

SCALE AND THE OPPORTUNITY YOUTH FORUM

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About the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions

The Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions promotes collaborative, community-based efforts that build the power and influence of those with the least access to opportunity, and support communities to come together to expand mobility, eliminate systemic barriers, and create their own solutions to their most pressing challenges. Launched in 2012 at the Aspen Institute, the Forum for Community Solutions envisions a future where communities create their own vibrant and lasting solutions to the social and economic problems that they face. The Forum for Community Solutions believes that if communities have more power to lead change, we will create a more just and equitable society. www.aspencommunitysolutions.org

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

The **Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions (AIFCS)**, a program of the Aspen Institute established in 2012, seeks to support communities that are working to expand mobility, eliminate systemic barriers, and create solutions to their most pressing challenges. The Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solution's **Opportunity Youth Forum (OYF)** is a network of more than two dozen urban, rural, and tribal community collaboratives focused on building and deepening education and employment pathways for opportunity youth, defined as young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are out of school and work. OYF collaboratives bring together multiple stakeholders (e.g., schools, community-based programs, postsecondary institutions, employers, youth leaders, foundations, government agencies) to remove barriers and improve the systems that serve opportunity youth. Roughly one-quarter (about 1.2 million pre-COVID-19) of all opportunity youth in the United States reside in or near OYF communities.

From its inception, OYF collaboratives have worked both to improve programming for current opportunity youth and to make the systemic changes necessary to expand their efforts to scale. The OYF continues to support communities to design and implement education and career pathways to create sustainable change that it hopes will, ultimately, support improved outcomes of a progressively larger proportion of opportunity youth. Opportunity Youth Forum network members are pursuing scale in a variety of ways, and this influences the strategies they use to expand their impact.

In this paper, we discuss the following strategies, providing examples from OYF network communities to illustrate ways OYF communities are seeking to bring this important work to scale:

- **Moving to Scale by Increasing Enrollment and Partners**
OYF collaboratives are seeking to increase their reach to a greater proportion of the opportunity youth population, including to more geographic areas and to more partners in their communities.
- **Moving to Scale by Proving and Expanding Promising Practices**
OYF collaboratives are using pilots and supporting innovation to test or demonstrate the efficacy of promising programs and practices. Having identified effective programs and practices, they are seeking to expand these to scale in their communities.
- **Moving to Scale by Expanding Pathways**
OYF collaboratives are seeking to increase the number and types of opportunities available to meet the actual interests of youth and young adults.
- **Moving to Scale by Changing Systems**
OYF collaboratives seek systems change to improve outcomes for opportunity youth.

OYF collaboratives are using the above strategies to move their work toward scale as part of an overarching focus on equity and ensuring equitable outcomes for all youth.

This paper includes discussion of the particular challenges and successes of efforts to bring opportunity youth work to scale in rural communities (home to 20% of opportunity youth in the US). While rural collaboratives reach smaller numbers of opportunity youth than do their urban and suburban counterparts, they often are reaching a much *larger proportion* of the opportunity youth in their communities. And although collaboratives in rural areas often must make up for a lack of infrastructure, with fewer system partners and smaller bureaucracies, closer geographic proximity of partners and fewer bureaucratic barriers often provide opportunities for being flexible, nimble, and innovative in aligning partners, resources, and programs. By almost any measure of scale, aside from total number of youth served, rural OYF collaboratives are making significant progress toward bringing opportunity youth programs and policies to scale in their communities.

INTRODUCTION

The **Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions (AIFCS)**, a program of the Aspen Institute established in 2012, seeks to highlight and support communities successfully engaging leaders and advocates across multiple sectors — government, nonprofit, business, and philanthropy — to collectively solve our society’s toughest social and economic challenges. Believing that when communities have more power to lead change

we will be able to create a more just and equitable society, the AIFCS supports community collaboratives and backbone organizations to build the power and influence of those with the least access to opportunity using a collective impact or community collaboration approach to come together to expand mobility, eliminate systemic barriers, and create their own solutions to their most pressing challenges.¹

