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Employing Opportunity Youth: Recognizing and Reinforcing the Business Case

Steve Bennett
Katie Hall
Authors

Larry Good
Holly Parker
Editors

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Corporation for a Skilled Workforce is a national nonprofit that partners with government, business, and community leaders to connect workers with good jobs, increase the competitiveness of companies, and build sustainable communities. For more than 23 years, we have been an effective catalyst for change. We identify opportunities for innovation in work and learning and provoke transformative change in policy and practice. We have worked with dozens of workforce investment boards, state and local workforce agencies, community-based organizations, foundations, federal agencies, and colleges to create lasting impact through their collaborative activities.

Introduction

Chronic disconnection affects a significant population of young people with far-reaching social and economic costs. These disconnected or “opportunity” youth are defined as 16-24 year olds who are not connected to school or work, and who have one or more barriers to entry into both. These young people are in very serious danger of being left behind permanently, often facing long-term unemployment, low or no income, and/or incarceration. The consequences of not helping these young people succeed are immediate, pressing, and will continue to reverberate both socially and economically until critical steps are taken to increase reconnection and sustainable employment.

Many philanthropic, community-based, and public organizations recognize and skillfully confront youth disconnection challenges. While these efforts are generally well-documented, they are not yet reaching scalable impact. There is less understanding about how the private sector can contribute to youth re-connection. Strategies focusing on meeting employer demand have the potential to leverage and contribute to existing youth-focused efforts, helping to ensure greater impact for both disconnected youth and employers. *This paper explores the reasons for and implications of youth disconnection from the labor market and subsequent employer lack of engagement with these youth. By outlining strategies for mitigating the problem from both sides, steps can be taken to both connect opportunity youth to education and employment and help employers realize the advantages of using this labor pool, while providing them with the supports necessary for success. This paper analyzes how six different strategies can*

¹ Rosenblum, Elise and Sara Toland. “Driving Employer Demand for New Sources of Talent” *The Rockefeller Foundation*. Fall 2013, Online. Available at

mitigate generally accepted dimensions of disconnection and provide the framework for long-term reconnection.

Including employers in effective youth connection strategies requires some cultural shifts, both in terms of employers’ perspectives on this population and in how youth services are envisioned and delivered. *Employers must be able to view these youth as potential economic assets rather than social liabilities.* Thus, case-making to employers about the potential pay-off of employing opportunity youth is a critical step. *Opportunity youth services will need to include education and support for employers* of these young people to facilitate the success and sustainability of their efforts.

While many employers have begun to create pathways for opportunity youth for social and moral reasons, far greater adoption and impact could be achieved by *articulating the business case and talent pipeline that opportunity youth can offer employers.*¹ Some employers already play a critical role in re-connecting opportunity youth by recruiting, training, and/or hiring them, but more must be done to make the case to other employers and supporting them once they engage in these efforts.

Understanding Youth Disconnection

Youth disconnection is a far-reaching problem. In the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, more than one in eight of all 15- to 24-year-olds are not in employment, education, or training. Around the world, the International Labour Organization estimates that 75 million young people are

<http://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/uploads/files/c4d3bb66-4c60-4dcb-9639-34d8cc77f8d7-driving.pdf>



unemployed.² In the United States, approximately 6.7 million young people fit into this category. This is a substantial population, making action all the more urgent both to help the young people in question, and to take advantage of the potential economic and social benefits for communities when previously disconnected youth begin to move towards greater stability and self-sufficiency.

The challenges begin early: three in five opportunity youth surveyed grew up in poverty, nearly half were raised by a single parent, and very few grew up in households with a parent who graduated from college. While more than half of these young people report looking for full-time work, most do not have the skills, prior work experience, or education to qualify for the jobs they seek.³ In addition to being unprepared for work, opportunity youth are met with other systemic barriers to their entry into and success with education and employment. Entry scores, basic skills, good study practices, and numerous other aspects of postsecondary school can be highly challenging for young people with few support structures. Workplace entry is equally or more challenging. Employment opportunities are often shared through social networks and word-of-mouth – avenues of connection that are likely inaccessible to opportunity youth. Even the way job postings are written can disqualify opportunity youth, such as when a high school diploma or college degree is required.

The impact of these factors leading to and perpetuating youth disconnection have

² Mourshed, Mona, Diana Farrell and Dominic Barton. "Education to Employment, Designing a System that Works." *McKinsey Center for Government*. May 2013, Online. Available at <http://mckinseysociety.com/education-to-employment/report/>

³ Gap Inc., Opportunity Nation, McKinsey and Company. "Connecting Youth and Business, A Toolkit for Employers." *Opportunity Nation*. June 4, 2012, Online. Available at

http://www.serve.gov/sites/default/files/ctools/youth_employment_toolkit.pdf

implications beyond challenges to work and learning. Research shows opportunity youth can internalize their bad experiences and then view work and their role within the workforce in a fundamentally different way from how it is viewed by more privileged youth. Indeed, the experience of disconnection is more than just a lack of employment or school connection. Cultural, familial, and social *norms* play a substantial role in youth disconnection. In a study of at-risk ninth grade students, researchers learned that participants' view of work as impacted by their families created an overall negative experience. Participants also viewed work differently based on gender, with men faring better than women. Only a small fraction of participants had a favorable view of work instilled by family members.⁴

Sociologist Sudhir Venkatesh provides insight into the view of work from populations in poverty. His research has culminated in two books that are relevant to the issues surrounding work and opportunity youth. In both *American Project: The Rise and Fall of a Modern American Ghetto* and *Off the Books: The Underground Economy of the Urban Poor*, Venkatesh describes the world in which many of our nation's opportunity youth live. This world is about entrepreneurship, barter systems, and parallel social norms. There are few bank accounts or pay checks, and access to mainstream employment is limited.⁵ When youth see their parents or older siblings participating in the underground economy, they understandably experience that as a normal set

http://www.serve.gov/sites/default/files/ctools/youth_employment_toolkit.pdf

⁴ Chaves, Anna P., et al. "Conceptions of Work: The View from Urban Youth". *Journal of Counseling Psychology*. 2004. 51(3). DOI: 10.1037/0022-0167.51.3.275

⁵ Venkatesh, Sudhir Alladi. *Off the Books: The Underground Economy of the Urban Poor*. 2006. Harvard University Press.



of transactions within the world of work. Too often, then, they see employment as temporary or itinerant. This research is important to understanding the context of how opportunity youth view their role within the conventional workforce, and the services and supports they may need to help them succeed.

