



We Know What Needs to Be Done

Lessons from 40 Years and an Agenda for the Future

Donald B. Spangler & Thomas C. Showalter (November 2019)

About the National Youth Employment Coalition

Since 1979, the National Youth Employment Coalition has been strengthening youth-serving organizations and advancing policy solutions for at-risk young people. We do this by improving the effectiveness of the organizations, and the systems, that serve young people. We collect, study, and support the implementation of best practices, all with a strong equity focus. NYEC conducts four kinds of activities to advance this mission:

1. NYEC keeps the field up to date on recent innovations in practice and the latest research on service models.
2. NYEC builds its members' capacity on two levels: professional development for youth workers and organizational development for agencies.
3. NYEC serves as a unique line of communication between practitioners and policy makers. NYEC regularly solicits the views of members on how policy affects their service to youth, conducts original analyses, and works with partners to advance policy solutions that move the youth-development field forward.
4. As an aggregator and curator of proven, emerging, and promising practices, NYEC promotes models supported by members and the research base.

Acknowledgements

This report is the product of many: Glenn Eagleson, NYEC Board Chair, advocated for a powerful statement of NYEC's principles and vision to commemorate its 40th Anniversary. A Publication Working Group including Rashaun Bennett, Kisha Bird, Bret Halverson, Linda Harris, Kevin Hickey, Kate O'Sullivan, Sally Prouty, Lori Strumpf, Johan Uvin, and Joan Wills defined the overall direction of this document and refined its vision and scope. Jen Hand edited the document. Cover photos feature a mural at the Maya Angelou Public Charter School in Washington, D.C.; staff of the Tumbleweed Center for Youth Development (now UMOM New Day Centers) in Phoenix, Arizona; and young people graduating from a Philadelphia Youth Network-funded program.

Suggested Citation

Spangler, Donald B. and Thomas C. Showalter. "We Know What Needs to Be Done: Lessons from 40 Years and An Agenda for the Future." National Youth Employment Coalition, 2019.

Copyright Creative Commons (cc) 2019


Notice of rights: This report has been published under a Creative Commons license. This work may be copied, redistributed, or displayed by anyone, provided that proper attribution is given and that the adaptation also carries a Creative Commons license. Commercial use of this work is disallowed.

Executive Summary

When NYEC's work began 40 years ago, young peoples' prospects for employment were declining and federal funding was under threat. Today, due largely to the efforts of NYEC and its partners, there is a well-established field of committed practitioners and policymakers who know what it takes to help young people succeed.

NYEC is a vibrant alliance of organizations across the country, grounded in the many grassroots organizations that we count as members. Given experience and composition, NYEC is uniquely positioned to be a convener, developer, and disseminator of solutions. NYEC will continue to build the field and advocate for solutions that work by:

- Convening practitioners and policymakers to assure that youth employment is a priority on federal, state, and local agendas;
- Changing systems to build better integrated, high-quality youth delivery systems;
- Apprising the field of bold, new proposals and preparing practitioners to take maximum advantage as legislative initiatives emerge;
- Elevating promising and proven practices, and translating these for policymakers;
- Leveraging NYEC's network to allow for scaling, innovation, and dissemination; and
- Modeling youth leadership and decision-making in NYEC's operations and throughout the NYEC network.



NYEC believes that every young person, regardless of race, gender, ability, or geography, has a right to education, training, and living-wage employment. We envision an America in which all youth and young adults are embraced, supported, and prepared to take their rightful places as thriving members of our economy and society.

What We Believe: Principles for Youth Employment

Our efforts are guided by principles that reflect the needs of today's young people.

Center Race and Gender Equity: Policies and programs must focus on race and gender explicitly, prioritize people of color for services, and be driven by people with lived experience.

Expand Opportunities for the Most Vulnerable: Policies must prioritize youth and young adults facing the most barriers to employment, adopt performance measures that encourage serving these young people, and reflect our deeper understanding of the effects of trauma.

Invest in Capacity Building and Local Decision-Making: Funders should provide sufficient resources to support strong local conveners or intermediaries, thriving local service ecosystems, and a healthy workforce of youth-serving professionals.

