning to collective impact, the current term for a set of strategies that leaders across various institutions in the public and private sectors can use to focus their energies on a defined challenge facing the community. Collective impact “tables” are tackling a wide range of issues, from early intervention for new mothers, to reducing gun violence in their neighborhoods, to employment pathways for younger and older adults with few job prospects—a spectrum often referred to in the field as “from cradle to career.”

Collective impact is proving to be a particularly attractive approach to bring to bear the situation faced by opportunity youth—young people between 16 and 24 years old who find themselves outside the mainstream education and workforce institutions at a very critical and vulnerable time in their lives. These young people are, by definition, on the margins—with no one system taking responsibility for tracking or improving their outcomes.

At the same time, as the young people themselves point out on surveys or in interviews, many of them are not entirely disconnected. Some connect to local community-based organizations (CBOs), receive services from social sector/public care agencies, some are or have recently been in foster care, and others

have been in the correctional system. However, these various agencies and systems usually do not coordinate among themselves or work together in a way that results in the types of powerful interventions that are needed to change the life outcomes of these young people.

When the Aspen Forum for Community Solutions launched the Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund (OYIF) in 21 communities across the United States in 2013, nonprofit organizations in each of these communities served as “backbones”—neutral conveners who would bring together the many disparate youth-serving nonprofits and community-based organizations, education systems, and public agencies in the community that serve opportunity youth. Charged with developing a shared agenda, actionable data, and mutual accountability, the backbone organizations convened large cross-sector collaboratives, formed workgroups to focus on issues such as career pathway development and enabling policies, and, in most cases, established a smaller steering committee to lead this work.

Recently, five of the OYIF communities in California, with support from the James Irvine Foundation, collaborated with Jobs for the Future in an exploration of the particular roles played by community-based organizations within these collaboratives, and the partnership strategies being pursued by CBOs and public agencies charged with serving this population. With support from the Irvine Foundation, JFF partnered with these communities in an effort to understand how collective impact could be more effective in bringing attention and resources to the too often invisible and undervalued work of the community-based organizations that frequently serve as the front door—and, in many cases, the only door—to education and employment opportunities for these young people.

The vital contributions of CBOs to developing career pathways for vulnerable youth, as well as a cost model and analysis of the limited funding available for this work, had emerged quite clearly from Opportunity Links for Youth, a prior JFF engagement with the Irvine Foundation to assist and document

selected community-based organizations in California as they built their capacity to offer effective career pathways for opportunity youth.<sup>1</sup> Building on this work, we wanted to look more closely at how collective impact strategies might play an important role in elevating and amplifying the contributions of the CBOs to get better outcomes for youth in each of these communities. Specifically, what are the collaboratives doing to spark and support innovative partnerships *among* the various CBOs offering programming for youth in the community, as well as *between* CBOs and key public agencies that have public funding to serve these youth?

This brief shares stories from the sites, based on conversations among the backbone leaders, site visits by JFF to each site, and a convening of small cross-sector teams from the sites. The first section offers examples from the sites on how collaboratives are working with youth-serving CBOs to align and sequence their programming, track progress, fill gaps, and reduce redundancies. The second section explores ongoing work at the sites to bring together innovative partnerships between nonprofit CBOs and public systems. It describes emerging and groundbreaking work to mediate very different cultures and requirements, and to help each partner reassess the ways they do business.

Our hope is that this brief will be useful to participants in collective impact efforts across the country as they try to tackle one of the central tasks and compelling promises of collective impact—to fashion systemic solutions that go beyond and knit together the disparate programs that have sprung up to address challenges faced by the young people who are being shut out of opportunity.

# BRINGING COHERENCE TO CBO CONTRIBUTIONS

A major challenge facing collective impact efforts that focus on opportunity youth is how to ensure that these young people gain the preparation to enter and the supports to succeed in education and career training opportunities leading to valued postsecondary credentials and good jobs. In many cities and towns, such preparatory and support services are most likely to be offered by community-based organizations. Such nonprofits may range in size from small neighborhood-based organizations to larger, more comprehensive organizations offering a variety of services.

In fact, depending on size, financing, mission, and history, community-based organizations vary a great deal in whom and how many they serve, as well as the range of services they can offer.

Recognizing the importance of aligning what they do and reducing redundancy in their offerings, CBO leaders are often willing to work together. However, the paucity of funding streams available to CBOs, and the potential competition for too few dollars, can make collaboration among CBOs a challenge. There are few incentives for CBOs to collaborate on stitching together coherent on-ramps and support systems for opportunity youth trying to access career pathways.