Given the complexity of the problems, needs, and experiences of opportunity youth, an exhaustive list of the dimensions of disconnection is not feasible. It would be inaccurate and disingenuous to think that any set of dimensions is the sole basis for detachment, when opportunity youth are more

likely to be persons of color and from areas of concentrated poverty.⁶ In fact, research has shown that African American youth from low-income families are considered “doubly disadvantaged” and are less likely to reconnect to the workforce, regardless of dimensions of disconnection.⁷ Still, some basis for defining and understanding the multiple facets of detachment is needed when considering approaches to help young people in need of education and/or employment opportunities. The following is a list of 10 characteristics that highlight common aspects of disengaged youth.⁸

Dimensions of Youth Disconnection
History of physical and/or mental abuse
Limited access to postsecondary education
No career guidance or career navigation skills
Few job opportunities
Inadequate job seeking skills
Limited networks for job search
Few positive adult mentors and role models
Inadequate work readiness skills
Living in poverty
Recently released from incarceration

⁶ Fernandes, Adrienne L., & Gabe, Thomas. “Disconnected Youth: A Look at 16- to 24-Year Olds Who Are Not Working or In School”. *Congressional Research Service*. April 22, 2009.

⁷ Hair, Elizabeth C., et al. “Youth Who Are ‘Disconnected’ and Those Who Then Reconnect: Assessing the Influence of Family, Programs, Peers,

and Communities”. *Child Trends Research Brief*. 2009.

⁸ This paper will reference many different dimensions of disconnection, which have been derived, synthesized, and/or developed from research conducted by the Corporation for a Skilled Workforce as well as numerous policy-based counterparts throughout the country.



Economic & Social Costs of Disconnected Youth

In *The Economic Cost of Opportunity Youth*, the authors calculated the immediate and future burden of opportunity youth.⁹ The findings of this paper illustrate that the economic and social costs of almost 7 million young people not connecting to the labor market are enormous.

The *economic* cost of opportunity youth represents the pure fiscal loss of earnings and tax revenue. The *social* cost represents societal losses regardless of who “pays.” Examples include welfare, healthcare, criminal justice and private education costs.

Immediate costs are the annual economic and social expenditures for youth ages 16-24. Future cost represents the lifetime burden of those youth age 25-65. Projected costs indicate the following:

Per individual opportunity youth	Economic (Taxpayer) Burden	Social Burden
Immediate (annually ages 16-24)	\$13,900	\$37,450
Lifetime	\$258,240	\$755,900

These numbers show the impact per individual; an aggregate view of the potential economic ramifications of an entire cohort of opportunity youth is enormous. “Considered over the full lifetime of a cohort of 6.7 million opportunity youth who are aged 16-24, the aggregate taxpayer burden amounts to \$1.56 trillion in present value terms, with an aggregate social burden of \$4.75 trillion. These costs roll over each year because each year brings a new cohort of opportunity youth.”¹⁰ In addition to

⁹ Belfield, Clive R., Henry M. Levin and Rachel Rosen. “The Economic Value of Opportunity Youth.” *Civic Enterprises*. January 2012, Online. Available at

these costs, the lost earning potential of this group of young people represents billions of dollars in salary and revenue.

Given the immense costs associated with disconnected youth, the potential pay-off for addressing related issues is clear. Not only can improving connection to employment better ensure the immediate financial stability of these youth, it can have substantial long-term economic impact for their families, their local communities, and the entire country.

Opportunity Youth Employment

It is generally understood how employing opportunity youth benefits the youth in question. Less obvious is how employers can gain from hiring these young people. While some employers have been motivated to make hiring opportunity youth part of their business model for social, moral, and community reasons, it is not realistic to expect the majority of employers to follow suit. If long term strategies to increase opportunity youth connection to education and the labor market are to succeed, they must include a clear and compelling case that doing so makes good business sense for employers.

“Employers that currently provide employment pathways for opportunity youth do so for a variety of reasons, including difficulty finding or hiring skilled talent, concerns about turnover, desire to increase employee diversity, commitment to serving the community, or concern about the young adult population. In many cases, the employers are initially motivated to create a pathway as part of their corporate social responsibility or philanthropic initiatives. However, the majority of employers choose to expand employment pathways when

http://www.civicenterprises.net/MediaLibrary/Docs/econ_value_opportunity_youth.pdf

¹⁰ Ibid.



they see that the pathway is meeting core business goals relating to talent.”¹¹

In order to make the case that businesses should recruit, hire, train, and support opportunity youth, it is critical to examine why many of them do not. Just as a set of barriers to employment and education result in youth disconnection, businesses face challenges resulting in their ongoing failure to connect to youth.

The most common reasons employers do not connect with the opportunity youth population are listed below.

Common Reasons for Employer Disconnection with Opportunity Youth
Unfamiliar with the demographic
Not interested in hiring
Negative stereotypes about these young people
Not sure how to recruit this population
Unfamiliar with training programs
Do not see any benefit to hiring from this group
Do not feel ownership of the problem
Internal hiring barriers
OK as is
Unwilling to take risks

Employing opportunity youth requires an understanding of the likely barriers these youth face, the tools and supports needed to successfully employ them, and the willingness to take the risk.

The Business Case for Hiring Opportunity Youth

In addition to the social, moral, and economic imperative to help 6.7 million opportunity

¹¹ Grobe, Terry, Elyse Rosenblum, and Todd Weissman. “Dollars and Sense: How “Career First” Programs Like Year Up Benefit Youth and Employers.” *Jobs for the Future*. May 2010, Online.

youth connect to education and jobs, leading employers indicate it also makes smart business sense. Economic conditions and unemployment are important undercurrents. When more people are out of work and even experienced workers take entry level jobs, young people, particularly opportunity youth, are far more likely to be passed over. But as the U.S. economy continues to recover, employers will be more motivated to take risks and career pathways for opportunity youth will likely increase. This is an untapped market, ripe with innovative, tech-savvy, energetic young people that could become a sustainable pipeline of talent. To keep pace with 21st century challenges such as baby boomer retirement, rapid technological change and global competition, companies must think creatively about human capital strategies and management. These young people represent a real opportunity.

Many companies have already started building opportunity youth pipelines, and while the initial motivation to do so varies, the positive outcomes are similar. Following is a discussion of the benefits companies have experienced in employing opportunity youth.

