

THE PATHWAYS TO CAREERS FUND: EMERGENT LEARNINGS | A CITYWIDE APPROACH | MORE THAN A JOB

September 2020

By
Adria Steinberg, JFF



Building a
Future
That Works

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

THE PATHWAYS TO CAREERS FUND

PART ONE: EMERGENT LEARNINGS

PART TWO: A CITYWIDE APPROACH

PART THREE: MORE THAN A JOB

This report comprises three complementary briefs, prepared by Adria Steinberg of JFF for the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions, to document the work of the Pathways to Careers Fund, an initiative of the Opportunity Youth Forum. OYF, formerly known as the Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund, is a network of collective impact efforts in more than two dozen communities around the United States focused on opportunity youth. The Forum for Community Solutions developed the Pathways to Careers Fund strategy building from its partnership with the 100,000 Opportunities Initiative™, a coalition of employers and community partners committed to hiring opportunity youth and helping businesses thrive.

Special thanks to the Pathways to Careers Fund funders: the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, JPMorgan Chase & Co., W.K. Kellogg Foundation, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, McCormick Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, Seattle Foundation, United Way of King County, and the Walmart Foundation. Also to Emma Uman, for her leadership during the first three years of the Fund, and Monique Miles, Tracee Fisher, Steve Patrick, Mike Swigert, and Raviya Ismail, formerly of the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions, and Lili Allen of JFF, who all helped getting the story right.

Finally, thanks to the program leaders who generously shared their thoughts and experiences: Dennis Bagneris of Liberty's Kitchen, Lindsey Heisser, Sean Arian, Jose Garcia, and Jaideep Upadhyay of the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce, Amrit Mehra, formerly of Thrive Chicago, now with the City of Chicago, Iona Calhoun-Battiste of Thrive Chicago, Leah Eggers of Youth Guidance, Eileen Hallstrom and Ivan Ramos of Youth Jobs Center, Tanille Smith and Ayom Siengo of Skills for Chicagoland's Future, Harry Alston and Ernest Wilson of Safer Foundation and BSD Industries, Franco Vega and Andraya Slyter, of The RightWay Foundation and Jerome Jupiter and Amanda Lindsey, of the Youth Empowerment Project.

THE PATHWAYS TO CAREERS FUND

PART ONE: EMERGENT LEARNINGS

A few months ago, before the COVID-19 outbreak, the United States was at full employment, and businesses were struggling to find skilled workers. The challenge was to find ways to train underemployed and unemployed young people to become the homegrown talent force that employers were seeking. In a handful of communities across the nation, innovative partnerships of community-based organizations (CBOs), training providers, and employers were grappling with this challenge by creating pathways designed to serve both young people who had been shut out of the labor market and employers that could not find the talent they needed.

This brief, which was written before the COVID-19 outbreak, offers insights emerging from the first two years of the Pathways to Careers Fund, an initiative of the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions. The Pathways to Careers Fund supports new models that effectively align employer demand with a supply of employment-ready opportunity youth, building on and advancing the systems coordination work already underway in these communities.

In addition to addressing the dearth of models in the field, the fund seeks to generate learning among participating organizations and more broadly in the field about effective strategies for engaging and partnering with employers to create pathways for opportunity youth. Although the coronavirus pandemic has dramatically altered the economic landscape, with millions of Americans out of work, these lessons can provide much-needed guidance to investing in the young people who will be vital to our economic recovery.

After an introduction to the Pathways to Careers initiative, we focus on three key areas of learning in five communities—Chicago, Seattle, Phoenix, Los Angeles, and New Orleans—that together have launched 25 such programs:

- Moving from quick job attachment to career pathways
- The power of small pilots
- The contributions of multisector collaboratives

With the proliferation of efforts around the country to improve career outcomes for opportunity youth, this is an important moment to highlight early learnings to help guide CBOs, employers, and philanthropies as they search for new, more impactful ways of preparing young people to thrive in today's and tomorrow's labor market.

This overview section is followed by two briefs that focus on specific communities and partnerships. *Part Two: A Citywide Approach* explores collaboration among five organizations in Chicago. *Part Three: More Than A Job* details strategies from three programs in New Orleans and Los Angeles.

THE PATHWAYS TO CAREERS FUND: CREATING PROOF POINTS AND CONDITIONS FOR SCALE

For the past 100 years, CBOs have worked with young people seeking educational and employment opportunities and a range of supports to help them stabilize and deal with the stresses in their lives. In addition to providing youth development activities, many CBOs have tried to offer the young people coming through their doors opportunities to complete a high school credential, transition to postsecondary education or further training, or find a job. In many cases, the resources to do this work have been sparse. Typically, organizations piece together state and federal workforce and human services funding and local philanthropic contributions.

In recent years, some CBOs have partnered with education and training providers and raised funds to add work preparation and job training components into their programming. These organizations are working to operate as the front door to economic opportunity for historically marginalized young people who want to find their way to a meaningful career, not just a job.¹ At the same time, a growing number of employers are seeking to improve their own recruitment, onboarding, and retention policies.

In short, this is an auspicious moment for the supply side of CBOs and workforce development organizations to engage in close collaboration with the demand side—employers that are willing to invest time and other resources to help shape and develop employment and training pathways and collaborate with CBOs to ensure successful outcomes. But for the many thousands of CBOs and employers across the United States to successfully engage in such partnerships, communities will need to invest in creating intentional youth workforce development ecosystems that, supported by a combination of public and private funding, include all of the key stakeholders.

In 2017, the [Forum for Community Solutions](#), in partnership with the [100,000 Opportunities Initiative™](#), launched the Pathways to Careers Fund to support and learn from effective employer-CBO partnerships and explore the potential for scaling such collaborations. “It was an exciting time to be launching this work,” says Steve Patrick, Vice President and Executive Director of the Forum for Community Solutions. “A number of key elements were coming together. The collective impact work focused on opportunity youth, increased employer interest in young adults as a talent source, and growing momentum among employers and philanthropies to make workforce development more about retaining and upskilling new hires.”

Specifically, by 2017, the [Forum for Community Solutions’ Opportunity Youth Forum](#) had a five-year track record of working with more than two dozen communities where anchor organizations were bringing together stakeholders in local systems and pathway development efforts to improve education and employment outcomes for opportunity youth. At the same time, major employers around the country—including Walmart, Sprint, Starbucks, Gap, and Chipotle—were beginning to recognize the potential talent pipeline represented by opportunity youth. In 2015, these companies joined with the Schultz Foundation to launch the 100,000 Opportunities Initiative, a coalition of employers that understood that opportunity youth were a vital and largely untapped part of their talent pool.

Coalition members pledged to work both individually and together to create by 2018 100,000 new opportunities for youth who were not in school or in the workforce. As a first step toward that goal, the initiative held Opportunity Fairs and Forums, large-scale launch events in a subset of demonstration cities, featuring resource tables, resume preparation, mock interviews, and opportunities for young adults to interview directly with companies, some of which were prepared to make on-the-spot offers.

1 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>

The Pathways to Careers Fund serves as the strategy for enhancing and deepening impact in demonstration cities hosting Opportunity Fairs. As Emma Uman, former Senior Program Manager at the Forum for Community Solutions, puts it, “We wanted the demonstration cities to take advantage of and reach beyond a galvanizing event such as a job fair to become places piloting and spreading new pathways to family-supporting careers for opportunity youth.” To incentivize such pathways, the Pathways to Careers Fund, in partnership with local and national philanthropies, awards up to two-year innovation grants to pilot programs developed by CBOs or workforce intermediaries in collaboration with employers. To date, 25 Pathways to Careers grants have been awarded to support programs in Chicago, Seattle, Los Angeles, Phoenix, and New Orleans.

For philanthropic partners, the Pathways to Careers Fund offers a national strategy for making customized place-based investments aligned to specific funder priorities. Funders interested in a particular local market can invest in the pilots in that community either through contributions to a shared pool managed by Pathways to Careers or a direct grant passed through to a particular pilot. As interest in youth career pathways and more generally in retention and upskilling in the workplace has increased among philanthropies, the opportunity to leverage funding in this way has attracted a growing number of funders.

The selection process for awarding grants includes all local and national funders (some of which have contributed funds) as well as a representative from the backbone organization that convenes the collective impact collaborative in that city and young people themselves. “This reflects the ecosystems approach that the Forum takes,” explains Steve Patrick. “The backbone organizations help integrate partners and strategies into their comprehensive efforts to create a system with strong labor market payoffs for opportunity youth.”

The Forum for Community Solutions recognizes that partnering across sectors—and in this case, bridging supply and demand—is complex. Improving career outcomes for opportunity youth at scale requires changing the systems and aligning the sectors that affect their ability to fully realize their potential in a career that, at a minimum, provides a family-sustaining wage. The Pathways to Careers Fund was created to address such gaps, supporting new models that effectively align employer demand with the supply of trained opportunity youth and building on the systems coordination work already underway in communities across the country, supported by the Aspen Institute through the Opportunity Youth Forum and demonstration cities.