With this challenge in mind, several of the OYIF sites in California have tackled these issues head-on, using collective impact tables to encourage strategic alignment and sequencing of CBO programming, and common indicators tracked across CBOs.

## OAKLAND/ALAMEDA COUNTY: DEVELOPING A FRAMEWORK FOR COLLABORATION

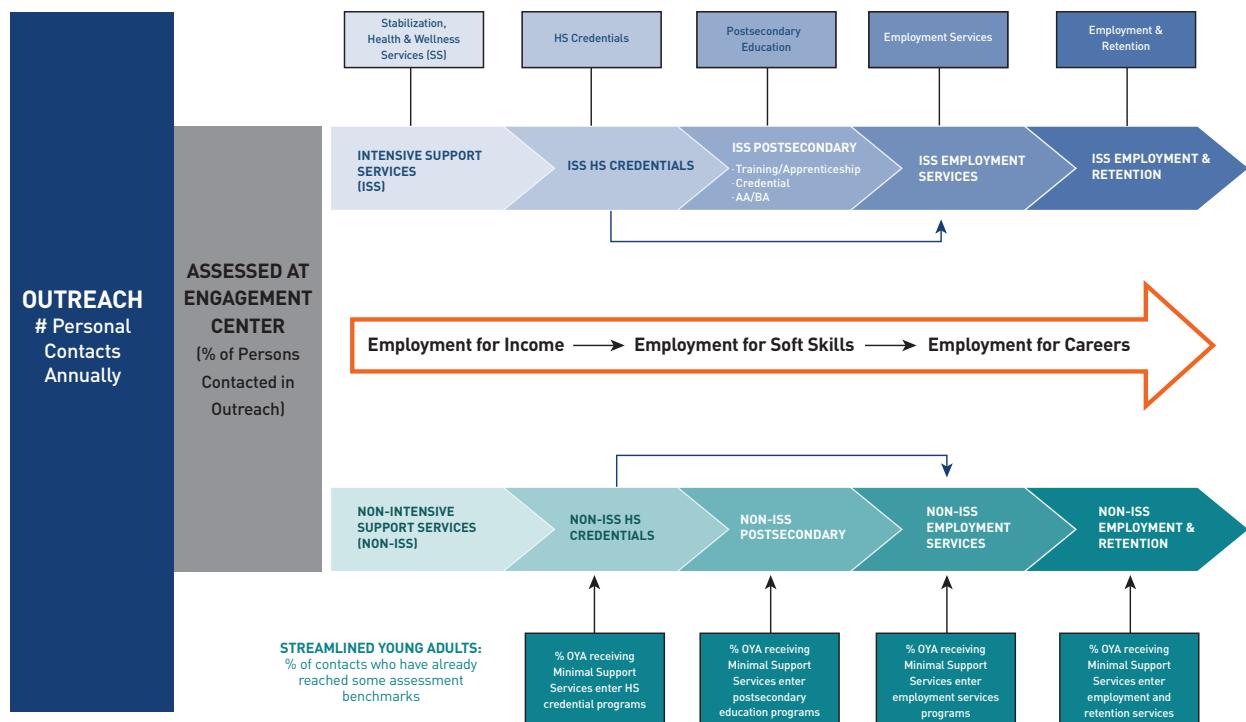
**Urban Strategies Council (USC), the backbone for the Oakland-Alameda Opportunity Youth Initiative (OYI), developed with their collaborative a Career Pathways Model that delineates the stages of the pathway: outreach, stabilization (e.g., health and wellness services), high school credentials, postsecondary credentials (including certificates and apprenticeships), employment services, employment, and retention.**

The model assumes a systemic infrastructure for delivery of each stage of the pathway with identified community-based organizations providing the services, and it also indicates the partners required

at each stage if vulnerable young people are to succeed and gain momentum toward education, training, and career success. A pipeline tool, based on the model, allows service providers to track the number of youth served and their success in achieving key outcomes along the pathway.

With the pathways model as the basic framework, USC could then work with the CBOs to develop a plan and approach for collaboration, with specified roles in building out the pathways and choices for young people. As a first step, USC met with the leaders and key data staff of partnering service providers to garner their input into this process, and USC continues to work with these organizations on using the pathway pipeline tool to track progress.

### OAKLAND-ALAMEDA COUNTY ALL YOUTH SERVICES FLOW AND TARGET POPULATIONS



USC also continues to convene a workgroup with a core of about 10 CBOs (joined often by the public agencies that contract with the providers for aspects of this work) to further align and systemize delivery of the pathway components. This creates a forum for thinking through a key tension involved in such systemization: how to become more streamlined and systematic in delivery while also retaining the nimbleness and flexibility that allow CBOs to deliver personalized trauma-informed care and the full range of services young people need.