Generate Revenue

The success of CVS Caremark is a great example of what can be achieved when businesses think outside the box in sourcing talent. CVS Caremark is the largest pharmacy healthcare provider in the United States and employs approximately 200,000 people. CVS has created an industry-based career pathway that enables at-risk youth and others in need of marketable skills to build a long-term relationship with the

Available at http://www.iff.org/sites/default/files/publications/DollarsSense_052510v3.pdf



company.¹² The career ladder begins with entry level positions, such as pharmacy technicians, schedulers, and customer services associates. In 1997, CVS acquired Revco Discount Drug Stores and with it, a welfare-to-career program that was used as guidance in building the youth pathway. The program was created specifically to access populations, such as opportunity youth, that are too often invisible to employers.

Like many successful employer programs, CVS had strong leadership at the helm to drive development, implementation, evaluation, and growth of the disadvantaged youth pathway program.

Since the program's inception, 80,000 employees have been hired and many are still on a career path with the company. With this program, CVS has found a way to source new talent, and it has become a competitive advantage for them. In fiscal year 2009, CVS reported a \$2.9 million investment in its Workforce Initiatives program, which generated \$36 million in income. This came from federal, state, and local tax credits and rate reductions received for offering job training to disadvantaged job seekers and for opening stores in economically depressed communities.⁵ CVS now includes in its profit and loss statements a line for the Work Opportunity Tax Credit (discussed in more detail below). The company has already experienced decreased turnover and the revenue generated is being reinvested in the program.

Long time CVS Caremark CEO Stephen M. Wing gave the following advice to companies who are looking to implement a similar program: "Start

small, incubate ideas, test these ideas, find internal champions for them and then let the champions roll out the program."¹³ Indeed, a key element present in similarly successful initiatives is the intentional training of employees to ensure understanding and buy-in about the purpose and components of the program.

Given the success of the campaign for an opportunity youth pathway, CVS intends to focus on diversity initiatives and ensuring that their staff demographics reflect the communities where they have stores. David L. Casey, CVS Caremark's Vice President of Workforce Strategies and Diversity noted, "Diversity management makes good business sense and good common sense. Our industry today is rapidly changing and increasingly complex. In this environment, having a broad range of ideas and viewpoints through a diverse workforce increases our chances of success with our customers, clients, patients, and communities."¹⁴

Build Community Support and Brand Recognition

As the in-house program at CVS grew, sales in urban centers where the program was employing youth increased and a survey conducted in 2011 in eight major markets indicated that consumers chose to shop at CVS because it was a "good company" that was providing jobs in their communities.¹⁵ Why does this matter? Consumers value companies who care about and invest in communities. In the age of social media and the 24 hour news cycle, average consumers have more market power

¹² Friedman, Dorian and John-Anthony Meza. "Why Companies Invest in 'Grow Your Own' Talent Development Models, Including a Tool for Calculating Return on Workforce Readiness Programs." *Corporate Voices for Working Families*. 2011, Online. Available at <http://adultcollegecompletion.org/sites/files/documents/corpVoicesROI.pdf>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ "Doing Good is also Good for Business." *CVS Caremark Survey Results*. Available at <http://gradsoflife.org/what-and-why/the-roi/>



than ever and sharing their experiences with a company can have vast impact on a company's reputation almost overnight. This then translates into gains or losses in the market.

Starbucks is an illustrative example of how ethical behavior boosts business. The world's largest coffee house chain has grown into one of the mostly highly respected businesses in the world, a feat not shared by many other companies of similar size. It has an almost cult-like following and has made the list of Most Admired Companies in the U.S., the 100 Best Companies to Work For, the 100 Best Corporate Citizens, the World's 50 Most Innovative Companies, and the World's Most Ethical Companies. Cutting edge programs in community service, supplier and employee diversity, environmental awareness, healthcare for part time workers, and youth innovation grants have contributed to a 2,200% increase in the company's stock over the past 10 years.

Youth Employment Network of West Africa (YEN) published a report in 2011 called *Building the Case for Business Collaboration on Youth Employment*, which highlights the financial and societal impact of connecting opportunity youth to work. In addition to increased GDP and growing foreign investment, countries like Mali have experienced crime reduction and increased student success in school.¹⁶ In Dakar, Senegal, business leaders serve as mentors to young entrepreneurs and provide business insights or even start-up capital. In Ghana, Google has entered into a partnership with Technoserve to offer a business planning competition for Ghanaian youth. The winner of

the competition is offered start-up financing, while the other finalists receive business consulting and mentoring support.¹⁷ In addition to helping young people find jobs, the businesses who participated were highly regarded in their communities and many even received government or philanthropic subsidies to continue the innovative work.

Mold the Workforce

In 2013, The Work Foundation at Lancaster University in the United Kingdom published *The Missing Million Paper 3: The employer's role in tackling youth unemployment*. The Missing Million Programme has released three reports to date, all focused on engaging the private sector by making the business case for hiring opportunity youth. The Missing Million Programme aims to reconnect one million youth per year using the strategies outlined in the publications. One component of the research was a survey of 15,000 employers of various sizes in a wide range of industries in the United Kingdom.

In response to the survey questions concerning benefits employers experience from hiring opportunity youth, the most common response (34% of employers surveyed) was the "ability to mold" the new hire into the type of employee sought.¹⁸ A medium-sized services employer in Doncaster, UK noted, "We train them the way we want them to be – to use our systems and processes... I'd much prefer to see a young person grow into the role than take on someone institutionalised and dulled from

¹⁶ Gardiner, Drew and Robert Drew (Editor). "Building the Case for Business Collaboration on Youth Employment." *Youth Employment Network Office for West Africa (YEN)*. 2011, Online. Available at http://www.ilo.org/public/english/employment/yen/downloads/psi/the_business_case_for_ye.pdf

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Cominetti, Nye, Paul Sissons and Katy Jones. "Beyond the business case: The employer's role in tackling youth Unemployment." *Missing Million Programme, The Work Foundation*. July 2013, Online. Available at http://www.theworkfoundation.com/DownloadPublication/Report/336_Employer's%20Role%20FINAL%2020July%202013.pdf



somewhere else.”¹⁹ Employers in the survey indicated that after a few cycles of youth hiring, a large subset of the workforce had been trained and possessed the same general skill set. This made for efficient operations and continuity.

Enthusiasm was identified as the second most common benefit of hiring young people (30%), and willingness to learn was the third (20%). A small employer in London felt that opportunity youth would be even more eager and willing to learn than the average young person, due in part to being grateful for the job opportunity and the challenges they had overcome. Young people can bring excitement, flexibility, and innovative thinking to a company. Technology savvy and social media expertise were also noted as compelling advantages to hiring opportunity youth. Unlike the other benefits, this skill set is easy to quantify, but the value also varies more by sector and firm.