The Pathways to Careers initiative has an ambitious theory of action: Encourage a new level of partnership between youth-serving CBOs, workforce development intermediaries, and employers that will lead to more effective onboarding, retention, and advancement of opportunity youth in these workplaces. These models will provide the proof points needed to change the focus of youth workforce development from rapid attachment to a first job to longer term career pathways that include the supports, training, work experience, and credentials that put young people on a path to economic mobility. Embedded within a larger ecosystem approach, these pilots will point the way to systemic changes that enable this work to happen at scale.

Pathways to Careers grants have been made on a rolling basis since spring 2017, with eight grants now completed, eight pilots in the second year of their two-year grants, and a third set of seven pilots recently launched.

GRANTEE	COMMUNITY	SECTORS(S)
North Lawndale Employment Network (NLEN)	Chicago	Transportation/logistics
Safer Foundation	Chicago	Advanced manufacturing
Skills for Chicagoland's Future	Chicago	Retail
Youth Guidance	Chicago	Retail
Youth Job Center (YJC)	Chicago	Retail
LeadersUp	Los Angeles	Hospitality
The Bixel Exchange	Los Angeles	Technology
The RightWay Foundation	Los Angeles	Hospitality/customer service
Liberty's Kitchen*	New Orleans	Hospitality
New Orleans Technical Education Provider (NOTEP)	New Orleans	Construction/trades
The Greater New Orleans Foundation	New Orleans	Hospitality; Healthcare
The Trombone Shorty Foundation	New Orleans	Arts/music
unCommon Construction	New Orleans	Construction/trades
Urban League of Louisiana	New Orleans	Hospitality
The Welcoming Project (Travis Hill Schools)	New Orleans	Hospitality; Arts/music
Youth Empowerment Project (YEP)*	New Orleans	Hospitality
Arizona Center for Youth Resources (ACYR)	Phoenix	Tech; Hospitality; Security; Retail
Chicanos Por La Causa	Phoenix	Healthcare; Retail; Financial services
The Accelerator YMCA of Greater Seattle	Seattle	Hospitality
Aerospace Joint Apprenticeship Committee (AJAC)	Seattle	Advanced manufacturing
Sawhorse Revolution	Seattle	Construction/trades
Year Up Puget Sound	Seattle	Retail
YouthCare	Seattle	Construction/trades

*multiple projects funded in successive rounds of funding

AREAS OF LEARNING AND EMERGING LESSONS

Wherever they are in the process, participants in Pathways to Careers are learning that to take advantage of the opportunities of the moment and address the challenges, they will need to move beyond the traditional roles they have played and form new kinds of partnerships. It will require changes on the part of CBOs and workforce intermediaries in how they support and prepare young people to meet employer demand and in how they approach partnership with employers. It will also require changes on the part of employers in how they source, onboard, manage, and upskill new talent. And, whether on the supply or demand side of the equation, such innovations benefit greatly from a new kind of investment from and organizing of philanthropic supporters. While it is still early to draw definitive lessons from the initiative, the following key areas of learnings are emerging from the first two years of the Pathway to Careers Fund:

1. Moving from quick job attachment to career pathways

Moving from a traditional focus on placing program alumni into entry-level jobs to a new pathway model that encompasses their professional development and growth into more sustainable and family-supporting careers requires the close collaboration of CBOs with employer partners. Building on their own strengths and local contexts, Pathways to Careers grantees have approached the development of such collaborations in a range of ways.

NEW ORLEANS

For example, in New Orleans, Liberty's Kitchen, a CBO with a long history of serving young people who come from very challenged circumstances and have experienced systemic racial barriers, has piloted a pathway into the hospitality and tourism industry, an important part of the local economy in this tourist mecca. Liberty's Kitchen provides work preparation training and experiences and wraparound supports to help participants deal with challenges including transportation, housing, food, and child care insecurities. The coronavirus outbreak has decimated these industries and it is unknown when they will be allowed to reopen.

The pilot involved a partnership with three companies that had previously hired Liberty's Kitchen students after an externship experience and were open to creating career pathways into management roles within their organizations. Selected young adults, who had previously completed the Liberty's Kitchen training and work experience program, interviewed for jobs in one of three participating businesses. Liberty's Kitchen staff continued to provide support to the young people and convened the businesses to deal with emerging challenges and map the skills and competencies needed to advance. One of the employer partners, Ruby Slipper Café, is expanding companywide the skills mapping that restaurant managers do with trainees to determine which skill sets they have and which they might need to strengthen to secure promotions.

LOS ANGELES

In Los Angeles, the Bixel Exchange's L.A. Tech Talent Pipeline program, a partnership with L.A. Mayor Eric Garcetti and the region's workforce intermediary, is developing career pathways into the fastest growing occupations in Los Angeles—creative and tech companies—which have traditionally not recruited or hired opportunity youth. The L.A. Tech Talent Pipeline works with CBOs that are part of the Los Angeles collective impact collaborative and with local community colleges and tech training boot camps to find young people who have experienced homelessness or the foster care system and are interested in creative or tech careers. L.A. Tech Talent Pipeline recruits tech companies to offer or participate in work-based learning (WBL)

opportunities such as design challenges, hackathons, company visits, and mock interviews, where they get a firsthand opportunity to see the talent and energy the young people bring to these activities. In the first year, 860 young people who have experienced homelessness and/or the foster care system engaged in a work-based learning activity with one or more of the employers, 42 got paid internships, and 40 percent got placed in jobs—the same conversion rate as for any intern.

2. The power of small pilots

When organizations that prepare, support, and train opportunity youth for career-track employment codesign even a small pilot program with an employer, the work can have longer term impacts in the ways all of the partners do their work.

SEATTLE/SOUTH KING COUNTY

The partnership between T-Mobile and the Year Up/Grads of Life Puget Sound initiative provides one example of a project that started modestly and led to continuing expansion and impact. The initial design called for a six-week summer internship program at T-Mobile retail stores in the Seattle market. Five young men between the ages of 18 and 25 completed a two-week boot camp-style training, primarily focused on professional skills, using a Career Labs curriculum that Grads of Life developed for this purpose (and has since built upon and expanded).

They then participated in a three-day training specific to the work they would be doing at T-Mobile stores. All placed in retail stores in the Seattle area, the interns learned and applied skills in inventory management, customer support, partnering with sales representatives, and crowd control. During the intern cycle, Grads of Life stayed in close contact with the store managers and met with the interns as a group each Friday to foster community among the interns, get and give feedback, and address their questions. Grads of Life also developed and tested a hiring manager training focused on opportunity youth, with the goal of laying the groundwork for a program that would spark culture and practice change in the company and deeply engage employees. T-Mobile was active in the design of all aspects of the pilot from the beginning. As Amanda Willard, senior talent acquisition leader at T-Mobile explains, “We wanted to become a different kind of employer who’s willing to explore new talent pipelines and give young people whom hiring managers previously would have overlooked a chance in the hiring process. And we wanted to provide our teams with hands-on engagement with our community initiatives.”

The pilot sparked excitement within T-Mobile and a commitment to scale the program to T-Mobile stores in five to eight additional markets. To accomplish this expansion, T-Mobile is drawing on the training curriculum developed by Grads of Life, as well as the manager and supervisor training. Encouraged by its employees, T-Mobile has also decided to go deeper into the “risk pool” in its search for new talent. As a result, the company has begun to work with organizations that serve more at-risk young people as it scales and conducts pilots in additional markets.

Grads of Life is also making changes as a result of the pilot. For example, it has used the manager training curriculum with a group of managers from Nordstrom in Seattle and is also using both the curriculum for young people and the manager training curriculum for a larger pilot with a group of employers in Seattle and has incorporated them into its suite of offerings for employers around the country.

3. The contributions of multisector collaboratives

Backbone organizations and the multisector collaboratives they convene can enhance and solidify the work of CBO-employer partnerships. At the same time, the CBOs engagement in effective employer and postsecondary education partnerships can deepen and energize the work of the collaborative.

CHICAGO

Thrive Chicago, the citywide backbone organization for Chicago's multisector youth ecosystem, which includes four organizations participating in Pathways to Careers, created a 12-month Community of Practice (COP) among the organizations that has helped them learn from one another and explore new ways of working together. On a quarterly basis throughout 2018 and 2019, the four grantees met to share promising practices, support each other in resolving key challenges, and learn from outside experts. Each of the meetings focused on an issue of importance to all of the organizations. Topics included how to structure staffing in support of employer relations and how to sustain the work beyond the grant funding.