One joint project that has emerged from such discussions at the Oakland/Alameda County collective impact tables is the development of a structure for a reengagement center network for the county. The design, vetted both by CBO and system leaders, includes both physical places (existing service provider sites) and possible mobile efforts—for example, a van to visit neighborhoods with high numbers of opportunity youth—to reach young people wherever they are.

CBOs are also now at the table for discussions about how to build career pathways in high-growth sectors in the area, such as information and communications technology, health, and construction. In building an infrastructure that will support opportunity youth to access such pathways, CBOs will be critical to providing the outreach, on-ramps, and social and academic supports that young people need.

When the state of California established the new, competitively funded California Career Pathways Trust fund for school districts and their partners, USC was able to successfully advocate for a portion of those funds to support career pathways for youth who are out of school or enrolled in alternative education systems. With these funds, USC will be able to support several CBOs to reengage youth disconnected from education to support services, secondary credentialing, and ultimately to career pathways at the community college district.

## SANTA CLARA: BUILDING A DATA-SHARING CULTURE AND PLATFORM

**Over the course of two years, the Santa Clara County Opportunity Youth Partnership (OYP), supported by Kids in Common—a program of Planned Parenthood Mar Monte that serves as the backbone organization—worked with 11 CBOs to develop a data-sharing platform to inform the development of services for opportunity youth.**

They began by gathering data on 936 youth across the 11 partners. Using a simple Excel tool, the partners reported on five self-sufficiency and five education and employment indicators to track how youth who receive services fare on metrics the CBOs believed were most critical.

A number of key conditions facilitated the building of a data-sharing culture among the CBOs. As the backbone, Kids in Common has a strong reputation as a data-focused advocacy body and an experienced and credible convener trusted among the partners. The 11 partners involved in the data collection had made a commitment to the collaborative and were part of a key OYP leadership group. The county provided \$384,000 to support the data collection effort and an applied research firm was brought on to help build tools to support the collection of the data and help with analysis and interpretation.

From the start, the process was flexible to encourage open conversation and provided opportunities for the partners to learn together. The group started the data conversation from where they lived by mapping the data they were already collecting to improve outcomes for youth. Having expert help in “reading the story” told by the data made it more useful and compelling to the partners.

Tactical capacity also helped, including the development of an Excel data-entry system that was easy to navigate while ensuring confidentiality through an automatically generated encrypted ID; funding to support data entry and reporting; and troubleshooting any snags the participants encountered.

The collaborative built trust in this process by providing the partners with substantial support, allowing them to take the lead on the data work and set the pace of the implementation of the data collection. Supporting and applauding the tangible results from these efforts led the group to push to the next level of analysis. This year, the collaborative is identifying a cohort of 100 youth to be followed more rigorously over 24 months to better understand the impact of services on their progress toward self-sufficiency and a productive, satisfying life. The learnings from this research will inform and help guide further improvements in programming and services.

# FORMING INNOVATIVE CBO-SYSTEMS PARTNERSHIPS

Although often engaging and serving the same young people, CBOs and public agencies generally have very different cultures, operate within different parameters, and respond to different imperatives. Public agencies are typically driven by bureaucratic rules regarding funding, staffing, work orders, and reporting. As a result, change comes slowly and can require a very heavy lift by an inside champion and leader. In contrast, CBOs may struggle to secure adequate funding, but typically operate more nimbly and flexibly to innovate more often and better support young people and improve outcomes.

The California OYIF sites offer examples of how champions inside public agencies and CBO leaders, brought together by a collective impact collaborative, can develop strong and innovative partnerships that make dramatic differences in young people's lives. Several of the sites have made significant progress in helping CBOs and systems that are part of their collective impact work reassess the ways they do business—from reviewing how, on whom, and on what they spend their resources, to assessing the real impact of their services while also renegotiating the ways they work together.

## SAN DIEGO: BRAIDING DISTRICT AND WORKFORCE FUNDING

**The San Diego Youth Opportunity Pathways Initiative succeeded in launching an innovative partnership between the San Diego Unified School District and CBOs that leverages the particular competencies and commitments of each partner.**

Through a unique staffing model, the partnership is able to reengage out-of-school youth as well as in-school youth who are off track to graduation.