Infuse Skills and Energy

The opportunity youth population possesses skills and characteristics that can positively contribute to the workplace. In effective opportunity youth pathways, employers have realized the impact these specific employees can make, by honing in on where they can add value immediately. As mentioned above, many employers value the fact that young people often bring strong digital literacy skills to the work place. “Young people are more tech savvy. They are faster at getting used to our in-house systems. We need our employees to use multiple different systems at the same time, so the speed new recruits learn the system is important.”²⁰ Indeed, there are many potential benefits and savings associated with hiring

someone with a built-in technology skills set. Young people are also capable of sharing IT knowledge that they use every day with other employees who may not be as comfortable with it. Technology plays a tremendous role in a company’s image, recruiting process and marketing structure. Young people are adept at using social media tools and could become involved in this aspect of the company’s operations with minimal training. They may also have new ideas about how their employer can better use technology to improve sales, branding and recruiting.

In addition to this specific skill set, opportunity youth possess a portfolio of other traits that make them desirable employees. In general, companies have found that the risk incurred by hiring opportunity youth was well worth it, because of many of the ‘intangibles’ that fuel every day operations. Young people are high energy and company morale goes up as a result of young people contributing. The teaching and learning exchange between employees and the new hires is healthy and highly valued by most employers. Compared to other young people of the same age who may have had a more linear path, possess a credential, etc., opportunity youth were notably hard working, resilient and adept at facing personal and professional challenges. Cascade Engineering, a Grand Rapids, Michigan company featured below, noted that the Welfare to Career (W2C) program hires were extremely grateful for their jobs and were more likely to become long term employees. This has saved the company thousands of dollars in turnover, recruiting, and training costs.²¹ Companies with similar models have realized that opportunity youth become capable and loyal employees.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Bradley, James R. “Bridging the Cultures of Business and Poverty” *A Case Study, Stanford Social*

Innovation Review. Spring 2003. Available at http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/bridging_the_cultures_of_business_and_poverty



Increase Diversity

In the fierce competition of an increasingly global economy, many firms are investing large amounts of labor and capital on initiatives to increase diversity. Indeed, a workforce that reflects a diverse customer base is often a key component of a thriving business model. The opportunity youth population represents an extremely diverse talent pool of ethnicities, languages, religions, and income brackets. A diverse workforce is often most important to those industries with a high level of customer/consumer contact, such as healthcare and hospitality. For companies who are committed to diversity but are not yet connected to the opportunity youth population, a specific initiative focused on opportunity youth is a chance to frame the approach and get started. For companies who are already hiring opportunity youth, a diversity initiative could be the next step in growing career pathways and ensuring that the workforce is representative of the community served.

Supporting Employers of Disconnected Youth

While some employers can recognize value and returns on hiring young people for a variety of reasons, a major drawback or hesitation can be the lack of work experience or education among this population. Thus, employers need a set of supports and tools to help them deal with both anticipated and unanticipated challenges of employing disconnected youth. The following section describes a variety of supports for employers of opportunity youth and highlights some promising examples of these supports in action.

Trusted Intermediaries

Intermediaries play a critical brokering role among opportunity youth, employers, educators, and the community. They facilitate information sharing and other communications that bridge the gap between jobs and talent and then help provide the support structure

necessary for all parties involved.

Intermediaries perform two critical functions in connecting opportunity youth and employers:

- **Provide Access.** Part of what defines the opportunity youth population is a lack of access to education and the labor market. A direct consequence of this lack of access is the absence of a network to rely on to learn about job postings, skills needed, or supports available. “Word of mouth” rarely reaches the opportunity youth population and the language of job postings often screens them out. Intermediaries can guide young adults in the search for jobs and share knowledge of industry needs. Some organizations hold “mixer” events, which youth and employers attend. This provides a controlled, facilitated introduction between the two groups and helps young people build their network. Helping employers understand how these young people access information is also key. Because youth rely heavily on social media, intermediaries can provide employers with the tools needed to use platforms like Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter to post jobs. Finally, intentionally crafting job postings in ways that encourage opportunity youth applicants is a critical final step. Considering whether requirements for specific credentials or experience are truly necessary, or whether they unnecessarily screen out opportunity youth candidates, is another example of how a good intermediary can help employers.
- **“De-Risk” the Hire.** Intermediaries with expertise working with opportunity youth and their challenges can also help employers to offset the relative – real or perceived -- “risk” involved with hiring opportunity youth. Trusted intermediaries can help the employer with orientation and on-boarding of new employees, preparing youth before they begin work. Intermediaries can also help employers to



address other issues that might arise or must be managed after hiring. If employers know that a capable organization will be handling some of the training, support, data tracking, etc., it can better enable them to integrate the youth into their workforce without a crippling time commitment or unrealistic learning curve.

In Denver, Colorado, a training subsidy designed to “reduce the burden of employee recruitment and additional costs on payroll”²² is available to employers of all sizes. The subsidy provides a minimum of 50% of qualifying hires’ wages for up to six months. In addition to the subsidy, the Denver Office of Economic Development pre-screens candidates to ensure they match position requirements and provides support services to the employees during the entire placement period. Pre-screening includes drug tests, remedial literacy and numeracy training and job-readiness skills. The program began as a pilot and has been made permanent. What sets this program apart is that it is administered at the city level and combines a wage subsidy, pre-screening, and support during employment into a comprehensive services package for the employer and the worker.

In Grand Rapids, Michigan, Cascade Engineering’s innovative and socially conscious Welfare to Career (or W2C) Model has attracted national attention and is the subject of countless case studies and presentations. Championed by former CEO Fred Keller since its inception in 1999, the company has invested significant resources to train and mentor employees in-house. The company hires youth and adults and trains them on life skills, basic literacy and numeracy and company culture. All Cascade employees undergo the same orientation and training, including diversity awareness and “Hidden Rules” training based

on the book *Hidden Rules of the Middle Class* by Ruby Payne. This programming bridges the gap between cultures and creates a new, unified workplace cohesion that increases retention and satisfaction overall. However, the company’s leadership notes that the primary reason for the success of the program is the role played by the case manager.

The Source, a non-profit employee support organization in Grand Rapids, assigns a case manager to Cascade to provide support and guidance for the variety of challenges that the incoming workers face – both at work and at home. This person maintains close relationships with employees as they move through the hiring and training process. The case manager conducts interviews, assists workers with paperwork and develops resource assistance plans including financial assistance, transportation logistics, child care, and mental health counseling. Over the years, the program progressed and grew in size and Cascade realized the tremendous role that the case manager played. The case manager is now located on-site, five days a week and serves several other area manufacturers, which equates to approximately 100 clients. What makes the case manager so valuable is her vast network of connections. When a problem arises, she knows who to reach out to and can provide a tailored solution quickly.