Most of the participants also took advantage of opportunities for structured site visits to one another's programs. A Thrive survey found that 75 percent of the COP participants were making changes in policies and practices related to recruitment, referral, and intake, and that 100 percent of participants experienced changes in the quality of connections and communications with other members of the COP, even those with differing histories and viewpoints. *(For more information about the work in Chicago, please see the second brief in this series: "Pathways to Careers: A Citywide Approach.")*

PHOENIX

In Phoenix, Pathways to Careers awarded grants to Chicanos Por La Causa and to Arizona Center for Youth Resources. Prior to their involvement in Pathways to Careers, these two grantees had very different relationships with the Opportunity for Youth collaborative and Arizona State University, the backbone to the collaborative. ACYR was deeply engaged in the collaborative's work, co-leading the Reengagement Action team, while CPLC was not yet an active participant. At a Pathways to Careers convening, leaders of CPLC, ACYR, and ASU/OFY had an opportunity to define a new relationship, leading to a joint submission between CPLC and OFY of a proposal for a Schmidt Futures' planning grant. This grant has supported CPLC in opening and staffing an OFY Reengagement Center in Phoenix's Desert Sky Mall.

A portion of the grant also supports the backbone to assist CPLC in refining its data collection and management capacities across multiple workforce sites and programs. CPLC was able to use this data to demonstrate to the local community college what was at the root of its enrollment issues: its remedial/development education model, which had an 8 to 16 percent success rate despite more than \$100 million in expenditures. This helped spur a complete rethinking of developmental education at the college. At the same time, leadership of CPLC has helped the collaborative build up its Career Connections Action team and launch hiring events and other engagement activities with employers. These connections and expanded collaborations would not have happened without the Pathways to Careers grant.

WHAT'S NEXT?

The work of aligning employer demand for talent with a supply of opportunity youth who have the training and supports to succeed in the workplace is still in its early stages. Recognizing this reality, the Pathways to Careers Fund provides an incentive to youth-serving CBOs, training providers, and employers to work together to invent, implement, and iterate new career pathway models. The first two years of the fund illustrate how much can be learned and accomplished with an infusion of even modest innovation grants for this work.

In the next two years, as this and many other nations struggle to recover from the effects of the coronavirus on the economy, a new set of questions will come to the fore, including:

- How does the field of youth workforce development draw lessons from the Pathways to Careers pilots even as it adapts to a less hospitable economic climate, with new challenges and opportunities for engagement?
- What will it take to move the field from rapid attachment to a first job to longer-term career pathways, with the supports, training, work experience, and credentials that young people need to get on—and stay on—a path to economic mobility?
- To what extent can technologies enabling virtual learning and connections be incorporated into the programming to allow for greater scale (and social distancing when this is necessary), while also honoring the importance of personal relationships?
- How do we take advantage of the systems coordination work already underway in dozens of communities to sustain and substantially grow new career pathway models to the scale needed to address both the talent needs of employers and the aspirations of millions opportunity youth to achieve economic mobility?

Issues such as these will animate the work of the Pathways to Careers Fund, as the first cohorts of grantees wrap up their pilots and the next cohorts begin. The fund remains committed to sharing lessons as they emerge, in occasional issue briefs such as this one and through the work of the national Opportunity Youth Forum network gatherings.

THE PATHWAYS TO CAREERS FUND

PART TWO: A CITYWIDE APPROACH

As unemployment rates in the United States fell over the past decade and employers grew vocal about their need for new talent, the employment prospects of 16- to 25-year-olds, especially those of color and those from under-resourced communities, have not appreciably improved. In an attempt to make progress on this issue, a number of collective impact efforts around the country have made developing career pathways for these young adults a high priority.

This brief, written before the global pandemic and accompanying economic crisis, highlights the progress made and lessons learned thus far by four youth-serving community-based organizations (CBOs) and workforce development organizations in Chicago, each of which is partnering with employers to pilot innovative, demand-driven career pathways. It also focuses on the role of Thrive Chicago as the backbone organization for collective impact efforts in the Chicago area.

In operation since 2014, Thrive creates collaborative networks that accelerate innovation for Chicago's youth by connecting people and data. Specifically, this brief describes the work of Thrive in creating a Community of Practice (COP) among the four organizations participating in Pathways to Careers and harvesting the learning to inform broader communitywide efforts to push toward systemic changes, with the potential to benefit both a substantial number of young adults seeking opportunity and companies seeking new talent.

The experiences and emergent insights of early innovators in Chicago are illustrative of strategies that other communities across the country can use to address similar opportunities and challenges they face. As technological changes and globalization come home to more and more communities, it is becoming more important than ever to design and implement reconnection pathways that allow opportunity youth to thrive as they become the homegrown talent force to meet the needs of employers and fuel local economies into the future.

INVESTING IN INNOVATION: THE PATHWAYS TO CAREERS FUND

The kickoff to the work in Chicago occurred in August 2015, with the Opportunity Fair and Forum, a citywide event featuring a resource fair, resume preparation, mock interviews, and opportunities for young adults to interview directly with companies, some of which made on-the-spot offers. The fair signaled the national launch of the 100,000 Opportunities Initiative™, a collaborative effort developed by the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions, the Schultz Family Foundation, and Starbucks to deepen employer connections and private-sector engagement across Aspen Institute's Opportunity Youth Forum (OYF) network.

True to this mission, the Chicago fair included a CEO track, where corporate and philanthropic leaders met with and learned from young people who had become leaders in the national opportunity youth

movement. Featuring popular entertainers such as Common and Usher, the citywide event drew more than 4,000 participants, generated significant excitement about the 100,000 Opportunities Initiative, and brought together new constituencies—raising awareness of opportunity youth issues among corporate leaders.

Building on its long-term commitment to develop the local capacity to change education and employment outcomes for opportunity youth and on its existing relationship with the 100,000 Opportunities Initiative, OYF established the Pathways to Careers Fund. The mission of the fund is to make investments for pathway development work in Chicago and several other selected demonstration cities of the 100,000 Opportunities Initiative. OYF understood that in order for CBOs to effectively partner with employers, they need investments to support the design and implementation of new ways of working—individually and collectively.

Organizations that support, train, and connect opportunity youth to careers too often are limited by the dearth of resources to develop and test innovative approaches. Furthermore, they may lack the employer relationships to effectively align their efforts to best prepare young people to be successful on the job. At the same time, employers often do not have clear, effective strategies to recruit, train, retain, and advance opportunity youth, nor are they aware of the breadth of preparation and support services that exist in their communities. This lack of awareness or understanding of how things work in another sector often gets in the way of identifying shared objectives.

To address these barriers, the Pathways to Careers strategy includes making investments in the lead or backbone entity that is already working with a multisector collaborative to improve coordination among systems, identify structural barriers (including policies, practices, and resource flows), and develop strategies and the constituencies to improve outcomes for opportunity youth.

NEW MODELS TO ALIGN DEMAND AND SUPPLY

As is the case in other large cities, the infrastructure for developing pathways to careers in Chicago consists of two kinds of organizations: youth development organizations eager to help the young people they work with gain access to career pathways by pursuing partnerships with employers; and workforce development organizations that have a strong history of partnership with employers and see the value in partnering with youth development organizations to serve the needs of their growing number of young adult clients. Among the four grantee organizations in Chicago, two brought a long history of providing outreach and serving a range of young people, including opportunity youth populations, and two came with more of an employer-driven approach and history, more recently adding a focus on opportunity youth. Descriptions of the organizations follow.

YOUTH GUIDANCE

A large social service organization with a 95-year history, Youth Guidance traditionally has helped K-12 students stay on track to graduate and plan for their futures with a mix of counseling, prevention, and intervention services, community school resources, and youth workforce development, including summer internships for high school students. In 2019, Youth Guidance reached more than 13,000 young people across 166 partner schools throughout Chicago.

Over the past five years, Youth Guidance has expanded what began as a small workforce development program for alumni who were floundering post high school into a robust program for young people who have graduated from or left high school. Specifically, the organization used the Pathways to Careers Fund to adapt and deepen Project Prepare Blue, a partnership with Sprint that began as an in-school program. In adapting that program for out-of-school youth, Youth Guidance and Sprint

condensed the initial training component into a two-week intensive focus on core skills, culminating in a two-year career plan. This is followed by individualized, ongoing support from a Youth Guidance career specialist, aimed at helping young people get the jobs or additional training they need to succeed on a career path.

During the two-week training, Sprint co-facilitates two days of hands-on experiential learning as well as exposure to company career paths through in-store training and a corporate office visit. Recently, job shadowing days have been offered as well. Sprint employees share the stories of their career journeys and provide in-depth feedback to youth engaged in activities such as a Best Sales Pitch competition and mock interviews. The youth also tour workplaces of business partners and engage with professionals during networking and mock interviewing activities.