Co-Design Solutions with Young People: Youth voice and building youth leadership are at the heart of positive youth workforce development efforts. With training, support, and compensation, young people can be invaluable contributors and co-designers of programs and policies.

Prepare the Next Generation of Leaders: We must train and support a new generation of leaders. Additional resources are needed not only to expand services for the young people, but also to hire, train, and refine the work of the adults who deliver youth employment programming.

What Works to Prepare Young People for Success

Our experience has shown us practices and strategies, some tried and some new, that best support youth success.

Connect School and Work: Career-connected strategies like career academies drive improved academic attainment, better preparation for work, and increased earnings. Opportunities must also be provided for those who have fallen off their educational path to reengage, regardless of age.

Provide Early and High-Quality Work Experience: Early work experience provides exposure that broadens awareness and increases professional connections, strengthening young peoples' agency in future career decisions.

Create Connections to Caring Adults: Access to caring adults – family members, teachers, coaches, pastors, colleagues, and mentors – is critical for adolescent development and success in education and employment. Not only do caring adults increase employment opportunities, they support young peoples' resilience, mental health, and self-efficacy.

Prioritize Youth Voice, Empowerment, and Leadership: Evidence shows the benefits of co-creating programming with young people, tapping into their wisdom as practitioners or peer support workers, and empowering them as leaders, promotes academic and workplace success.

Implement Sectoral Employment Strategies: Training driven by industry sector needs and managed by community collaboratives helps young people master job requirements, successfully enter high-demand fields, and earn higher wages.

Adapt Lessons from Other Disciplines: Trauma-informed care, knowledge of adolescent brain development, and the restorative justice framework are enabling practitioners to build programs and services that help young people identify, remediate, and overcome challenges that hinder their success.

Develop Highly Trained Professionals: Even the best models and research-based approaches will mean little if they are not planned and managed by individuals who not only

care about young people, but also understand the importance of program management, evaluation, and accountability.

Looking Forward to a Future of Abundance

Advocacy on behalf of youth and young adults has never been more important.

We need a transformative federal investment that, guided by local decision-making, fulfills our promise to young adults. Guided by our principles, we can rebuild local infrastructure for high-quality service delivery, create an opening for new models of local decision-making and youth-adult partnership, and finally ensure that all young people have access to postsecondary education, work experience, and service.

One example of such a bold proposal is the Youth Opportunity Guarantee¹ framework proposed by Georgetown University's Center on Poverty and Inequality. The framework proposes a system guarantee which includes:

- High school or equivalent that prepares students for college and career;
- A range of postsecondary options that help lead to labor market success; and
- High-quality career training, national and community service, or employment.

Another direction are proposals related to infrastructure or the transition to a green economy. NYEC has been convening national organizations to ensure that young people are able to take advantage of large-scale legislative developments in this area.² Whatever the vehicle, NYEC will work with members and partners to create and advocate for solutions that match our obligation to young people.

Local practitioners and policy makers have always been the lifeblood of NYEC. The ideas, innovations, and breakthroughs of the people who do this work every day have helped to elevate the importance of youth employment, and to shape and strengthen the federal policy frameworks that help to support it.

Welcome to the next phase of NYEC's work. We hope you will join us.

Introduction: We Know What It Takes

*This is the future we are working toward: **All young people, regardless of race, gender, ability, orientation, or geography, have access to meaningful education, work, and service opportunities.** Whatever their personal circumstances, young people feel a sense of stability, continuity, and opportunity as they think about their future. In each community, a*

¹ Tatum, Laura, et al. "The Youth Opportunity Guarantee: A Framework for Success." Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2019. Available at www.georgetownpoverty.org/issues/employment/youth-opportunity-guarantee-framework.

² For more information, read legislative principles, and join this work, please visit https://nyec.org/green_economy/.

different combination of actors – K-12 schools, two- and four-year colleges, community- and faith-based organizations, intermediaries, city and county agencies, and youth-led decision-making bodies – work together to make this pathway to adulthood a reality. This ecosystem of institutions reflects and serves its community. It is well connected to the efforts of other communities around the country. In each community, the goal for young people is the same: A safe and stable pathway to adulthood, work, and civic life.