The Forum for Community Solutions’ **Opportunity Youth Forum (OYF)** began as a group of 21 community collaboratives and has grown to a network of more than 30 urban, rural, and tribal communities seeking to scale reconnection and career pathways for youth and young adults. Roughly one-quarter (about 1.2 million, pre-COVID-19) of all opportunity youth in the US reside in or near OYF communities. Across the OYF network, communities are engaged in specific efforts to improve education and employment outcomes for opportunity youth.²

Using a collective impact or community collaboration approach, OYF collaboratives bring together multiple stakeholders (e.g., schools, community-based programs, postsecondary institutions, employers, youth leaders, government agencies) to remove barriers and improve the systems that serve opportunity youth. With a focus on creating

integrated education and career pathways to reconnect opportunity youth to school and employment, OYF collaboratives are making it possible for young people to get back on track to successful adulthood. In addition to removing barriers and creating pathways of reconnection, OYF collaboratives are seeking to build awareness by identifying and sharing successful strategies, mobilizing stakeholders through knowledge and network development, advocating for effective policy, and catalyzing investments by encouraging funder partnerships. The network of OYF communities seeks to support community collaboratives and the whole ecosystem of systems and programs to design innovative approaches aimed at advancing the most effective solutions for reconnecting opportunity youth.

Opportunity Youth Forum collaboratives have worked both to improve programming for current opportunity youth and to *make the systemic changes necessary to expand their efforts to scale.*³ Specifically, OYF work is done

OYF work is done with an eye toward three overarching goals: 1) higher rates of reconnection to education and employment among opportunity youth; 2) adoption of effective approaches leading to productive careers for opportunity youth and scaling of these approaches through replication and expansion; and 3) system and policy changes and creative leveraging of public financing mechanisms and existing streams to remove barriers to positive outcomes for opportunity youth.

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Although the AIFCS initially used the concept of “scale” to mean replication and expansion of effective policies and programs to reach larger numbers of opportunity youth, in practice, the network has come to define scale more broadly to include not only reaching larger numbers of young people, but reaching a higher proportion of young people within a particular region or expanding to previously underserved geographic areas or populations. And while operating with a sense of urgency around scaling the number of opportunities, AIFCS collaboratives have often prioritized quality over quantity in an effort to prepare to scale something that, when scaled, will have the greatest positive impact. The AIFCS concept of scale today includes attention to developing high-quality, promising (and, in several cases, evidence-informed and/or evidence-building) programs and effective policies to improve outcomes for opportunity youth and expand those programs and policies, strategically, to reach more young people in more communities.⁵

A NOTE ON THE PANDEMIC AND ECONOMIC CRISIS:

Research for this paper was conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing economic downturn. Since March 2020, work in OYF communities has shifted dramatically to meet the needs of the already economically vulnerable youth and young adults who now are experiencing a disproportionate share of layoffs as a result of stay-at-home orders and the recession.⁶ Nonetheless, this paper contains important lessons about scaling efforts to improve outcomes for opportunity youth that remain relevant.

Changes due to the current crises have implications for both short-term programs and long-term pathway and system development. Schools and youth-serving programs are exploring new virtual strategies to meaningfully engage young people while physical distancing is still a necessity. In an effort to assist practitioners planning programming for summer 2020, the Aspen Forum recently released a digital summer youth employment toolkit that explores digital strategies for everything from enrollment to career exploration to virtual employer-hosted internships.⁷

Although the pandemic is forcing a rapid entry into the digital realm, it is compelling a move that most in the youth-serving field acknowledge was long due. The future of our work with young people and of their experience in the workplace includes increased interaction with digital technology and using virtual environments to prepare young people offers new opportunities. For instance, increasing use of virtual environments for youth-serving programs can help rural and tribal communities to overcome barriers such as transportation and access to a wide range of workplace opportunities. And by increasing focus on digital skill development and creating on-ramps to high-wage jobs involving remote work, programs that serve opportunity youth and young adults can reduce inequities of the “digital divide” in which Black and Latinx youth and young adults are disproportionately represented among those with limited or no digital skills.⁸ The Aspen Forum for Community Solutions and OYF network will continue to track and seek to understand how the pandemic and economic downturn will impact scaling programs for opportunity youth going forward.