Although the partnership with Sprint has been central to Project Prepare Blue, Youth Guidance remains committed to offering young people a launchpad into a number of different industry sectors. To that end, it has hired a manager of workforce partnerships who is dedicated to engaging employers throughout the process and developing collaborative relationships with other workforce training programs as well as postsecondary college enrollment and success organizations.

YOUTH JOB CENTER

Young people come to the Youth Job Center for its mix of programming, including career exploration and advising, work-readiness training, job placement, career pathway training programs, and follow-up support. Founded in 1983 to serve 14- to 25-year-olds in Evanston, Illinois, YJC has recently expanded its programming throughout Chicago and Cook County. The organization is placing an added emphasis on helping 18- to 25-year-olds who are not in school or employed not just get a job but also build and practice skills that employers value and that lead to career advancement.

With assistance from the Pathways to Careers Fund, and drawing on its experience as a CBO partner to Gap's This Way Ahead program for school-aged youth, YJC developed a Retail/Customer Service Career Pathway program designed to serve older youth in the Evanston and South Chicago areas. In the first stage of the pathway, youth enter YJC's Job-Readiness Training (JRT), where they learn the basics of getting a job and develop transferrable skills such as positive communication skills as well as how to navigate workplace expectations and culture. In the second stage, participants move on to the retail/customer service skills training, where they learn skills that are vital to success in retail and customer service fields.

Upon successful completion, participants receive help securing job placement, followed by continued YJC support for both the youth and employer, to identify potential issues that could jeopardize the youth's employment and develop a plan for career advancement. To ensure the effectiveness of this work, YJC has deepened its employer engagement work. It now integrates employer-specific needs into its training curriculum and has created a new position, manager of employer and partner relations, to help build relationships with employers to better understand their needs and educate employers on best practices for hiring, training, and retaining opportunity youth who face many life challenges.

In the two years since the pilot program was launched, nearly 450 young adults completed JRT and 40 percent of them secured employment and maintained that employment in customer service/retail for at least 90 days. While just over a third of those placements were in retail/customer service positions, YJC was able to use its partnerships with a range of companies—including TJX (parent company of T.J. Maxx, Marshalls, and HomeGoods), Chick-fil-A, Whole Foods, Nordstrom, and Wintrust Bank—to help participants enter industries where many of the skills they learned can be utilized, including food service, health care, education and childcare, office administration, security, and transportation/logistics.

SKILLS FOR CHICAGOLAND'S FUTURE

Since its founding as a demand-driven business intermediary in 2012, Skills for Chicagoland's Future (known as Skills) has focused on the dual goal of increasing economic mobility for the approximately 1,300 jobseekers it places in jobs each year and solving the talent needs of businesses in the Chicagoland area. Five years into this work, Skills leaders noted that close to 40 percent of the individuals they were helping to place in businesses were under 26 years old. Realizing the importance of becoming more targeted and intentional in their work with young adults, Skills leaders joined in the community-wide dialogue about opportunity youth led by Thrive Chicago.

In 2017, with support from the Pathways to Careers Fund, Skills launched Pivot to Success, a demand-driven, two-year career pathways program for young adults. The goal of Pivot to Success is to fundamentally change the life trajectory of opportunity youth by developing their core skills and utilizing employment as the catalyst to a career path that incorporates occupational and academic skills attainment and professional growth, leading to longer term economic mobility.

The pilot program focuses on meeting employers' unique hiring needs by placing youth into entry-level jobs with top local employers, while also identifying opportunities for defined pathways into middle-income careers. Participating employers commit to not just hiring young people but also dedicating an internal mentor and advancing participants within the company. Some of the pathways are or resemble apprenticeships in their combination of work and learning, with participating young adults earning an associate degree or industry-recognized credential while simultaneously gaining valuable work experience.

To support students' academic attainment, Skills has created a robust partnership with City Colleges of Chicago. Through the partnership, Skills has been able to remove key barriers to enrollment and success in college coursework. For example, students can now take required college placement tests and complete course registration on site at Skills, as well as get help navigating the colleges' financial aid offices.

Skills also acts as a workforce intermediary, assessing both the business requirements of the occupations and the needs of youth candidates to determine the level and extent of supports needed. To provide such support, Skills partners with effective nonprofit service providers in Chicago to provide both pre- and post-employment mentoring and to assist program participants in gaining and retaining employment. The mentors also provide access to the life and occupational supports necessary to help balance the requirements of work, education and training, and personal obligations.

Thus far, the program has placed more than 100 opportunity youth into jobs with career pathways at seven employer partners: Walgreens, Freedman Seating Company, McDonald's, AT&T, CDW, Rush University Medical Center, and Hyatt Hotels.

SAFER AND BSD INDUSTRIES

The Safer Foundation is a faith- and community-based organization that helps justice system-involved individuals train for and find employment. Services include stabilization assistance, barrier removal, and housing assistance. For the Pathways to Careers program, Safer identified and recruited a small cohort of 18- to 24-year-old high school or GED graduates with arrest or conviction records to participate alongside adults in a 13-month intensive Robotics Technician Program offered through Safer's close partnership with Building Self Determination Industries. The goal of the pilot was to create a pipeline for these opportunity youth, from the Safer Foundation to BSD to full-time employment in advanced manufacturing.

The Robotics Technician Program consists of five levels, each carrying a stackable certificate and college credits. The participants start in what Safer calls a "boost camp" (an introduction to rigorous mathematical

thinking with a focus on 21st century skills) and then move into Level 1 (CAD training), Level 2 (industry control systems), Level 3 (automation control systems), and Level 4 (robotics programming).

At Level 4, trainees apply the theory they are learning on site at BSD's plastics injection molding facility, where BSD makes plastic cutlery that is sold as a funding source for the program. During Level 4, trainees are paid for both their work hours at BSD and their training hours. In addition, they participate in a colloquium where they focus on communications skills and workplace etiquette, and can access tutoring and other supports offered by Safer case managers. Although most participants never attended college nor considered higher education, through this program, they can earn multiple, stackable National Institute for Metalworking Skills (NIMS) certificates and receive as many as 21 college credits toward an AA through a partnership of Safer and BSD with Daley College's advanced manufacturing program. Students are considered dual enrolled in the college's robotics program.

The youth participating in the pilot trained and worked alongside older adults, an age mix that the program conveners felt was beneficial. Older trainees could help younger ones deal with program requirements, and younger trainees sometimes helped older ones with the technologies involved. The length and intensity of the program, requiring participants to forgo paid employment for the better part of a year, are key factors in identifying and recruiting the young people best positioned to benefit from the program. Through the youth-serving organizations in the Thrive collaborative, Safer has been able to cast a wider net in finding appropriate candidates for the program.

A LEARNING AGENDA

The four Chicago grantees of Pathways to Careers profiled here are all members of the Opportunity Youth Workgroup convened by Thrive Chicago. According to Amrit Mehra, Thrive's former director of employment and opportunity youth, this created an "opportunity for Thrive as the backbone to go deeper than we usually can with particular CBO members and to test out more of a multiple-pathways approach." To make the most of this opportunity, Thrive Chicago created a Community of Practice (COP) among the four grantee organizations through which they could share promising practices as well as problems of practice and possibly find new ways to work together.

The COP met four times, with a different learning agenda for each meeting. The themes were:

- How to structure staffing to do employer relations well
- How to do effective recruitment of opportunity youth
- How to address barriers and crises
- How to ensure sustainability

Each meeting followed a similar format: Meetings began with check-ins, reflections, and updates, followed by a presentation on one of the four themes and ending with a consideration of a problem of practice brought by one of the programs, guided by a consultancy protocol. In addition, structured site visits were available for members of the group to visit one another's programs.

"Learning what other organizations are doing, both best practices and pain points, is really important," explains Ivan Ramos, YJC's program director. "Collaboration is key in our work—another organization might be doing something we don't do that could benefit one of our participants."

Participants acknowledge the potential for competition among the programs, since there is some overlap in services they provide, and they might compete for the same grants from funders. But they also applaud Thrive for creating an atmosphere in which staff in different organizations felt safe to share ideas and compare notes. As Safer's Ernest Wilson notes, "We found most of the barriers we

experienced had a common thread, and these meetings provided information that was necessary to arrive at a solution.”

Tanille Smith, senior director of youth programs at Skills for Chicagoland’s Future, appreciates the reciprocity of bringing expertise Skills has developed about partnering with employers and gaining new understandings from organizations that have been working with the opportunity youth population for a long time. In addition, she notes that “being part of the Community of Practice also opened up new partnership opportunities, helping us, for example, recruit young people in neighborhoods we had not yet reached.”

Getting to know each other as programs had a number of tangible benefits, according to Leah Eggers, director of youth workforce development and postsecondary pathways at Youth Guidance. The COP, she explains, “allowed us to get invested in checking in on one another, and it was easier to get helpful feedback because people understood the program better.” She contrasts the granular level of sharing in the COP to the larger collaborative meetings where “the opportunity youth workgroup and action teams tend to focus on broader policy and using best practices to move the field.”