When NYEC's work began 40 years ago, young peoples' prospects for employment were declining and federal funding was under threat. Faced with these realities, the fledgling organization's founders issued a call to action:

- Everyone who wants to work should have the opportunity to do so;
- Too many young people are pushed out of the economy;
- Youth employment services must be targeted to those with the greatest need;
- Established organizations cannot adequately serve all youth; and
- A national youth policy must set a long-term vision.

Today, due largely to the efforts of NYEC and its partners, there is a well-established field of committed practitioners and policymakers who know what it takes to help young people succeed.

Despite the growth of networks and the proliferation of proven and innovative models, the youth employment crisis continues for millions of young Americans largely due a federal disinvestment and the lack of a vision and sustained commitment to provide the services and support required for those who need it most. Since 2001, the investment in federal youth workforce dollars has been reduced by 47% when adjusted for inflation.

And while the country enjoys record low unemployment rates, the economic recovery has not resulted in more young people in the labor force. Rates of youth labor-force participation for 16-24 year olds have remained virtually the same since 2010, the lowest participation in almost 50 years.³⁴ (see Figure 1). There are roughly 4.5 million “opportunity youth,” 16-24-year-olds who are neither working nor in school.⁵ This is not only unjust, but a staggering waste of talent.

This is not by choice. Opportunity youth are eager to work.⁶ They want to earn money and build better lives for themselves and their families, but struggle to find jobs.

³ As identified by the BLS Data Viewer; see <https://beta.bls.gov/dataViewer/view/timeseries/LNS113248870> for this table.

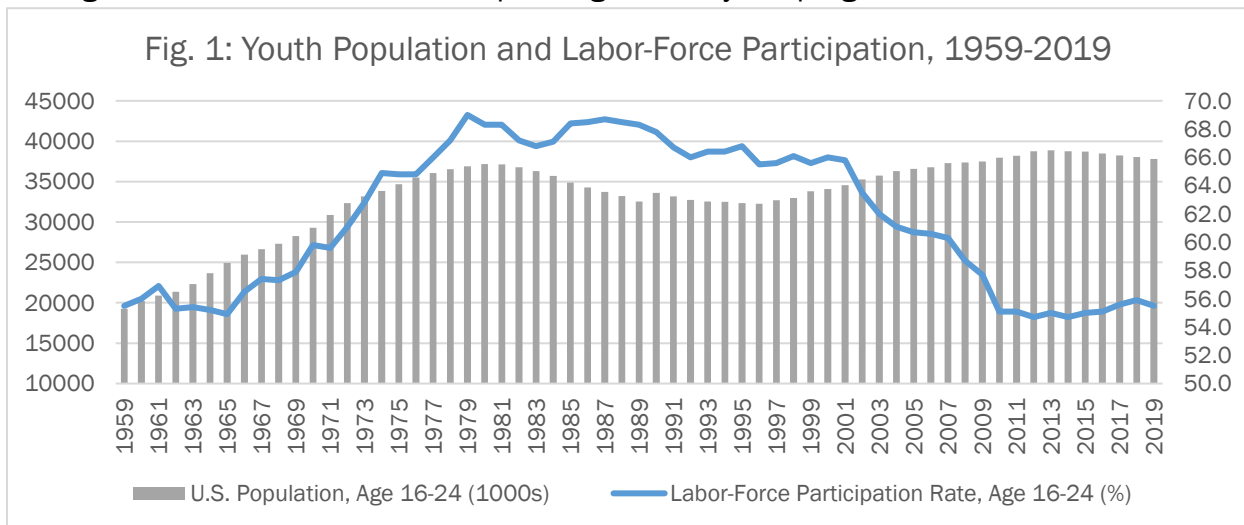
⁴ See Bureau of Labor Statistics for other invaluable historical data, available at <https://www.bls.gov/cps/#tables>.