SCALE ACROSS THE OPPORTUNITY YOUTH FORUM NETWORK

Definitions of Scale

While the concept of scale may have appeared straightforward at the inception of the OYF, Opportunity Youth Forum network members are pursuing scale in a variety of ways, and this influences their strategies for scaling their work. Most representatives of OYF collaboratives agree on a standard definition of scale as the number or proportion of opportunity youth served, but all are also seeking other types of scale as well. Some think of scale as the number or proportion of partners (e.g., public agencies, employers, education) engaged. Others focus on geographic reach (to the entire specific region or to all of the areas identified as most in need) when they consider scaling their work within their community. Still others emphasize quality and depth of programming or broader systems change as moving toward scale. Across the OYF network, views of and strategies for achieving scale vary widely. Even within a particular community, complications arise when talking about scaling the work of an opportunity youth collaborative versus the work of individual youth-serving programs.

Scale in Rural Communities

Nationally, 20% of opportunity youth live in a rural area. The OYF network is geographically diverse and includes a growing number of collaboratives in rural communities, in which scale can look very different from urban or suburban communities. Rural communities, for example, often have smaller numbers of opportunity youth than their urban and suburban counterparts, although in many rural areas opportunity youth represent a larger proportion of the total youth population and are, therefore, highly visible. This means rural areas can offer programming to what appears to be a low

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number of youth even while reaching a much larger proportion of the total opportunity youth population in their communities. In fact, one could argue that in rural areas, in which opportunity youth represent a *large proportion* of the total youth population, reaching these young people is of even greater consequence to the entire community. Especially in impoverished rural communities with low levels of education and employment, an opportunity youth strategy that reaches half the area's opportunity youth can prove a significant component of an overall community or regional economic and workforce development strategy.

Opportunity youth collaboratives in rural areas, which usually do not have the infrastructure of urban and suburban areas, frequently find themselves subsidizing public systems or the gap between public and private funding. Staff capacity can present another challenge to going to scale that arises as youth-serving programs in rural areas find it harder to attract and retain well-prepared staff or to provide staff with a full range of professional development opportunities. Despite these challenges, rural collaboratives are often nimbler and more innovative than their urban and suburban counterparts. Because they have fewer system partners and smaller bureaucracies, rural collaboratives can often easily get all the players in the same room so decisions and cross-system agreements can be made more quickly and pilots of new programming tested more easily. Thus, by almost any measure of "scale" aside from total number of youth served, rural

OYF collaboratives are making some of the most significant progress toward bringing opportunity youth programs and policies to scale in their communities.

Scaling With an Equity Lens

OYF collaboratives are focusing on the overarching goal of increasing equity as they scale their work. For instance, in Georgia, the **Metro Atlanta Opportunity Youth Collaborative** is using the United Way's Child Well-Being Index to look, at the zip code level, at the large area it serves to understand how resources are distributed across the region. Through this process, the collaborative has been able to identify inequity in the system, with rural areas and some urban Metro Atlanta areas having access to the fewest resources. As the collaborative scales its work to serve a larger region of 13 counties, it is trying to galvanize interest in areas that have been overlooked and underserved in the past. Similarly, the **Opportunity Youth Advisory Group** of the **Road Map Project** in Seattle/South King County, Washington, identifies improving the supply and coordination of reengagement pathways as an area of focus, with a specific priority on finding and reconnecting opportunity youth with high rates of disconnection using targeted, equity-focused outreach. To assess the racial equity impact of any potential priority, the Opportunity Youth Advisory Group asks, "Will this strategy increase opportunity for youth of color and other youth who have been historically excluded from opportunity?"⁹

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OYF Collaboratives Scaling Opportunity Youth Work in Their Communities

Opportunity Youth Forum collaboratives are scaling their work in a variety of ways. In what follows, we discuss various strategies, providing examples from OYF network communities to illustrate different strategies for bringing this important work to scale. It is important to note that each OYF collaborative mentioned is engaged in multiple strategies to move its work toward scale, not just those we have chosen to highlight here. These strategies are helping to propel the work of OYF communities forward.