In a Thrive survey of all COP participants, respondents offered evidence of organizational changes related to three programmatic areas:

- Recruitment and intake processes;
- Inclusion of staff in decision making; and
- Changes in the way staff communicate about opportunity youth to external stakeholders.

The survey found that 75 percent of participants were making changes in policies and practices related to recruitment, referral, and intake, and that 100 percent of participants noted changes in the quality of connections and communications among members of the COP, even those with differing histories and viewpoints.

AMPLIFYING IMPACT

Since its inception, the Pathways to Careers Fund has sought to situate the piloting of career pathways for opportunity youth within the broader systems coordination work already underway in Chicago and other demonstration cities supported by OYF and the 100,000 Opportunities Initiative. Several promising possibilities for spreading and systematizing pathways for opportunity youth have already opened up in Chicago as a result of the Pathways to Careers pilots and the COP that Thrive Chicago convened.

As a workforce intermediary with a long history of partnering with major employers in Chicago, Skills for Chicagoland’s Future has already begun to build out additional career pathways by brokering conversations between employers that have made commitments to hire and retain opportunity youth and CBOs that participated in the COP as well as additional ones with a focus on these young people. Drawing on what it learned from the Pathways to Careers work—including the roles CBOs can play in supporting and helping to prepare vulnerable young people for the workforce and how to prepare supervisors and other employees at the worksite to mentor these young people on the job—Skills is poised to amplify and spread the impact of its pilot pathways.

In addition, Thrive Chicago, as the backbone organization, manages a large collaborative of organizations, including a workgroup of more than 30 organizations focused on opportunity youth. From the beginning,

Thrive Chicago—like other backbone organizations around the country—has understood that improving career outcomes for opportunity youth at scale will require changing the systems and aligning the sectors that affect the youths’ ability to fully realize their potential in career-track employment.

A promising move in this direction in Chicago is the development of Reconnection Hubs, which have garnered public support from the mayor’s office as well as private philanthropic sources. Located inside of neighborhood-based CBOs that are part of the Thrive collaborative, the Reconnection Hubs are a place-based community asset where opportunity youth can connect with coaches or navigators who guide them, nonjudgmentally, down a pathway to employment or education. “The idea of the Hub is to ensure each participant has the best chance of success by providing a central point of coordination where everyone working with that participant is in communication,” explains Iona Calhoun-Battiste, director of opportunity youth strategies for Thrive Chicago.

For example, a young person who comes to Skills for Chicagoland’s Future looking for a job but is not yet ready to enter one of the career pathways can now be referred to the most convenient Reconnection Hub. There, a coach meets with the young person to conduct initial assessments of strengths and skills gaps, consider possible career trajectories, co-create a career plan, and coordinate supports across a network of community partners to address any barriers to participation the young person faces.

The coach then brokers a warm handoff to the community partners best-positioned to provide the opportunities and services needed, while keeping in touch with the young person throughout the process in order to be there when they are ready for the next steps. The young people served by these Reconnection Hub partners will be tracked in a unified fashion through NowPow, a digital referral platform that will also enable consistent data collection across partners for reporting, monitoring, and outcome tracking. Each Reconnection Hub launched has a goal of serving 300 opportunity youth in its pilot year and scaling to serve 700 in subsequent years.

THE PATHWAYS TO CAREERS FUND

PART THREE: MORE THAN A JOB

INTRODUCTION

Community-based organizations that offer youth employment programs face a difficult dilemma. Often, their goal is to provide pathways to careers for young people who are drawing on all of their resilience to overcome big barriers to employment. However, the employers who turn to CBOs for help filling jobs have a clear preference for candidates who have the most prior education and the fewest evident barriers to labor force participation.

Even in the tight labor market that preceded COVID-19, employment of 16-to-24-year-olds was lagging well behind that of older adults. The pandemic-related economic crisis has widened this gap. This is especially true for opportunity youth and other segments of the young adult population in communities particularly affected by housing and food insecurity as well as other intergenerational effects of poverty, mass incarceration, and racism.¹

Since its inception in 2017, the Pathways to Careers (P2C) Fund of the Aspen Forum for Community Solutions has supported innovative CBO/employer partnerships across the country in honoring the potential of an opportunity youth population that is far from homogeneous. At one end of the spectrum are young people who graduated from high school and perhaps were even able to overcome numerous obstacles and enroll in postsecondary education or training only to find additional barriers to completion or to finding career-track employment. At the other end are a substantial number who are searching for opportunities despite highly unstable housing, food insecurity, few if any educational credentials, or little or no job history. Many of these young people face additional challenges because they are or have been system-involved—as part of the child welfare / foster care system, or the juvenile or adult criminal justice systems.

To address the employment aspirations of all the young adults coming to their doors, a growing number of CBOs are acting not just as settings for youth development but also as workforce intermediaries. They are searching for employers open to hiring young people while also recruiting, supporting, and training the young people for the jobs these employers are hoping to fill. For the most part, these CBO/ employer partnerships form somewhat opportunistically and are transactional in nature, based on local contacts and relationships.

This brief, the final section of this report, describes the work of three pioneering CBOs that have begun to articulate and act on a broader analysis of how to develop and support a homegrown workforce to meet the changing talent needs of growth industries and industry sectors in their regions. They are proactively making the business case regarding the returns of investing in young local talent and the value of a longer-term partnership to provide and coordinate inside-the-company employee assistance and mentorship with outside support and coaching. A small number have even begun working directly with employers on ways to enhance both job quality and the day-to-day workplace experience of new employees by adapting some of the strategies CBOs use to engage young people and build their self-confidence and sense of agency.

Supported by the P2C Fund, these CBOs—the Youth Empowerment Project and Liberty’s Kitchen (both in New Orleans), and The RightWay Foundation in Los Angeles—formed partnerships with businesses in the hospitality and tourism industry. Before the COVID-19 crisis, this industry offered a number of advantages to opportunity youth. Facing high turnover and competition from better-paying industries that offered entry-level jobs with more regular or full-time schedules, businesses in this area presented fewer barriers to entry, even for young people who did not have the educational credentials or work experience most employers prefer; they also offered more on-the-job training for entry-level employees. Moreover, the industry featured multiple points of entry for workers with different education levels.²

For example, for the 26,000 opportunity youth in New Orleans, and especially for the portion of these youth who have a high school diploma at most, the industry offered some of the best opportunities to gain employment. Pre-pandemic, nearly 40,000 of the 200,000 jobs in the city were in the hospitality and tourism industry. And almost 28 percent of the people in these jobs currently were under the age of 25—more than twice the proportion of young workers in other industries in the region. In other words, the workforce in hospitality and tourism was disproportionately young.³

At the same time, a report by the Restaurant Opportunities Centers United found a high degree of racial disparity in wages and working conditions, with people of color clustered in the most unskilled parts of the food industry, in jobs with the lowest wages, longest hours, and fewest advancement opportunities. Not surprisingly, these are also the parts of the industry where turnover is high. Management and leadership positions, as well as front-of-house jobs, are predominantly occupied by white workers. (footnote to *The Great Service Divide: Occupational Segregation and Inequality in the US Restaurant Industry*, 2014)

This data points to the critical need for community-based and workforce development organizations serving opportunity youth to work closely with industry partners to identify ways to advance young people into positions with family-supporting wages. Following descriptions of each CBO’s work, the final section of this report offers several emerging lessons from the P2C Fund grantees profiled here. They speak to a critical challenge facing CBO/employer partnerships—how to move from transactional relationships to ones based more on co-investment in helping young people to be successful, not just in a first job but in using that initial opportunity as a springboard to advancement within the industry or adjacent ones.

THE YOUTH EMPOWERMENT PROJECT, NEW ORLEANS

Founded in 2004, the Youth Empowerment Project has grown from a juvenile reentry program serving 25 young people to a comprehensive organization that serves over 1,200 children and youth (up to age 24) annually, with an array of community-based education, mentoring, employment readiness, and enrichment offerings. In 2013, YEP leaders created YEP Works to provide local opportunity youth with experiential work-readiness training and transitional services—features that are becoming even more critical as young people look to enter a slowly reopening economy.

At the core of YEP Works programming is the Trafigura Work & Learn Centre—an earn-and-learn job training program reaching 160 New Orleans young people (ages 16-24) each year. The vast majority of these young people are Black and living in households below the federal poverty line, and close to one in five are involved with the justice system. Throughout the year, young adults can enter the six-week program in cohorts of 24-30 participants, earning an educational stipend while gaining skills that can help them get and keep jobs. Because YEP Works is embedded within a larger nonprofit organization, participants also have access to other supportive services at YEP, including employment and postsecondary transition services, adult education programming, and basic needs support.