One of the key needs that emerged for the company’s young workers was reliable transportation. The company and the Source had a working relationship with the Grand Rapids transportation authority and are working to add an additional bus route from downtown to the plant for the third shift. Several other examples of intermediaries working with transit authorities on transportation issues exist around the country. This is an example of a

²² Training Subsidies. *Denver Office of Economic Development*. 2014, Online. Available at <https://www.denvergov.org/oed/DenverOfficeofEconomicDevelopment/WorkforceDevelopment/ForEmployers/TrainingSubsidies/tabid/435868/Default.aspx>

<https://www.denvergov.org/oed/DenverOfficeofEconomicDevelopment/WorkforceDevelopment/ForEmployers/TrainingSubsidies/tabid/435868/Default.aspx>



fundamental problem – the ability to get to work - for which an effective intermediary can provide a solution.

Employer Toolkits

In 2012, a toolkit titled, *Connecting Youth and Business, A Toolkit for Employers*, was created by Gap Inc. with the support of McKinsey & Company, Corporate Voices for Working Families, and the Taproot Foundation.²³ The toolkit is a call to action encouraging employers to take a more active role in employing opportunity youth.

Employers are unlikely to actively engage with a population they don't know or for whom they hold negative perceptions. Employers often feel they do not have the resources or expertise to employ opportunity youth. This and other similar toolkits were created to help employers bridge this gap of experience and confidence. They provide employers with step by step guidance for recruiting, hiring, training, and retaining disconnected young people. *Connecting Youth and Business, A Toolkit for Employers* describes how employers of all sizes can provide disconnected youth with the skills needed for employment and adulthood and includes a list of resources that can be used for training and supporting young people throughout the process.

Combined with the personalized support and community networks brought by an intermediary (as noted above), an employer toolkit can be a powerful way to help support employers and their existing workforce in taking full advantage of the potential of opportunity youth.

²³ Supra note 3, page 5. "Connecting Youth and Business, A Toolkit for Employers."

²⁴ "Disconnected Youth: Federal Action Could Address Some of the Challenges Faced by Local Programs That Reconnect Youth to Education and

Financial Incentives

FEDERAL RESOURCES

The major funding agencies for opportunity youth activities, according to the Government Accountability Office of the United States, include the Departments of Labor, Health & Human Services, Education, and Justice. Together, these four departments and their many agencies invest billions of dollars each year in reconnecting youth.²⁴ Immediate financial benefits can be realized for employers hiring and/or training certain subsets of the population, including opportunity youth.

- **Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC)** is a Federal tax credit available to employers for hiring individuals from certain target groups who have consistently faced significant barriers to employment.²⁵ Target groups include veterans, ex-felons, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Food Stamp (SNAP) recipients, and designated community residents living in "empowerment zones," particularly summer youth employees. Empowerment zones are designated as such because of population size, pervasive poverty, and general distress. While opportunity youth are not a specific target group for WOTC, many opportunity youth qualify for the tax credit in one of the other categories. Three of the most common features of the opportunity youth population in this country are that they have a criminal history (ex-felon), are TANF recipients, or live in an "empowerment zone." In 2012 and 2013, the average federal tax credit under WOTC was at least \$1,500 per

Employment". *United States Government Accountability Office*. 2008. 08-313.

²⁵ Work Opportunity Tax Credit. *Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration*. Updated October 28, 2014. Available at <http://www.doleta.gov/business/incentives/opptax/eligible.cfm>.



employee. However, because of the narrowly written qualifying categories, WOTC has served as more of a resource for larger companies. Since WOTC is written for “out of school and out of work” target groups, young people who do not fall into one of those groups do not qualify. Large companies who hire more opportunity youth can cover the cost of the whole program, even if only half of the hires qualify. Larger companies are also better equipped to dedicate staff time and resources to doing the training in house. Many large companies like CVS have received millions of dollars of benefits for their programs. Small and medium sized companies may not think it is worth the time and paperwork to investigate tax credits available to them, but with easier access to information and the support of local government agencies, more may realize the tax credits can significantly offset hiring costs. While the WOTC is currently operating on a year to year extension cycle pending congressional reauthorization, it is important to note that all components of the act are fully functional and reporting requirements remain the same. “Similar to the 2014 hiatus period, and specifically in the 2015 hiatus period, states can accept applications for new employees in the current WOTC target groups hired on or after WOTC Program Guidance January 7, 2015.”²⁶

- **Workforce Investment Act (WIA) dollars targeted to serve youth** and accessed through local workforce agencies and state initiatives are another example of federal resources available to employers. WIA defined eligible youth as 14-21 years of age with one or more of six barriers to education and work. The intent was to help youth access education and good jobs. On July 22, 2014, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) was signed into law and replaced WIA. The new WIOA will continue to provide employers with funding and programs to encourage employment of opportunity youth. In fact, WIOA greatly increases the proportion of youth funding that must be used to serve out-of-school youth and allows eligibility up to age 24.

Notable changes in WIOA regarding opportunity youth²⁷:

1. Increases youth funding to serve out-of-school youth from 30% to 75%.
2. Shifts and expands age range for qualifying youth from 14-21 to 16-24.
3. Restores Governor’s 15% discretionary fund.
4. Emphasizes career pathways and sector strategies.

²⁶ WOTC Program Guidance, January 7, 2015. *IRS, Work Opportunity Tax Credit Extended*. Available at http://www.doleta.gov/business/incentives/opptax/PDF/InterimInstructions_2014Reauthorization_2015Hiatus.pdf

²⁷ Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. *Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration*. Updated December 11, 2014. Available at <http://www.doleta.gov/wioa/>.



STATE RESOURCES

In addition to federal programs, many states have training or wage subsidies that offer \$1,000-\$5,000 for each qualifying employee hired. Opportunity youth are a designated category for some states, and often qualify in other eligibility categories as discussed above.