District-based Check and Connect mentors, funded by district dollars, address the academic and other college-ready behaviors and motivational needs of young people who are in school or returning to school but are off track to graduation. The staffing also includes CBO-based Opportunity Coaches who help out-of-school young people in select high-need neighborhoods reconnect to education and training. The Opportunity Coaches, paid for through workforce funding (formerly WIA, now known as the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, or WIOA), can provide essential wraparound supports to out-of-school youth as well as supplement the services for off-track, in-school young people, helping both groups succeed in gaining a high school credential and career- and college-ready skills.

This partnership, launched by the San Diego Youth Development Office and key partners—San Diego Workforce Partnership, the Unified School District, and community-based organizations—provides a vision of how education and workforce can collaborate in reaching a broad range of vulnerable youth within a community. It offers an important model for the field—especially in its blending of public funding streams from two major systems affecting youth, and its complementary staffing model. At the same time, it exemplifies the challenges of bringing together agencies and funding streams that have very different requirements.

For example, the partnership struggled in its first year to meet enrollment goals and performance targets specified by WIOA, which required extensive documentation to meet eligibility requirements,

including proof that a family is low-income. The partnership specifically sought to recruit some of the highest-need youth living in areas of high concentrations of poverty. Despite the expressed desire of young people in those areas to participate in the programs, families facing multiple barriers often struggled to provide the required documentation, even with the support of CBOs.

Determined not to let some of the most vulnerable young people fall through the cracks, the partners made a commitment to tackle the documentation challenges and achieve their enrollment targets. Opportunity Coaches worked with youth (and their families) for weeks and even months, if necessary, to get the documentation needed for each youth to be enrolled.

Each partner remains committed to the partnership, recognizing the value each brings to the table and the promise of improved youth outcomes. The backbone and key partners have persisted in finding solutions to the challenges under the new WIOA regulations, including ways to reduce the burden of documentation and expand the reach to youth in order to ensure that the work continues.

## SANTA CLARA: FROM DETENTION TO SUPPORTIVE SERVICES

**With an innovative leader at the helm, the Santa Clara Department of Probation has revamped its approach to working with justice-involved youth over the last several years.**

Previously, juvenile offenders were sent to secure facilities, regardless of the level of offense. Collaboration between the Probation Department and community-based organizations to provide supports to adjudicated youth was close to nonexistent.

Viewing this as a broken system that was failing young people, the director shifted the approach to significantly downsize the population in facilities and prioritize CBO partnerships to offer support services to the youth. Augmented resources are provided to CBOs with the clear expectation that CBOs will

employ specific evidence-based practices and that outcomes will improve.

As an alternative to probation, officers are charged with referring youth to pro-social and mental health services provided by CBOs. These also include pro-social activities in the community, including sports and art programs. The primary goal is to integrate young people back into the community. As a result, probation numbers have dropped and young people identified as high in need and low in criminality are no longer pulled into the system, but instead get the services they need.

In the shift from an entrenched culture that focused on detention to one focusing on supports, family, and community reintegration, pitfalls were inevitable and included probation officers, accustomed to the old system, not making the required referrals to CBOs. As a result, CBOs were not able to spend down their fee-for-service contracts. Collectively, the CBOs took action, with some support from the Silicon Valley Council of Nonprofits and Kids in Common, the backbone for the Santa Clara County Youth Collaborative. As a result of this collective action, a shift in culture has taken place and referrals of youth to CBOs are being made.

The emphasis on ensuring that line staff act on the priorities at the top is essential to an effective CBO/system partnership. In addition to providing training to probation officers, the director of the Department of Probation now personally interviews all prospective probation officers to ensure that they understand the appropriate use of secure detention as well as the issue of racial/ethnic inequity in the justice-involved population. Ultimately, the goal is not only to change outcomes for youth in the probation system, but also to include other key players, such as the district attorney's (DA's) office, in a system of shared values and outcomes.

This work is in line with the actions taken by a forward thinking judge working with the nonprofit ConXion to Community to co-locate an "Opportunity Court" at the nonprofit. A judge, bailiff, and court reporter run the court for juveniles on-site. While

youth are waiting for their scheduled court time, they can meet with nonprofit staff to learn about an array of programs from GED preparation to music and art classes; at court time, the judge gets a "map" of services recommended for that young person.

## SAN FRANCISCO: RESTORATIVE JUSTICE AND ALTERNATIVE SENTENCING

**Like Santa Clara, San Francisco is making a major, if not radical, shift in the treatment of young people who find themselves involved in the criminal justice system.**

The seat of this change has been the District Attorney's (DA's) office, where leaders were concerned that young people were being over-incarcerated, at significant cost to both the young people themselves and the larger community. It was time to rethink the notion of public safety, to look beyond the offense to the offender, and recognize that over-incarcerating young people can lead to more, rather than fewer, issues with public safety in the long run.