⁵ Lewis, Kristen. Making the Connection: Transportation and Youth Disconnection. New York: Measure of America, Social Science Research Council, 2019. Available at <https://ssrc-static.s3.amazonaws.com/moa/Making%20the%20Connection.pdf>.

⁶ Most opportunity youth are actively looking for work, even more wish to attain higher education, and the vast majority take responsibility for their future achievement. For more, see Bridgeland, John A. and Jessica A.

The youth employment crisis disproportionately impacts communities of color, residents in poor urban and rural areas, and immigrants. In turn, the lack of opportunity to work affects the ability of young people to escape the cycle of poverty, build skills and assets, and participate meaningfully in their communities.

By 2020, it's estimated that 65% of all jobs will require some postsecondary education, up from 28% in 1973.⁷ Our nation cannot afford to allow these young people to enter adulthood without the requisite skills to command the jobs of the future. Reconnecting opportunity youth with school and work would significantly increase tax revenues, help employers grow in a tight labor market, and reduce spending on safety-net programs.⁸



There is a critical need for transformative federal, state, and local investments to strengthen local infrastructure for high-quality service delivery, create openings for innovation, and ensure that all young people who seek pathways to opportunity are able to do so.

We can do better. We must do better. We will do better.

We are at an inflection point. For the first time in decades, there is a broad understanding that, despite a low unemployment rate, the labor market and economy are not working for

Milano. "Opportunity Road: The Promise and Challenge of America's Forgotten Youth." Civic Enterprises and America's Promise Alliance, 2012. Available at https://dfbaaa3e-0ce2-4de0-929d-4611a51646be.filesusr.com/ugd/03cac8_bf6b58256cd2484ba286443fd3fc7240.pdf.

⁷ See Carnevale, Anthony P. et al. "Recovery: Projections of Jobs and Education Requirements through 2020." Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce, June 2013. Available at https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Recovery2020.FR_Web_.pdf. The report also includes breakdowns by occupational clusters and educational level.

⁸ See Belfield, Clive R. et al. "The Economic Value of Opportunity Youth." The Corporation for National and Community Service and the White House Council for Community Solutions, January 5, 2012. Available at https://dfbaaa3e-0ce2-4de0-929d-4611a51646be.filesusr.com/ugd/03cac8_115141276ebb4800bed05d5dacfed6b0.pdf. The report includes estimates of the taxpayer and social burden of opportunity youth: for instance, each opportunity youth imposes an annual social burden of \$37,450 (2011 dollars).

many. Today's labor markets are difficult to navigate—especially for youth and young adults workers—due to the demise of good jobs for those without postsecondary education, globalization, and changes wrought by the rise of the gig economy.

As a field, what will we do differently to capitalize on this opportunity?

NYEC believes that every young person, regardless of race, gender, ability, or geography, has a right to education, training, and living-wage employment. We envision an America in which all youth and young adults are embraced, supported, and prepared to take their rightful places as thriving members of our economy and society.

Commemorating NYEC's 40th anniversary, this brief honors our past while looking forward to the work to come. Beginning with principles that must guide the work of the field, we reflect on the history of NYEC and the work of increasing equity in access to employment, the effective practices that have emerged from this work, and what is needed to act on the scale of the challenge faced by our young people.

What We Believe: Principles for Youth Employment

Informed by the history of the field, it's important to center the principles that guide us. We hope that these are principles that the field can embrace; they are principles that will guide NYEC's work going forward.

Center Race and Gender Equity

Black, Latinx, and Native young people are over-represented in the population of opportunity youth, and face significantly greater barriers to successful entry into the labor market. Therefore, we must advocate for policies, programs, and increased investments which feature an explicit focus on race and gender, prioritize people of color for services, and are led by people who represent the communities they serve. Policies that directly attack these structural inequalities include program designs and place-based strategies that focus on marginalized

The Disparate Impacts of Youth Disconnection

- Young people age 16-24 were unemployed at between 1.9 and 5.0 times the rate of those age 25-54, depending on the state, in 2018.
- African American youth experienced unemployment at four times the national rate, at 20.6% in July 2016. Disparities between black and white youth are so severe that in states with the lowest rates of disconnection for black youth, their rate is still worse than the average national disconnection rate for white youth.
- In rural areas, the youth disconnection rate is 20.3%, while in urban areas it is 14%.
- Only 67% of English language learners graduate high school, compared to a national graduation rate of 84%.