- **Broad tax incentives.** In Pennsylvania, employers can take advantage of Employee Incentive Payments (EIP) and Welfare to Work tax credits for hiring job seekers with barriers to employment. Both programs target welfare recipients. Both programs are broadly written and have served many opportunity youth, requiring only a one page application from employers. Washington State, California, Georgia and South Carolina have similar programs. These programs have the potential to help support industry in hiring opportunity youth, but employers must be aware of the programs and feel capable of managing the processes involved in order to take advantage them. While federal and state resources are available and can be used concurrently, state subsidies and incentives are often more accessible for small and medium size employers.
- **Targeted training subsidies.** In New York State, there are a variety of incentives for businesses who hire and train specific categories of workers. The NY Youth Works Program encourages businesses to hire unemployed, disadvantaged youth, ages 16 to 24, who live in specific areas.²⁸ The program has been extremely successful and was re-authorized yearly until 2012 when the Governor extended it to December 21, 2018. Businesses can receive up to \$5,000 per eligible full-time youth hire and up to \$2,500 for part time hires.

²⁸ New York Youth Works, Career Services. *New York State, Department of Labor*. Available at

Key aspects of NY Youth Works that make this state program a model:

1. The subsidy is generous – higher than most state programs, and includes full and part time hires.
2. Employers receive “bonuses” when the hire reaches the six month and two year marks of retention with the company (\$1,000 for full time hires and \$500 for part time).
3. The process for qualifying and enrolling is simple and fast. Businesses fill out a brief online application, receive email approval and subsequent notifications when applications come in from the centralized state job bank.

Work-Based Strategies to Engage Opportunity Youth

A key strategy for connecting opportunity youth with long-term work opportunities is the use of interim, work-based programs that help introduce youth to the world of work. Work-based strategies aimed at opportunity youth are varied and dynamic. This section focuses on some critical strategies that show promise and/or a proven track record in helping reconnect opportunity youth, with a specific focus on internships, civic engagement, and earn and learn programs. Work-based programs and strategies have long been an important part of connection and/or reconnection to the workforce for many Americans. In general, these programs are based on a goal of workforce connection, with a mix of supports that help mitigate various challenges. Supports include funding, human capital, logistics, and basic wraparound services. They are an essential component of any work-based strategy.

For the purposes of this paper, we focus on three program types: (1) internships; (2) civic engagement; and (3) earn and learn

<https://labor.ny.gov/careerservices/youth-tax-credit.shtm>



opportunities. What is missing from this list is the use of apprenticeships, once a standard tool used in many professions throughout the United States, and now a model of workforce development in Europe. Because of the enormous impact and potential of apprenticeships, that programming is fully addressed in a separate paper in this series (Expanding Youth Apprenticeships in the United States: Engaging Employers and Improving Alignment to Build on Success by Dorian Friedman).

Using Internships for Opportunity Youth

The use of internships as a method for reconnecting youth is a relatively novel idea. Generally speaking, internships are largely seen as a mechanism available for undergraduate college students, despite evidence that many populations benefit from this form of employment opportunity. Nationally, internships are a valuable experience for the interns, with 51.2% of all college internships transitioning into full time employment (based on offers from employers to 64.8% of their interns).²⁹ Employers can create these same kinds of opportunities for the opportunity youth population.

Successful internship programs for opportunity youth have reflected the needs of both interns and employers. The following examples include thoughtful considerations that benefit both the intern and the bottom line for the employer.

The Young Adult Internship Program (YAIP) of New York City is specifically designed to help nearly 165,000 young adults, aged 16-24, in

New York City reconnect with employment and/or education. With \$17 million in funding from the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) over two years, the program targets disconnected youth who have at least a sixth grade reading level. YAIP focuses on interventions to help opportunity youth find the right resources necessary for them to reconnect. The program is structured in 14 week cycles and measures, among other components, two key outcomes: the number of opportunity youth who have completed the internship and the number of opportunity youth who have thereafter reconnected by getting a job or enrolling in school.³⁰

Participants were recruited by 15 community-based organizations spread across all five boroughs of New York City. Social media, traditional fliers, and word of mouth were key recruitment strategies. After an initial orientation phase, participants were placed in internship worksites based on their existing skills, abilities, and interests. YAIP recruited employers from a variety of industries that represent logical worksites where low-skilled youth can begin developing skills, including restaurants, retail stores, senior centers, community organizations, auto repair shops, hospitals, child care centers, telecommunication companies, and public agencies.³¹

In an analysis of the program, 99.3% of the participants were placed in internships after completing orientation and all of them completed the internship.

²⁹ Koc, Edwin W. "2014 Internship and Co-op Survey Executive Summary." *National Association of Colleges and Employers*. April, 2014. Available at <http://www.naceweb.org/uploadedFiles/Content/static-assets/downloads/executive-summary/2014-internship-co-op-survey-executive-summary.pdf>

³⁰ "Young Adult Internship Program: A Program of the New York City Department of Youth and

Community Development Program Review Summary". *Center for Economic Opportunity*. Available at

http://www.nyc.gov/html/ceo/downloads/pdf/yaip_prr.pdf

³¹ Ibid.



Urban Alliance in Washington, D.C., operates a youth internship program funded by foundations and the employers who host the interns. Although participants are not, strictly speaking, disconnected “opportunity youth,” they are deemed at-risk. Baltimore and D.C. employers contribute \$10,000 and \$12,500 respectively per intern. The program includes intensive case management, mentorship, and pre-work training prior to placement in a roughly three-week internship.³² Despite the tight structure and design, there are several opportunities for attrition within the program. Because participants must complete significant pre-work activities and goals, getting placed in an actual internship takes considerable effort. Less than 80% of applicants are accepted; of those who participate, just over 50% complete

pre-work training. However, among those who complete all of the pre-work training, nearly 85% are ultimately placed in a job.

In addition to the large numbers of young people impacted by these internship programs, the programs themselves are designed with effective strategies to engage employers -- a critical element to any work-based strategy. The Urban Alliance approach reflected demonstrable commitment from employers willing to make a financial investment in the program. Some employers have acknowledged the positive impact the interns have had on the organizational bottom line. For youth, these internships provide a way to make money, gain valuable work experience that can be reflected in resumes, and builds workplace skills.

Key Aspects of Internship Programs:

1. Internship programs should be highly organized and designed, including position descriptions, short- and long-term goals, and explicit expectations of the intern.
2. Creative tools should be used to help ease employers into the internship arena, including using intermediary organizations to manage internship programs, handle payroll and employment issues, and other related challenges when necessary.
3. Obtain buy-in for the internship program from key leaders in the organization to ensure a smooth on-boarding and transition period for all of those involved in the program.

Civic Engagement as a Means for Reconnection

Civic engagement has long been used as a way to effectively involve youth from all walks of life in matters important in their communities and includes things such as voting, serving on public boards or offices, and doing volunteer work. There is relatively little research that makes the case for civic engagement as a means to improving the economic prosperity of youth. The research that does exist, however, is compelling and helps build the case for using

these kinds of strategies to address both civic apathy and youth disconnection.