- **Moving to Scale by Increasing Enrollment and Partners**

OYF collaboratives are seeking to increase their reach — to a greater proportion of the opportunity youth, to more geographic areas, and to more partners in their communities. The **Greenville Opportunity Youth Initiative (GO Youth)** in Greenville, Mississippi, operates in rural Washington County, where there are only 6,000 young people ages 16 to 24, but half of those young people are defined as opportunity youth. GO Youth has worked hard to increase the proportion of opportunity youth reached by its programming, which it is working to embed in secondary and postsecondary education systems and the local workforce development system. GO Youth reports that it is reaching an impressive half the county's opportunity youth through its programming. In Illinois, **Thrive Chicago** has developed a neighborhood-based Reconnection Hub model in which centralized hubs offer navigation supports to connect opportunity youth to existing resources and services. Having piloted and refined the model in one neighborhood, the collaborative has opened a second site and hopes to scale the model to more and more neighborhoods across the city. In each neighborhood, Thrive works in partnership with a lead direct service organization, which also serves as the physical host in the neighborhood, to tailor the hub to local needs and leverage neighborhood assets. While Northern California's **Del Norte County and Tribal Lands Opportunity Youth Initiative** also seeks scale defined as reach to youth and to geographic area, the collaborative also defines scale in terms of numbers and variety of institutions investing and partnering in the work, continually asking who else they should involve in developing career pathways.

- **Moving to Scale by Proving and Expanding Promising Practices**

OYF collaboratives are using pilots and supporting innovation to test or demonstrate the efficacy of promising programs and practices. The **Denver Opportunity Youth Initiative (DOYI)** in Colorado has supported several pilots with the goal of making the case for wider adoption of these interventions and approaches by system partners. For instance, the success of the DOYI-supported pilot to have Academic Navigators reach out to students who had become inactive convinced Metropolitan State University of Denver to support an expanded version of the reengagement effort, and the neighboring Colorado Community College system is interested in improving its reengagement efforts. In a similar vein, the **Youth on the Rise (YOTR)** collaborative in Pima County, Arizona, piloted several different approaches to establishing a reengagement center, keeping its focus on developing one high-quality, stable center before attempting to open multiple centers or create other new programming for opportunity youth. Since 2017, Goodwill of Southern Arizona has overseen the Re-Engagement Center, now successfully operating for nearly three years, and opened a second center in 2020. The YOTR collaborative is committed to continuous improvement in case management practice, effective referrals, and pathway developments that speed up and sustain connections to education and careers as it works to establish an effective network of reengagement service providers.

OYF collaboratives are seeking to focus on and perfect promising work with an eye toward expansion or replication. For example, the **Los Angeles Opportunity Youth Collaborative (LAOYC)** in California has started its opportunity youth-focused work by going in depth with one population — foster youth. In a county with 150,000 opportunity youth, LAOYC is focusing in depth on the region’s 10,000 current and former foster youth ages 16 to 24. To that end, LAOYC has spent years building an ecosystem of organizations that work together to ensure that each foster youth is served in a holistic way with a coherent array of complementary services — no small feat in a county with seven Workforce Investment Boards and 80 school districts. LAOYC has achieved numerous policy wins and systems changes for foster care Transition Age Youth and also piloted large-scale pathways in partnership with organizations like iFoster — winner of the new AmeriCorps program of the year recognition for its use of national service to employ foster care youth in service-based pathways. After initial growth from serving three to 13 Georgia counties, **Metro Atlanta Opportunity Youth Collaborative** took a step back and decided that, rather than attempt to reach a larger number of young people, it would focus on those young people already being served, to really understand what was working at what was not, what barriers still existed, and how those barriers could be eliminated. This has led collaborative partners to incorporate trauma-informed care, extended supports for youth and young adults during their first year in employment, and integrated services. By emphasizing quality over quantity, the collaborative is defining “scale” in a new way than it had in the past. The **Bronx Opportunity Network (BON)** in New York City is an innovative network model made up of seven Bronx-based organizations working in partnership with Bronx Community College and Hostos Community College in the South Bronx. Through a bridge program approach, the BON supports underprepared Bronx students to improve their academic skills, overcome systemic barriers, and earn a college degree. As New York City’s public community college system has undergone significant changes in recent years and as young adults continue to enter a more precarious economy that increasingly requires postsecondary education, the BON has been working with JobsFirstNYC to evolve its model. This includes using real-time student data from college partners to provide timely interventions when students get off-track as well as helping students find their purpose to increase engagement and retention through an integrated career development approach. A dedication to program design and a focus on successful program elements has made the BON an authority in a city that has a lot of potential for replication of the BON’s bridge models.