Sources: Tatum et al. and Lewis, see footnotes for full reference.

young people, culturally competent program models developed by local leaders, multiple on- and off-ramps to programming, and wealth-building initiatives targeting minority communities.

Expand Opportunities for the Most Vulnerable

Federal laws now take some steps to encourage systems to focus on those who are hardest to serve, but too many young people are still screened out of programs as short-term, employment-focused performance measures make it more challenging for providers to serve them. This principle means:

- Policies must intentionally and specifically prioritize youth and young adults facing the most barriers to employment, such as those without secondary credentials; those currently or formerly connected to the foster care or juvenile justice systems; those experiencing homelessness; those who identify as LGBTQ+; youth with disabilities; and those who are pregnant or parenting;
- Policies and programs must adopt performance measures that prioritize measures of program quality, interim measures that reward progress, and outcome measures that emphasize long-term retention in employment, job quality, and the building of social-cultural capital;
- Legislation and practice in the field must reflect our deeper understanding of the effects of trauma, prioritizing approaches to young people such as trauma-informed care and developing executive skills, and community approaches such as restorative justice;
- All programs serving young people should demonstrate a deep understanding of young peoples' social and emotional needs and developmental state, respond to the way youth and young adults learn and apply information, and support career exposure; and

Institutional Racism Project

The National Youth Employment Coalition launched the youth-driven Institutional Racism Project in 2001. The project had three major goals:

- Provide a tool for youth service providers, teachers and other professionals to promote open discussion with young people about institutional racism;
- Serve as a project-based learning opportunity for young people; and
- Create an important forum for youth to inform the workforce development field about their thinking and experiences with institutional racism.

Through the initiative, young people produced a magazine, *Voices of Diversity*, and a dialogue guide to assist schools and program staff in facilitating dialogues on institutional racism with young people.

- All programs serving young people must intentionally build connections between young people and caring adults, whether as mentors, coaches, navigators, supervisors, neighbors, or those in other roles.

Invest in Capacity Building and Local Decision-Making

Locally driven decision-making is more likely to result in seamless, comprehensive service delivery, as practitioners and policy makers craft solutions that meet the needs of the children, youth, and young adults in their areas. But they need the financial resources to take on this important work. Local decision-making is particularly important as practitioners become more aware of the challenges young people face, from trauma, poverty, substance abuse, and unstable housing.

While the number of youth who are out-of-school and out-of-work has fallen, today's opportunity youth are likely to have lower skills levels, less work history, and more limited prospects than young people at the beginning of the current economic expansion. They require more intensive services and will take longer to obtain the skills needed to secure living-wage jobs and careers at a time when postsecondary credentials are increasingly required for long-term employment in quality jobs.

Though the state of evidence for youth programming is greater than it has ever been, many programs have less ability to hire and train new leaders and offer new opportunities than they did a generation ago. Local organizations may be pitted against each other to deliver different services with scarce resources, attempting to braid many sources of funds to serve individual youth, while accommodating different eligibility criteria and measures of success to satisfy different funders.

Instead, federal, state, and local governments, and philanthropic funders, should provide sufficient resources to support strong local conveners or intermediaries, thriving local service ecosystems, a healthy workforce of youth-serving professionals, and aligned measures that encourage serving racial minorities and the hardest-to-serve young people first.

New Leaders Academy

In 1999, NYEC launched the New Leaders Academy, a competitive, year-long professional management and training program designed to equip mid-level youth service professionals with the skills and competencies necessary to successfully manage and lead youth programs.

Working in cohorts, New Leaders learned effective practices, received coaching from seasoned professionals, and developed project-based capstones that furthered the field.