Civic engagement for opportunity youth mimics the activities often found in work-based strategies, including internships and earn and learn programs. At the youth level, the focus tends to be less on activities like voting, and more on volunteer-based options that require training, planning, and longer-term commitments. These civic engagement activities require opportunity youth to develop

³² Theodos, Brett, et al. “Preparing Youth for College and Career: A Process Evaluation of Urban Alliance”. *Urban Institute*. 2014.



skills that are required for success within any workplace setting.

A 2014 report from Opportunity Nation highlighted data that supports these assertions. First, youth who participate in civic engagement activities are less likely than non-engaged peers to disconnect from school and the workforce.³³ The research also showed drastic differences in disconnection for different populations of low-income youth. For African American youth, the likelihood of disconnection without volunteering is nearly 28%; the likelihood of disconnection with volunteering efforts is only 17.8%. Similar data was presented for low-income Hispanic and white youth.³⁴

Youth Participation in Evaluation and Research authors Nygreen, Kwon, and Sanchez describe civic engagement projects as opportunities to develop trusting relationships and to strengthen relationships with adults that are seen as allies. In an analysis of three different youth-led projects, the researchers identified positive outcomes for urban youth who participate in civic-based projects that mimic interactions in the workplace. In particular, these kinds of projects help establish positive relationships with authority figures. In civic engagement

projects that are youth-led, relationship barriers are addressed and mitigated, an important result “because wider societal power relations between adults and youth...are well established”.³⁵

In *Critical Civic Engagement Among Urban Youth*, Kirshner, Strobel, and Fernandez identify the positive results of a community based project that positioned youth participants as researchers who could help identify and impact social and community problems that these youth wanted to fix.³⁶ Empowering youth to solve problems that require critical thinking helps build the kinds of skills they will need in to employ in the workplace.

The results of this research shouldn’t be seen as anecdotal or isolated. Instead, the research highlights the opportunity to create work-based experiences for opportunity youth, especially in instances where employer engagement may be lacking or financial resources are limited. These kinds of program options also shouldn’t be treated primarily as a way to get free labor. Youth volunteers, whether or not they are disconnected or at-risk, should feel that their efforts are linked to real issues and meaningful work.

This research highlights the kind of meaningful experiences that civic engagement work can provide and translates well on resumes because participants:

1. Develop strong teamwork skills, as well as the ability to negotiate and navigate relationships with those in authority positions.
2. Learn how to develop a meaningful connection to their work, helping with productivity, loyalty, and sustained efforts in a paid position.
3. Have the opportunity to build networks beyond their existing social circles.

³³ “Connecting Youth and Strengthening Communities: The Data Behind Civic Engagement and Economic Opportunity”. *Opportunity Nation*. September 2014. Available at <http://opportunitynation.org/app/uploads/2014/09/Opportunity-Nation-Civic-Engagement-Report-2014.pdf>

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Nygreen, Kysa, Kwon, Soo A., & Sanchez, Patricia. “Youth Participation in Evaluation and Research”. 2006. DOI: 10.1300/J125v14n01_07

³⁶ Kirshner, Ben, Strobel, Karen, & Fernandez, Maria. “Critical Civic Engagement Among Urban Youth”. *Perspectives on Urban Education*. 2003. 2(1).



Earn and Learn Programs

Earn and learn programs combine an opportunity to earn a credential and obtain some form of paid employment. Generally speaking, they provide a structure and strong case management to support the youth being served. Two different program designs illustrate the benefits of this approach.

The National Guard Youth ChalleNGe program has served more than 100,000 participants since its inception in the 1990s. It focuses on opportunity youth through a 17-month engagement that uses a military approach as part of a 3-stage program. The program is considered highly successful as an intervention for youth who need significant help reconnecting with the workforce and educational systems.³⁷

The 22-week residential program begins with a two-week assessment phase that could be described as a psychological and cognitive boot camp. From there, the participants complete a 20-weeks of programming on soft skill development, civic engagement, personal responsibility, and physical fitness. During this time, participants can also earn their GED or high school diploma through highly structured educational programs. Following the 22-week residential component, the “cadets” enter a year-long offsite placement in employment, school, or the military. This phase includes intensive mentoring and case management in order to support and monitor youth progression and development.

The ChalleNGe program operates in more than 25 states across the country and is funded annually through Congressional appropriations that cover about 75% of total expenses, while

states pick up the remaining 25% of the \$14,000 per participant cost.³⁸

A three-year evaluation led by MDRC found that ChalleNGe participants were more likely to obtain a GED or a high school diploma, and earn college credits than opportunity youth who were not in the program. They also had higher to be employment rates and earned 20% higher wages than their non-participating peers.³⁹

The Michigan-based earn and learn program operated in Flint, Saginaw and Detroit uses a unique funding model that increased employer engagement by de-risking the investment made by employers. This program was specifically designed for at-risk individuals with one or more factors that could contribute to future disconnection. The model integrated elements of career pathways as part of the delivery mechanism for participants, and combined funding from the private philanthropic community, federal workforce development and state resources to provide a platform for employer engagement that wouldn’t have occurred otherwise. While an analysis of the program is still in progress, initial results show high success rates for program participants. For example, in Flint, 85% of participants at Mott Community College were considered active, 80% had achieved a credential, and 97% had been placed into employment.⁴⁰ The results of this type of earn and learn model clearly have positive implications for the opportunity youth community since the same model could be applied to programs focused specifically on this population.

³⁷ Millenky, Megan, et al. “Staying On Course: Three-Year Results of the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Evaluation”. MDRC. June 2011.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ “Earn and Learn Program Implementation Report for the C.S. Mott Foundation”. *Corporation for a Skilled Workforce*. February 2014.



Dimensions of Disconnection - Youth and Employers

Work-based learning strategies and employer supports impact, in various ways, nearly every dimension of disconnection noted earlier in this paper with the exception of incarceration and/or broken family structures, which may require different supports. However, because opportunity youth generally face more than one dimension of disconnection, most individuals in this population will still benefit from a work-based strategy and/or employer supports. In addition, these strategies help to mitigate common barriers and help individuals navigate and manage relationships which they may have never encountered before.

The following table lists each dimension of disconnection referenced in this paper alongside the appropriate intervention(s) or support(s) that can mitigate that dimension. As is evident in the table, both youth and employers need robust information, access and support to successfully access and work with each other.

The table reflects areas of potential alignment between the dimensions of youth and employer disconnection and successful or promising approaches, including: internships, civic engagement, and earn and learn models; as well as the use of trusted intermediaries, employer toolkits, and financial incentives.