After an intensive introductory week during which the students learn strategies of mindfulness, empathy, and self-awareness, they choose to work and learn in one of YEP's three youth-led enterprises: Bike Works, Design Works, or Thrift Works. By participating in one of these businesses, young people gain customer service skills, as well as specific technical capabilities such as bicycle repair or creative digital media skills. Regardless of which enterprise they enter, the youth also gain valuable professional skills, such as how to interview for a job, and they build the self-confidence necessary to help them secure and maintain employment. At the end of the six weeks, YEP Works staff members help participants secure externships or employment or pursue further education and training in a career area of interest to them.

As a long-established youth-serving CBO in New Orleans, YEP has been able to build relationships with employers in a number of industries. The P2C Fund has enabled YEP Works to create a more intensive and intentional pathway for young people who express an interest in pursuing a career in one of New Orleans's biggest industries: hospitality and tourism. In 2017, the P2C Fund awarded a grant to YEP Works to pilot this pathway. As Jerome Jupiter, deputy director of YEP Works, explains, "Tourism and hospitality is a huge industry in New Orleans. But what often happens is that our young people get caught up into back-of-the-house positions with not much opportunity for advancement."

To address this problem, leaders of YEP Works approached Donald Link, a key supporter of the organization over the years and a world-renowned chef with a number of popular restaurants in New Orleans. The Link Restaurant Group (LRG) includes a family of popular restaurants in New Orleans that provide fine dining, counter service, private dining, and catering. These businesses employ over 350 people.

"We saw P2C as an opportunity to formalize the relationship," notes Jupiter, "and to work together to create externships that would give young people a more comprehensive experience in hospitality—one that includes not just serving and dishwashing but career pathways into back-office and management positions." The new design called for participants to do six-week externships with LRG, during which they would receive an honorarium, extensive training, and wraparound social supports while working alongside the employees of successful local restaurants.

Amanda Lindsey, YEP's support services coordinator, explains, "We wanted to show the young people what other opportunities might be available once you get past this introductory phase—give them a taste of what other things look like in the industry and what might be possible." LRG helped design a curriculum that would enhance the young people's professional skills and provide them with work experience in multiple aspects of the hospitality industry, including direct customer service, food preparation or serving, event planning, catering, sales, and administration.

Exposing Young People to All Aspects of an Industry

Exposing young people to multiple aspects of the hospitality business within a six-week externship is possible because all three of the LRG restaurants taking on YEP externs are located in the same building in downtown New Orleans, and each restaurant has a different focus with myriad positions. Each trainee has the opportunity to spend two weeks learning about three different positions. During each placement, managers coach them and gauge their interest in that area while also sharing their own journeys in the industry—how they got to where they are, and what kind of additional training and/or experience the young people might need if they want to go a similar route.

The intent from the beginning has to been to help young adults who have expressed an interest in hospitality and tourism to develop a wide set of skills that they can then apply to positions within LRG or the broader hospitality industry, or in adjacent industries utilizing similar skill sets. The design also entails keeping YEP Works staff members engaged with young people beyond the externship. As Lindsey notes, "We actively try to keep up with them for a year. And we continue to follow up with students as long as they want to be engaged with the services; they can reengage at any point."

Jupiter emphasizes that ongoing support is a critical component of the program: “Young people may come in and demonstrate that they can attain employment and show up to work, but then life can get in the way and they don’t know how to communicate to employers about the challenges they are facing, or how to navigate the relationships. It is on YEP to support the young people and the employers.”

A Dual-Client Approach

To make sure that young people’s needs are being met, YEP Works support services staff members work to create a holistic environment, where the barriers the program participants are facing are identified and addressed. At the same time, employment services staff members engage with the employers. “We try to overcommunicate,” says Jupiter. “We ask employers, ‘What’s the profile of the best employee you have? And how can we get there together?’” At the same time, YEP staff members work with employers to build their level of empathy as they come to see who the young people are and the life challenges they are overcoming.

One of the challenges YEP Works has faced is that buy-in from a business’s high-level employees might not always trickle down to the shift managers or others who work directly with the young people. In high-pressure jobs in a fast-paced industry, these employees may not fully share the view of those higher up that the long-term benefit of bringing in the young workers is worth working through some short-term employment issues. In the pilot phase of the program, this had an effect on the retention rate of participants. “We try to communicate that we don’t want our young people to get special accommodations,” says Jupiter, “but people may need to examine and put aside some of their biases so young people can feel supported and get the resources they need to be productive in the workplace.”

To reinforce this point with the business partners, as young people go through the training phase, YEP Works has begun to be more intentional in inviting in those who will be supervising and managing the externs. When the participants are transitioning to the externship phase, these visits might involve mock interviews, where the employer partners are directed to be honest and transparent with the young people and give feedback. This contact, along with the workplace visits the young people do, is helping their future supervisors better understand them and the services available through YEP Works.

THE RIGHTWAY FOUNDATION, LOS ANGELES

In 2011, Franco Vega founded The RightWay Foundation to serve a particular segment of the opportunity youth population in Los Angeles County—young people of transition age (18-25 years old) who are currently in or have recently exited the foster care system. Nationally, approximately 415,000 youth are in foster care; over one-sixth of them are in California, with a significant proportion clustered in LA County, where RightWay is located.

After many years of working with transition-age youth in Los Angeles, Vega saw the need for an employment center that could help them develop the tools to be successful and self-sufficient as they exited the foster care system. He established The RightWay foundation to do this work. With few services in the Los Angeles area specifically targeted to this population of young people, referrals began to pour in from sources such as the LA County Department of Children and Family Services, the LA County Probation Department, attorneys, and judges, as well as CBOs providing housing and other resources that transition-age youth need. Vega was also able to establish and build on new relationships with employers open to hiring young people who completed the training.

Several years into delivering employment services, RightWay made what Vega has referred to as a “180-degree turn.” Many of the young people entering the program were suffering from trauma and abuse. Realizing that it was not just job readiness that these young people needed, but also mental

health services, Vega began to evolve the program model. Mental health workers with experience providing therapy and trauma-informed care to victims of trauma and abuse joined the team of job developers and job readiness trainers.

As Vega has observed, “By the time our youth come to us, they may have been in 20 to 30 group homes, 10 to 20 high schools. They never got a break in life.” About 30 percent of the youth entering the program are homeless, and a similar percentage are what youth workers call *crossover youth*, meaning that they have also been involved in the juvenile justice system and hence also need to overcome the additional barriers that come with reentry. In recognition of the importance of helping young people make the transition to a productive adulthood, Vega named this evolution of the model Operation Emancipation.

Operation Emancipation: Trauma-Informed, Healing-Centered

Operation Emancipation is designed as an intensive four-week (32 hours per week) cohort-based program. Mental health and employment staffs work together to provide comprehensive, trauma-informed services to support transition-age youth through job readiness training and the employment process. Along with receiving training in transferrable customer service skills and the usual professional skills needed to be effective at any job site, the young people participate in workshops on self-advocacy and financial literacy. They also receive one-on-one therapy, case management, and supportive services directed at helping them heal from past traumas and become mentally ready for the pressures of the workforce and living on their own. At the end of this period, case managers try to determine who is ready to interview for jobs with partnering companies. Those who are not yet ready are set up with paid internships that can last up to 400 hours, after which they receive help securing a job.

To date, Operation Emancipation has served over 425 young people in LA County. In 2018, the P2C Fund added its support to Operation Emancipation, with the goal of supporting at least 200 additional transition-age youth through job readiness training and the employment process by 2020. Specifically, the target is for 80 percent of those enrolled over the grant period to be successfully connected to employment or paid internships, and for 80 percent of these employed young adults to be retained for at least six months beyond initial hiring.

Initially, many of the job placements were in the entertainment / creative arts industry—a burgeoning part of the Los Angeles economy. An expanded set of business partnerships today include many restaurants and other businesses that are part of the robust food industry and broader hospitality and tourism industry in Los Angeles. The assumption is not that the young people will necessarily look for long-term careers in these industries. Vega directs his staff members to look for good first jobs that can provide some much-needed income so that they can continue working with the young people on stabilizing their lives while also developing their career interests over a longer period of time.

“It comes down to our relationships with the youth,” observes Andraya Slyter, RightWay’s chief operating officer and an experienced social worker, who oversees Operation Emancipation. “We try to come across in a very nonjudgmental, non-admonishing way. We get to know our youth and stay interested in what they are doing.” To do this, staff members check in with participants regularly. For six months to a year after a job placement occurs, participants meet with counselors at least once a week.

The organization also extends an open-door policy to its alumni. As Slyter notes, “There is no termination process. Healing from trauma can be lifelong, and the level of support needs to match that. The focus is to teach them the skills to be independent and to try to provide the wraparound services they need during and after the training until they can become self-sufficient.” RightWay’s staff wants the young people to know that if things change in their lives, there is still support available to them.

