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Summer Youth Employment Programs 2020: Lessons from the Field

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This is part two of a three-part series written by CLASP and the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions. Summer Youth Employment Programs (SYEPs) offer short-term, paid opportunities for youth and young adults to gain career exposure, training, and work experience. These programs have been **shown** to improve participants' economic, academic, and behavioral outcomes. Drawing on our survey of 73 SYEP providers and local public funders, this three-part series is designed to provide policymakers, local systems leaders, and practitioners with insight into how SYEPs responded in 2020 to the economic and health challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Part 2: Challenges

Summer Youth Employment Programs (SYEPs) faced an unusual range of challenges in 2020. This brief highlights perspectives on hurdles that the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting economic crisis created or exacerbated.

Longstanding challenges heightened by the pandemic

Unreliable funding

Although many SYEPs supplement their budgets with philanthropic dollars or federal and state government sources such as WIOA, TANF, and state general funds, most programs rely primarily on local government funds. These local appropriations can fluctuate significantly from year to year. Policymakers often **delay** decisions about funding levels until late spring, complicating program planning. The timing of the COVID-19 pandemic added to the uncertainty, leading some communities to reduce or even eliminate funding for SYEPs in 2020.

- Among the 13 survey respondents who reported cancelling their 2020 SYEPs, 55 percent noted funding cuts as a primary or contributing factor in that decision. One-third of those that cancelled rely solely on city general funds to operate.
- Half of the programs that did not cancel revised enrollment goals due to the pandemic. Two increased enrollment, while the remainder reduced their goals by almost 50 percent. Most programs met at least 75 percent of their revised targets.
- Several respondents reported that enrollment fell below 25 percent of their original goals. The majority of this group said funding cuts were detrimental to their programs.

Limited employer engagement

SYEPs frequently face challenges securing employers to serve as hosts for summer youth participants. In 2020, rolling shutdowns and stay-at-home orders curtailed many opportunities in the public and private sectors.

- Government jobs: Cities scaled down or cancelled summer camps, which typically host large numbers of youth workers.
- Service sector: Many businesses in fields with low barriers to entry, such as food service and hospitality, were closed or restricted by local public health measures.
- Other industries: Even businesses that weren't hamstrung by the pandemic itself were adapting to COVID-safe operations, making many hesitant to add youth workers to the equation.

The loss of so many employer hosts limited the number of youth that some programs could accommodate. Among respondents that served less than 25 percent of the youth they had hoped to engage, 67 percent ranked employer engagement challenges as the most detrimental to their success.

New challenges created by COVID-19

Health and safety concerns

Efforts to “flatten the curve” of COVID-19 infections came just as SYEPs were preparing to launch. The impact of health concerns varied from program to program.

- Among programs that cancelled SYEP, 73 percent cited safety concerns as the primary reason.
- Despite initial fears, none of the programs that remained active ranked safety concerns as the most difficult challenge they had to resolve. In fact, 58 percent of respondents indicated that these concerns were “not very detrimental” or “not at all detrimental” to program success.
- Public health guidance, such as physical distancing requirements and caps on group gatherings, did limit the number of youth many communities were able to accommodate.

Technology limitations

Technology-related issues hampered many programs’ ability to engage youth participants remotely.

- **Access:** 77 percent of respondents ranked lack of technology access among youth among the most difficult challenges to resolve.
- **Infrastructure:** 75 percent reported difficulty addressing problems related to technology infrastructure among providers.
- **Digital literacy:** 57 percent said they struggled to overcome gaps in technology skills among youth. Although lack of technology access was the most difficult problem to resolve initially, challenges with digital literacy ultimately proved more detrimental to program success.

Differing perspectives

Survey data revealed some distinct differences in how respondents assessed last summer’s challenges.

Funders and providers

Funders and the programs they supported viewed the 2020 SYEP experience differently.

- Overall, 66 percent of funders who weren’t also program providers identified lack of public commitment as detrimental to SYEPs, but only 27 percent of providers shared this perspective.
- Providers who weren’t also funders were more likely to report that issues with technology infrastructure and digital literacy were most detrimental.
- 45 percent of all program providers reported that difficulty maintaining supportive services was among the most detrimental challenges of virtual programming, while only 1 of the 10 funders that weren’t also providers identified this as a detrimental challenge.

Larger and smaller providers

SYEPs represented among survey respondents ranged from small programs that employed fewer than 100 youth to large programs serving over 10,000.

- 94 percent of respondents serving more than 1,000 youth identified insufficient technology infrastructure and access as key challenges, while just over half of the smallest programs made the same assessment.
- Larger programs cited issues with digital literacy among youth as a significant problem, but only 50 percent of smaller programs agreed.
- Two-thirds of small programs said youth safety was “not very difficult” or “not at all difficult” to achieve, while two-thirds of large programs said it was “somewhat difficult” or “very difficult.”
- Larger programs reported greater difficulty maintaining supportive services than smaller programs did.

Policy and program considerations

Young people today are coming of age amid a once-in-a-lifetime crisis. Alongside year-round programs, postsecondary bridging, and other subsidized training and work experiences, SYEPs can contribute significantly to lifelong economic mobility for today’s youth and an equitable national recovery. The following recommendations for 2021 can mitigate the kinds of challenges highlighted in this brief.

- Our current crises heighten the urgency of addressing longstanding challenges with funding and employer engagement. State and local leaders can be effective champions for SYEPs among employers, reduce uncertainties by determining SYEP appropriations as early as possible, and follow the lead of cities that increased funding to serve more youth in 2020.
- SYEPs will continue to need support ensuring safe worksites and addressing gaps in technology access and digital literacy. Funding for PPE, technology infrastructure, and hardware should remain a priority. Providers should be granted flexibility to test creative outreach and engagement approaches for youth who struggle with technology.
- Community stakeholders need to reach a shared understanding of last summer’s challenges so funders can align their expectations and supports with providers’ needs.