- **Moving to Scale by Expanding Pathways**

OYF collaboratives are seeking to increase the number and types of opportunities available to meet the actual interests of youth and young adults. For example, the **Del Norte County and Tribal Lands Opportunity Youth Initiative** in California has existing pathways programming in what are known regional growth industries (e.g., health care), but the collaborative is attempting to expand its career pathway options to include the industries of greatest interest to the area's young people. To date, the collaborative has been able to offer youth the following career pathways: Health, Early Childhood Education, Innovation/Entrepreneurship, Outdoor Recreation, Food, Media, and Community Organizing. The collaborative sees this as moving toward scale, with scale defined as offering career pathways in high demand by both local industry and the community's youth.

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- **Moving to Scale by Changing Systems**

OYF collaboratives seek systems change to improve outcomes for opportunity youth. With over 20,000 opportunity youth in Seattle/South King County, Washington, **Road Map Project** partners were clear from the start that they needed to engage in system building, not simply program replication. However, partners agreed they did not want to build a *separate* system filled with opportunity youth. For this reason, the collaborative has tried to ensure that programs are integrated with existing public entities. For example, many high school completion and career pathway programs are housed on community college campuses. The goal is to improve and expand existing systems to better meet the needs of the region's opportunity youth population. In an attempt to reach all of the older youth in foster care in the state of Maine, the **Southern Maine Youth Transition Network (SMYTN)** made sure to bring in statewide partners from the beginning so it would have the capacity to reach the largest possible number of older youth. In addition to working with local partners to build new and enhance existing pathways and create a system to help young people navigate these programs, SMYTN has created a Community of Practice for direct service providers from across the state, worked with youth and adult advocates statewide to push for supportive state legislation, and continued to work to secure dedicated state funds to support this population of young people.

It is important to note that the Road Map Project and SMYTN have been able to scale their opportunity youth-serving systems quite rapidly in large part due to a foundation of enabling legislation. Specifically, since 2011-12, Washington state's Open Doors law has allowed state K-12 education formula funding to follow students outside of public schools for high school completion; the Best Starts for Kids tax levy in King County allocated \$2.4 million per year to reconnect opportunity youth to education and employment during a six-year period coinciding with the Road Map Project's efforts to scale reengagement. Similarly, Maine's LD1683, Act to Improve Degree and Career Attainment for Former Foster Children, extends college supports for foster care youth through age 26.

CHALLENGES AND PROMISE OF BRINGING OPPORTUNITY YOUTH WORK TO SCALE

Across the network, OYF communities are pursuing various aspects of scale using myriad strategies. And although network members seem to agree that pushing for scale is important, they face two significant challenges in doing so:

- **Quality Versus Quantity**

All OYF collaboratives struggle with decisions about quality versus quantity. Collaboratives and their direct service-providing partners feel pressure to be able to report to funders that they are reaching large numbers of young people with their programming. This pressure can create a disincentive for those seeking to do the thorough, deep work required to help young people effectively address the challenges they face. Most OYF collaboratives address the quality-versus-quantity dilemma by shifting attention between the two as they continuously move toward better programs, situated in a more complete system, serving more and more opportunity youth.