Dimensions of Disconnection			
Youth Disconnection	Internships	Civic Engagement	Employer Toolkits
History of physical and/or mental abuse		X	X
Limited access to postsecondary education	X	X	X
No career guidance or career navigation skills	X		X
Few job opportunities	X	X	X
Inadequate job seeking skills	X		X
Limited networks for job search	X	X	X
Few positive adult mentors and role models	X	X	X
Inadequate work readiness skills	X	X	X
Living in poverty	X	X	X
Recently released from incarceration		X	X
Employer Disconnection	Trusted Intermediaries	Employer Toolkits	Financial Incentives
Unfamiliar with this demographic	X		
Not interested in hiring	X	X	X
Negative stereotypes about these young people	X		
Not sure how to recruit this population	X	X	
Unfamiliar with training programs	X	X	X
Do not see any benefit to hiring from this group	X	X	X
Do not feel ownership of the problem	X		X
Internal hiring barriers		X	X
OK as is			X
Unwilling to take risks	X	X	X



These dimensions comprise a powerful narrative about the work ahead for policy makers, funders, practitioners, employers, and opportunity youth. The examples highlighted throughout this paper represent strategies and activities undertaken by various groups to address these issues, either explicitly or implicitly, on behalf of opportunity youth and employers. Because the scale of youth disconnection is seemingly overwhelming and certainly complex, programs that consider ways to impact both youth and employer disconnections will be most successful in meeting the needs of both youth and employers.

Recommendations for Action

Our research has led to recommendations from two perspectives: strategies to directly engage and impact opportunity youth, and strategies to directly engage and support employers. Within these strategies we incorporate the role of intermediary organizations in multiple approaches. Policy makers and practitioners should see their work as part of all of these recommendations.

Connect Opportunity Youth to Employment

- **Integrate infrastructure and services** on the front lines of support for opportunity youth. This includes One-Stops, social services agencies, community colleges, juvenile justice personnel and other critical partners. Increased communication and teamwork will result in a tighter network around this population and increase awareness of their needs. Young people are more likely to go somewhere or to someone that they trust, and if no one knows what they need and they do not know help is available, there is a continued disconnect.
- **Adapt services available to disconnected adults/long-term unemployed** to the opportunity youth population. Free or subsidized literacy, numeracy, ESL programs

available to returning veterans, long term unemployed or those with a criminal history could be expanded to opportunity youth. Short term, subsidized training programs, including fast track credentials for high demand jobs, would benefit opportunity youth as well.

- **Track progress.** In order to sustain and expand the success and funding of opportunity youth programs, rigorous data collection must be a priority. Demonstrating the financial return that employers get when hiring opportunity youth and tracking lower crime statistics in a community where young people have access to school and work are just two examples of the value of reliable and widely shared data.
- **Talk to disconnected youth.** In order to help young people succeed, policy makers need to understand the details of their circumstances. Many of the challenges discussed in this report cannot be fully understood from a distance. A youth council at the city, state or national level would serve to engage the youth of a community, demonstrate that policy makers value their contributions, and help ensure that their needs are being met.
- **Connect internships and civic engagement.** Because earn and learn models are traditionally flexible in their design and implementation, local agencies could experiment with combining work-based strategies into one earn and learn program, using internships and civic engagement opportunities as components of a robust, comprehensive work-based approach. Further, the connection of these kinds of activities can lead to innovative credentialing opportunities for this population. A “badge” or mini-credential certifying that an opportunity youth has completed an internship or civic engagement work can be meaningful on a



resume if employers value it and know to look for it.

- **Promote access to employers** by educating young people on how and where to search for jobs, and how to capture and communicate skills and achievements to employers, even if they are obtained through non-traditional school or work. Schools and community organizations can host events that bring industry and opportunity youth together for job fairs, internship opportunities or civic engagement activities.

Connect Employers to Opportunity Youth

- **Build and distribute toolkits** to employers interested in building a pathway for opportunity youth at their companies. Toolkits should be adaptable or tailored for various industries and employer sizes. Ensure these toolkits provide employers the tangible steps necessary to begin or continue and grow an opportunity youth pipeline that suits their needs and the community.
- **Use Tax Incentives and/or Wage and Training Subsidies** to invest in the training and hiring of opportunity youth. The federal government, states, and some cities offer a variety of financial incentives to cover the costs of recruiting and on boarding, and employers can guide the selection and training process as well. State agencies and non-profits will assist employers with paperwork and reporting for program and tax purposes. Further, the reauthorized workforce investment act, WIOA, provides opportunities in the next several years to rethink how federal support can better serve youth and adults in obtaining skills, employer-valued credentials, and jobs. As WIOA implementation phases in during 2015-2016, this source should be recognized as a vital tool for employers.
- **Use Intermediaries and Support Organizations** to recruit, hire, train and

support opportunity youth. It is critical for employers to be aware of the intermediaries in their community and what services are offered. Intermediary organizations can provide the framework to engage employers with opportunity youth through informal and formal mentoring.

- **Incent Development of Internship Programs**, which employers often see as risky and unpredictable both in terms of time and financial commitment. These concerns are heightened with respect to opportunity youth. Accordingly, supports, resources, and infrastructure are needed to better enable employers to become part of long-term internship programs. Strategies that help incentivize employer engagement and/or strategies that acknowledge employer engagement should be developed and supported.
- **Think creatively** about funding streams and make opportunity youth a policy priority when new funding opportunities arise. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014 provides an apparatus for growing opportunity youth programs. The increased focus on career pathways, industry sector partnerships, and credential attainment presents opportunities to leverage resources for the opportunity youth population. More importantly, the new law designates 75% of funds for serving “out of school youth” and adjusts and expands the definition of youth from 14-21 to 16-24 years old. Finally, the Governor’s discretionary fund (15%) has been restored. Perhaps this is an avenue to fund youth councils or other state-wide initiatives.
- **Use technology to access opportunity youth** when posting job opportunities. By thinking creatively about vacancy announcements and job posting language, employers can increase their exposure to young people. Being diligent about using



multiple platforms to advertise for positions, employers increase the chance of reaching opportunity youth. LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter and online news sources represent some of the most popular means of information consumption for youth.

- ***Use intentional job posting to access opportunity youth.*** Often, opportunity youth are unintentionally screened out by the language in job postings. Some entry level positions do not require a specific credential or set of skills. Leading employers have begun to actively include language to target opportunity youth. These postings include preferences such as, “looking to build skills” or “no experience required.”