Vega points out that having older alumni come back for additional help securing employment can be good for the program as well as the individual, because the program can send them to a company looking for young adults with more experience and maturity. When this happens, says Vega, “it helps us look good, and that will help that business relationship.”

Offering Training to Businesses

In the past few years, RightWay has developed a separate service line offering partnering companies training in trauma-informed, healing-centered approaches to working with young adults such as those coming to them through the foundation. This work grew out of a project RightWay did with arts institutions around LA as part of its Creative Career Pathways Program. The organizations reacted positively to training in trauma-informed mentoring best practices that Slyter provided to key people in each organization.

Since then, the training has been formalized into a five-hour interactive format designed to help managers develop an understanding of the kinds of experiences their employees might have had. The training also aims to help them develop more self-awareness of their own challenges, biases, and issues, along with an understanding of how these factors might affect their interactions with and perceptions of others. Businesses can contract with RightWay for this on-site training for their own managers.

From the start of building a relationship with a company, Vega and his team let their partners know that the RightWay staff will check in with them regularly to ensure that the placement is meeting the needs of both the youth and the business. At the same time, they continue to meet with the young people to help them take a constructive approach to any issues they may be experiencing on the job. They also talk with managers about the importance of supporting the success of the young people they hire by mentoring them, not just supervising them. The message is that this is a role that higher-level managers, as opposed to front-line supervisors, can and should play.

When a company is ready to hire young people coming out of Operation Emancipation, it learns about the training package and how it can help the company achieve the dual goal of meeting the needs of both the youth and the business. Slyter explains, “This is part of the pitch from the beginning: If this is going to work and you are going to retain your employees, this is something your management team should go through.”

Increasingly, the workforce in the hospitality and tourism industry is getting somewhat younger, and employers acknowledge that turnover, already an issue, could get even worse. Companies are recognizing that the approaches offered in the RightWay training—which include helping managers become leaders in the work environment by modeling the behavior they want to see, being transparent, and providing employees with the information they need—can be valuable tools to use with other employees in the company as well. Recently, RightWay was hired to bring this training to 40 managers of food establishments at the Los Angeles International Airport.

LIBERTY’S KITCHEN, NEW ORLEANS

Founded in 2008, Liberty’s Kitchen is a community-based organization with a decade-long track record of effectively working with and on behalf of young adults who are seeking a route out of poverty and toward a better life. The first LK location—directly across the street from the Orleans Parish courthouse and jail—reached out to young New Orleanians who had experienced neglect and criminalization, with the promise of a hot meal, a job opportunity, and a support system. These three ingredients remain core to LK’s program today.

While food is at the heart of the New Orleans economy and culture, many low-income, African American areas of the city are food deserts, a condition much exacerbated by Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath. The commitment to address this situation has helped to fuel LK's growth from its original location to two dine-in locations, a catering business, and several community food access projects. One such project provided nutritious school meals to New Orleans elementary schools, and another, in partnership with the city and the community-based nonprofit Top Box Foods, provides fresh produce to corner stores at affordable prices. The 800-plus young adults who have graduated from LK's youth development and youth leadership programs have helped to provide more than 2 million school lunches and to deliver over 20,000 pounds of fresh produce.

Each year, about 100 young adults come to LK's youth development program for its comprehensive combination of skill development, employment opportunities, and leadership development. All of these services are undergirded with wraparound supports to help participants deal with challenges to employment, including transportation, housing, food, and child care insecurity. A signature aspect of the program is the hands-on experience young people get working and training in LK's various food-related enterprises. As the staff is quick to point out, however, LK is "not a cooking school" but rather a place that "changes the lives of young people."⁴ Dennis Bagneris, CEO of Liberty's Kitchen, elaborates: "The program helps them to chart their own career paths, and advocate for themselves in spaces where they are not treated fairly," and in the process, this enables them to help transform their communities.

Trainees learn how to present themselves in a work environment, become part of a team, and practice essential interpersonal and social-emotional skills. They also benefit from a life skills curriculum that covers topics such as stress management and financial literacy. Once the young people complete the program, they participate in the youth leadership program, which provides at least a year of support to help them retain their jobs and complete their educational goals and offers a continuation of needed social services. Even beyond the year, alumni can continue to use LK services as they try to increase their earning potential and career options. In recent years, LK has also stepped up its commitment to supporting young people who want to learn to start businesses of their own. To date, alumni have started three businesses.

Career Track Initiative: Deepening Relationships with Employers

In 2016, LK received a grant from the P2C Fund to develop Career Track—a more intentional career pathway for young people interested not just in a first job, but in making a career in the burgeoning hospitality industry of New Orleans. The leaders of LK had long been aware of the advantages of the hospitality sector for young people, which Bagneris enumerates as "a huge demand for employees; a simple skill set [requirement; and] low barriers to employment, even for those previously incarcerated and for those who left school after 8th grade."

At the same time, Bagneris explains, "we were noticing a lot of our young people having difficulty staying in jobs, getting promoted, even getting information on pathways to careers within the industry. ... We also knew that traditionally there's been racism ingrained in these spaces: Wages aren't equitable, promotion is lacking. We wanted to shift those things ... to reach out to employers to figure out how to sustain employment of our young people and reduce turnover, and to find a way to advance them into pathways to supervisory- or management-level career opportunities."

To try to achieve these aims, Bagneris and his team reached out to recent graduates of their program who had a stated interest in careers in food services and systems, and whom LK staff knew to be good team players who could become strong communicators. Then they looked at the whole spectrum of 40 employer partners that had been providing externships and eventual job placements for LK graduates. To be considered as potential partners for the pilot project, employers needed to have clearly

demonstrated their desire to work with opportunity youth by hiring graduates of the program before, be willing to commit to communicating regularly and participate in meetings and trainings, and be open to expanding the program in the future.

In order to learn as much as they could about doing this work in different types of businesses with varying approaches to employer engagement, Bagneris and his team selected three different partners: City Greens, a small restaurant chain founded in New Orleans; Ruby Slipper Cafe, a family-owned business operating a café and catering under a franchise-type model, with a growing number of sites across the Gulf South; and Ace Hotel, a boutique hotel in New Orleans that is part of an international chain.

It's Always About Communication

Throughout the Career Track pilot, the staff members made deepening their interactions and relationships with employers a core objective. As Bagneris notes, "In addition to the work we have always done advocating for and skilling up young people, it was really an opportunity to help employers learn to be more adaptable and successful in training and retaining this population." In other words, LK's staff used the pilot to more fully develop a dual-customer approach.

From the beginning, communication—between employers and young people, as well as between employers and LK staff members—was a centerpiece of the initiative. In joining the project, employers committed to participating in regular biweekly conversations with an LK program manager who came to the worksite, and to maintaining phone contact with LK. In these ways, LK could offer just-in-time support and coaching to employers if problematic situations arose that were too far outside the scope of the experience and comfort of supervisors at the job site. In addition, the three businesses sent representatives to a series of training sessions at LK. The training, like the biweekly coaching, offered strategies for centering racial equity in ways that address racial disparities, and for moving toward more human-centered, trauma-informed practices in their approach to training and employing young adults.

Another way that LK supported employers was in helping them think about how to evaluate success on the job, define and recognize good work, and make decisions about investing in a young worker. All of this, emphasizes Bagneris, is part and parcel of helping young people develop a good work ethic—something all of the employers want to see. And this means making far more transparent what is much too often not at all obvious to young people: the short- and longer-term milestones they should meet in order to attain salary increases and promotions.

As Bagneris explains, "Most food service businesses do not have a delineated career pathway ... but when you hire young workers, you can ask them how they see themselves evolving in your space. You can start thinking about where they could go, rather than leave them to just hope that hard work will pay off. ... Employers can figure out what that development plan looks like, what skills are needed to get to the next level and communicate how they will continue to be invested in the young person's success."

A Mutually Beneficial Partnership

At first, one concern that the LK team heard from employers was that they didn't have the capacity to serve as "a social worker or case manager." As Bagneris notes, "When faced with a situation where they can see there's trauma, the usual response is to shut down or overreact. That's the moment the young people decide they don't want to be around you. If this practice continues, the turnover rate will continue to increase. Being trained in effective communication can help managers to tone down a potential conflict situation, create a less hostile work environment. ... For young people, it's always about communication."

The LK team tried to convey to the employers that they did not want to add to their already busy jobs but rather to help them make better decisions about how to work and communicate with the young adults in ways that supported less turnover and reduced stress and conflict at the worksite. At an initial meeting

with the leaders at each of the businesses, LK staff members emphasized the importance of carefully selecting who would participate in the training sessions. “We said, ‘Send us the one or two people in your organization who are most ready, with some support, to become the champions, who are interested in learning more and will bring the ideas and information back to train your team,’” Bagneris explains. “Not the ones that most need the training, but the ones who can most effectively deliver it to others.”