The shift to restorative justice and alternative sentencing enabled the DA's office to partner with the local Roadmap to Peace collaborative, which works to reduce gang violence and change life outcomes among Latino boys and young men. By joining reformers in the DA's office with CBO members of Roadmap to Peace, leaders realized they could offer young people opportunities to turn their lives around at a crucial time in their journey.

The restorative justice and alternative sentencing program is now managed and overseen by the DA's office and involves district attorneys, judges, probation officers, defense attorneys, social workers, and service providers to create a plan for the youth around education, mental and physical health, job training, housing, and other supports, while preventing crime and increasing community safety. The Back on Track court, a collaborative problem-

solving court that serves young people ages 18-30, enables this planning to take place.

Increasingly, prosecutors see intervention and prevention as the keys to public safety. And San Francisco as a city has benefited from sharply reduced recidivism and young people on the path to a productive and healthy life.

## DEL NORTE: LOCAL PUBLIC AGENCIES IN CBO ROLES

**As a rural community, Del Norte does not enjoy the plethora of CBOs that can be found in urban centers. Public agencies step up to play CBO-like roles in service delivery to youth.**

In addressing that challenge, the backbone for collective impact, the Wild Rivers Community Foundation, works closely with the local government agencies that fill many of the roles that CBOs traditionally play. For example, Coastal Connections, a teen center providing information, classes, and activities as part of the county's mental health approach to teen health, is part of Del Norte County Health and Human Services. The office is intentionally designed to look and feel like a community agency. Staff play service and support roles much like CBO staff in larger, urban communities.

Backbone and collaborative leaders acknowledge the trade-offs of such an approach. On one hand, the agencies are, for the most part, better resourced than small CBOs would be, and expectations and lines of accountability are clear and direct. On the other hand, agencies cannot always operate with the flexibility of CBOs, which sometimes constrains or limits the work. In addition, leaders worry that agencies may unwittingly compete with small and

often fragile community organizations, resulting in less capacity for rural service delivery.

Public agencies and institutions also play a crucial role in the development of career pathways for opportunity youth in Del Norte. One example is the Health Career Pathway. Linked regionally to Humboldt County to engage the postsecondary and health care delivery systems, it includes the K-12 system, College of the Redwoods, Humboldt State University, the Rural Human Services Workforce Center, and North Coast Clinics Network.

Much as the other collaboratives are working to align the CBOs that are core to their pathway development work, Del Norte is working to articulate and align the roles of the system partners in an attempt to ensure a seamless trajectory from career exposure and preparation in K-12 to credentials and career experience in community college. The initiative complements the regional economic development industry cluster strategy and focuses on growing local talent in a rural area that traditionally experiences challenges in recruiting and retaining talent from outside the region.

# EMERGING LESSONS FOR AN EMERGING FIELD

CBOs serving vulnerable youth are well aware of the gaps and redundancies that arise when they act independently of one another. For this reason many of them eagerly join collective impact tables, but these organizations also have histories, missions, and priorities that may make it challenging to fully engage in alignment work. And most face serious resource issues, which often require them to compete with one another or forge distinct niches.

Recognizing these challenges, backbone leaders of collective impact collaboratives in California are trying a variety of approaches to draw on and support the core strengths of CBOs. They have developed frameworks for collaboration, formed workgroups among CBOs, and looked for ways to bring more resources to community partners. There is still work to do to deepen the roles that CBOs play in the collaboratives, and to find ways to increase the resource pool they can draw from.

One promising strategy in several of the sites is to broker and support innovative partnerships between CBOs and the public systems with the responsibility and funding to serve the same young people. Such partnerships can significantly increase the revenue flow of CBOs and result in stronger service delivery to, and outcomes for, young people. The nimbleness and personalized approach of CBOs can be especially beneficial to system-involved youth, who have to navigate challenging transitions while dealing with complex bureaucracies.

Despite core cultural differences between public agencies and community-based organizations, entrepreneurial leaders, supported by the backbone for a collective impact collaborative, can make important strides in forging such partnerships. Doing so requires an understanding of the cultural differences and a commitment to finding space to collaborate within those parameters. The California OYIF sites are learning important lessons that ultimately can help other communities that are grappling with similar challenges.

# ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> For more information, see Adria Steinberg and Cheryl Almeida. 2015. *Opening the Door: How Community Organizations Address the Youth Unemployment Crisis.* <http://www.jff.org/publications/opening-door-how-community-organizations-address-youth-unemployment-crisis>



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