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- **Model Fidelity**

Some OYF collaboratives and their partners have developed strong career pathway programming; with a promising or proven model, collaborative partners are inclined to try to get the model to a larger group of young people, perhaps in a broader geographic area. This can lead to a balancing act. On the one hand, replicating or expanding to more sites too quickly can lead to changes in program implementation and poor results at new sites. On the other hand, focusing too much on fidelity to a particular program model can mean that replication or expansion occurs so slowly that the community continues to have a large number of underserved

opportunity youth. For instance, the BON in New York City is currently working with college leadership to refine and evolve its successful collective college bridge model in response to changes in how local community colleges handle remediation. This has required each partner organization to both make institution-level changes and recommit to the purpose and approach of a new BON model. Kevin Stump, senior vice president at JobsFirstNYC, the intermediary supporting the BON's strategic planning process, notes the network is attempting to remain faithful to the BON model while acknowledging changes in local conditions: "After more than a decade of partnership, the BON is smart to leverage CUNY's (City University of New York) new remediation policy to build an even more responsive model with the potential to scale to other colleges."

The Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund — a multiyear investment in 2013 in 21 communities to create and deepen multisector and cross-system community collaboratives focused on opportunity youth — and the Opportunity Youth Forum that has blossomed from that initial investment are working with partner

initiatives and organizations to scale *focus* on opportunity youth across the country. This increased focus in more and more communities across the country, combined with the ability to scale effective *solutions* (i.e., the full range of interventions and programs needed) for opportunity youth, have moved the OYF much closer to scaling equitable outcomes for opportunity youth in the US. Reinvention of these solutions in the pandemic era, and disruptions across the labor market, public schools, and postsecondary institutions, present an opportunity — and a challenge — for bold re-imagining of programs, pathways, and systems seeking improved outcomes for opportunity youth.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 The Forum for Community Solutions works in partnership with many different communities. The following set of core values informs these partnerships:
 - **Community and Constituent Centered:**
We believe in the power of community and in the central role of community members to lead the change and advance individual and community change — particularly those most impacted by issues and historically furthest from influence and decision making.
 - **Equity:**
Equity is just and fair inclusion in a society in which all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential. We believe that solutions are not successful if they don't produce greater equity for groups that have historically been excluded from opportunities.
 - **Justice:**
There is no equity without justice, and no justice without equity. We must courageously create a fair society that provides opportunity to all; to accomplish this, we must shift balances of power to increase the influence of those who have traditionally been denied power.
 - **Collaboration:**
We believe we can go further together than apart. Only through genuine, trust-based collaboration can significant community and systems challenges be addressed and resolved.
 - **Respect:**
We are humbled by the strength and courage of the communities we seek to support, and do our work with the deepest respect. Only through earning their respect and building trust can we be successful in our work.
 - **Love:**
We believe that long-lasting, sustained change of some of our society's most difficult problems is based in having a deeper love of humanity — a greater compassion, empathy, and understanding for all people that is bigger than any one of us.
 - **Accountable Impact:**
We are results-oriented; we seek to ensure that solutions produce real, equitable results that meaningfully improve people's lives. We seek to get to impact with a deep sense of organizational responsibility and with accountability to the communities we serve.
 - **Learning Together:**
We believe in the power of learning and knowledge as an engine for change, and that learning together, with and across communities, can only happen where there is mutual respect.
- 2 Figure internally calculated by Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions, based on Measure of America city- and/or county-level estimates of opportunity youth populations in the US. Retrieved from <https://aspencommunitysolutions.org/impact/>. These data are outdated due to the pandemic and economic crisis; however, it is reasonable to assume that a large proportion of opportunity youth in the US still reside in OYF communities.

- 3 To this end, the AIFCS has focused on the following systemic shifts: 1) building and strengthening collaborative infrastructure, 2) building diverse stakeholder commitment, and 3) implementing and sustaining collective action among stakeholders. These shifts are improving the ways opportunity youth are supported to reach better outcomes in OYF communities. For a full discussion of systemic shifts in the OYF, see Miles, Monique, & Nemoy, Yelena. (December 2017). Shift happens: The Aspen Institute opportunity youth incentive fund accelerates systems change. Retrieved from <https://aspencommunitysolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Shift-Happens-Full-Report.pdf>
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