In designing the training, LK leaders were able to draw on lessons they had learned and developed in teaching their own staff members to train and support young people working in LK’s restaurant, café, catering, and food access enterprises. They then customized the curriculum based on concerns they heard from the Career Track employers about difficulties they were experiencing with the youth and based on focus groups with the young people about issues they were experiencing at job sites. LK’s staff members also adapted and shared a self-evaluation tool they had used that asks managers to evaluate their environment based on a set of criteria for creating a safe, structured, and equitable holistic space for developing young people.

One immediately positive result of the training was improved communication between the employer partners and LK, which allowed them to better identify and address problems before they became too serious. Staff members learned that partners were putting effort into asking more questions of the young people, which in turn helped the partners to better individualize them, understand more about who they were and what they brought to the table, and where they might need supports. Encouraged by this result, LK began to incorporate material from the training in the way it works with all 40 of its employer partners, not just the ones in the Career Track pilot.

As the employer partners continued to report on how things were going, LK leaders also learned that two of the three were beginning to incorporate some of the Career Track approaches into their own onboarding, training, and HR practices. At a convening of Career Track partners, the cofounder of City Greens shared, “This was much more of a mutually beneficial partnership than I expected, being able to look at how we run the company. I didn’t expect to reevaluate my leadership style.” Ruby Slipper also made changes, adopting a mandatory meeting for managers and their staff where they could learn about what LK was doing in their own dine-in spaces and hear about the practices discussed in the training that would help make their work spaces safe and supportive for young people.

Furthermore, some strong reciprocation of support also began to occur. For example, as Ruby Slipper grew its business to 20 locations, it hired more of the young adults and also began offering support to LK to help with its bottom line. And when City Greens opened a third location, all the proceeds from its grand opening benefitted Liberty’s Kitchen.

Moving Forward with Career Track

One clear lesson from the first two years of Career Track was that participating youth needed help to navigate the first year on the job while they were learning more about the requirements of a workplace, and about themselves and what they needed from a work environment. Career advancement in hospitality, especially for young adults, is nonlinear. One LK partner described his own company as a “career jungle gym” where it can be challenging for employees to see how they fit in and how they can move up.

In such a situation, good communication and a strong relationship between the newly hired young adults and their managers can help to mitigate many of the circumstances that might lead young people to leave or lose their jobs, and their ability to get good references for a next job. While LK’s staff members were successful in brokering such communication within the three employers participating in Career Track, they recognized that it would be difficult to provide that level of training and support to many more of their employer partners.

Even with just three partners, coordinating meetings was not a simple matter, since all of them operated on incredibly busy and sometimes unpredictable schedules. Additionally, there were changes in management at all three partner locations over the course of the project, as well as turnover among managers at LK, that sometimes made consistent communication and scheduling even more challenging. Bagneris notes that “we found at times that the engagement and commitment that we saw at the highest levels of leadership wasn’t always translated to on-site managers and supervisors.”

To spread what they had learned from both the successes and challenges of Career Track to influence a greater number of young adults and employers, LK’s leaders have begun planning and piloting a new phase of the initiative, with support from the P2C Fund. The design calls for training a group of career coaches/mentors who provide opportunity youth with a strong network of support as they learn to navigate challenging workforce dynamics. As trainees progress through the youth development program, they will be matched to one of these coaches, who will then stay with their mentee through their first job placement. The goal is to increase job retention, career advancement, and long-term stability for LK alumni and improve employer partners’ experiences with these graduates. Both the coaches and the young people will receive training from LK and be expected to stay in touch regularly.

Initiative leaders see the potential of a dual win—ensuring more just-in-time support for young workers in handling issues that might affect job retention or promotion and equipping a set of industry professionals with knowledge that they can bring back into their own work environments as well.

EMERGING LESSONS AND AREAS FOR FUTURE STUDY

All three of the programs profiled in this brief work with young people who might have been passed over by hiring managers based on their education and employment histories. A relatively short training period, some work-based experience, and a modicum of support orchestrated by a case manager may be enough to get some young people prepared for a successful workplace experience, but it is not sufficient for many of those facing complex barriers to employment.

Despite the challenges of the hospitality and tourism industry and the barriers faced by many young adults, all three organizations have developed training, work experience, and support strategies in coordination with industry partners that enable such young people to gain new skills, successfully complete externships, and move into jobs and, potentially, careers in the industry. And all three have also started building an evidence base about what works and what more is needed to implement such pilot efforts on a larger scale.

1. Barrier Reduction Through Continuing Wraparound Support

The relationships and trust that young people develop with staff members undergird the success of all three programs in helping young people not only enter but stay in jobs. Staff members also provide case management as an important part of the models. In their regular meetings with young people, they work with them to address issues that may be impeding their full participation in the program, including issues related to housing, transportation, mental health, and child care.

2. Work-Based Learning

All three of the programs use strategies that provide young people with paid work experience and the opportunity to learn while doing tasks in actual workplaces. These experiences range from working within enterprises run by the organization (such as YEP’s Bike Works or Thrift Works and Liberty’s Kitchen’s restaurants or café) to paid externships or internships such as those that RightWay and YEP are able to offer.

3. A Longer On-Ramp

Although the programs have start and end dates to their formal training and internships components, they all also try to provide each young person with a sufficiently longer period to ramp up into full-time employment. They all stay in touch with their graduates for up to a year and then have open-door policies for any alumni who, in later months or years, seek help making work or life transitions. Each is incorporating key lessons into its ongoing work:

- YEP has found that some of its trainees benefit from spending more time in the more supported work environment of the in-house enterprises before being ready for an outside placement.
- RightWay offers its population of youth who are in or transitioning from the foster care system comprehensive, trauma-informed job preparation services delivered by mental health professionals, as well as a youth development staff and employment trainers. For young people who need it, these services continue through longer internships until they are ready to interview for jobs.
- LK automatically enrolls graduates of its youth development program into its leadership development program and is in the process of developing a mentorship program that adds another significant adult to a participant's system of support while on the job.

4. From Transactional to Co-Investment Partnerships with Employers

For the most part, CBO-employer partnerships start out as more or less transactional in nature. CBOs let employers know about all they are doing to prepare young adults for the workforce and solicit advice and possibly resources from the companies. Employers agree to do things like send volunteers from their companies into the program to speak with young people about the industry or business, become internship or externship sites, and possibly interview qualified young people that the program sends them. All of the programs profiled here came into this initiative with nearly a decade of experience setting up and nurturing this type of transactional partnership with employers.

What sets them apart from many others is that they are laying the groundwork for a deeper kind of partnership, in which the business partners co-invest in the young job aspirants—both as part of the businesses' corporate responsibility arms and to support their bottom lines. Notably, both The RightWay Foundation and Liberty's Kitchen have developed human-centered, healing-focused management training programs that they businesses realized offer valuable insights not just into how to work with the young people they hire from these programs but into how to be more successful with their other employees.

RightWay has developed a separate service line that companies whose workforces include opportunity youth are buying into. And as part of its spread strategy, Liberty's Kitchen will train managers with experience in the hospitality industry to become career coaches who can help young workers stay employed and get promoted and bring these practices back into their own businesses.

Looking Ahead

As the country struggles to recover from the economic disruptions caused by COVID-19, unemployment among the rising generation of youth and young adults is at a record high. This poses a serious threat to the future prosperity of our communities. The co-investment, demand-driven model of youth workforce development being pioneered by Pathways to Careers Fund programs such as those profiled in this brief offers a vision of how partnerships of community organizations and employers can begin to address this challenge in ways that will benefit both young adults seeking employment and businesses seeking to restart and rebuild.

Even more important, these programs demonstrate strategies that work for the young people who are often the last to be hired—young people from low-income and marginalized communities, young people who have been caught up in the criminal justice system, or those who have been in foster care. In the coming months and years, lessons emerging from efforts such as these can help point the way toward a broad and an equitable recovery.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Opportunity youth are young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are neither in school nor in the labor market. The term calls attention to the opportunity these young people seek as well as the opportunity before the nation of investing in their education and training to help them become productive adults.
- 2 Tiffany L. Smith, *Hospitality and Tourism in the New Orleans Region: A Labor Market Snapshot* (Boston: JFF, November 2018), <https://www.hiltonfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Hilton-Hospitality-NOLA-Final-111518-3.pdf>.
- 3 Smith, *Hospitality and Tourism*, <https://www.hiltonfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Hilton-Hospitality-NOLA-Final-111518-3.pdf>.
- 4 “Liberty’s Kitchen: Not a Cooking School,” Liberty’s Kitchen, September 28, 2018, video, 7:06, <https://youtu.be/NVkJc-C40Yg>.