New Leaders adapted to changing needs in the field by creating the WIA (Workforce Investment Act) Leaders Academy. From 1999 to 2003, 154 youth professionals successfully completed the New Leaders Academy and WIA Leaders Academy.

This requires building capacity at both the organizational and system level. While some areas have strong intermediaries and provider ecosystems, more work is needed to truly spread lessons nationwide and ensure communities of all kinds are able to implement them.

Co-Design Solutions with Young People

Honoring youth voice and building youth leadership are at the heart of positive youth workforce development efforts. With training, support, and compensation, young people can be invaluable contributors and co-designers of programs and policies. Ingredients for youth-adult partnership include:

- Ensuring that adults are ready to engage as peers with young people;
- Supporting long-term engagement of young people, including by providing compensation;
- Creating spaces that are safe for young people to express themselves, experiment, and make mistakes;
- Creating mentorship opportunities; and
- Allowing youth to develop at their own pace.

At the highest levels of young-adult engagement, power, influence, and accountability are shared. Young people work directly with adults to identify issues and design and implement solutions.

Prepare the Next Generation of Leaders

As we recommit ourselves to this work, we need to train and support a new generation of leaders to guide these efforts. Additional resources are needed, not only to expand services for the young people, but also to hire, train, refine the work of the adults who manage and deliver youth employment programming.

Local practitioners and policy makers have always been the lifeblood of NYEC. The ideas, innovations, and breakthroughs of the people who do this work every day have elevated the importance of youth employment, and improved the federal legislation that affects young adults.

Promising and Effective Practices Network (PEPNet)

NYEC in 1993 began developing the Promising and Effective Practices Network (PEPNet). PEPNet identified a set of program quality standards and developed a framework to assess program quality, which included a self-assessment for organizations, a peer-review process to recognize effective programs and an index of effective practices.

Over 100 programs across the country were recognized, and thousands of youth professionals in U.S. and internationally experienced PEPNet. This work was later adapted for EDNet, an initiative which developed a set of quality standards and tools for assessing program quality in alternative education programs.

As we consider new legislative and policy proposals, we will work to ensure that they honor local decision-making and innovation around program design and effectiveness, provide local practitioners the autonomy and resources to design high-quality programs to support the costs of staff development and effective administration.

Our History: NYEC and the Youth-Employment Field

By the time of NYEC's founding in 1979, much was already known about what it takes to connect all young people with work. Initial federal efforts related to youth employment sought to alleviate poverty and tackle racial discrimination. In the **1960s**, Experimental and Demonstration Projects under the Manpower Development and Training Act (MDTA) saw the development of:

- Employer-facing intermediaries running on-the-job training programs (National Urban League and Mobilization for Youth);
- Comprehensive programming, supported by a coaching model, for young people impacted by gangs and violence (YMCA of Chicago); and
- Efforts to educate employers and change discriminatory hiring practices to a “whole person” lens at scale (Opportunities Industrialization Centers).⁹

President Johnson's War on Poverty led to the launch of Job Corps in 1964, as well as the program now called AmeriCorps VISTA. The first federal summer youth employment program began in 1965.

In the **1970s**, the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) devolved funding to local areas, while requiring universal availability of some workforce development services. The law block-granted most federal job-training dollars to local “prime sponsors,” a predecessor to today's workforce development boards. Responding to prior pilot programs, a CETA amendment (1977) authorized new youth-related programs, including the Young Adult Conservation Corps, which spawned the modern conservation corps movement, and the Youth Incentive Entitlement Pilot Projects, which used guaranteed employment to encourage students to stay in school or return to education.

In this period, a growing field of youth development practitioners recognized the need for comprehensive supports and training opportunities. Intermediaries like Public/Private Ventures (P/PV), the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC), and Youth Work highlighted these findings.

⁹ This section is adapted from Zuckerman, Alan. In *Youth Development: Issues, Challenges, and Directions*, pp. 305-307. Public/Private Ventures, 2000.

It was this belief in the need for comprehensive programming that led to the founding of the National Youth Advocacy Coalition, as it was then called, in 1979.

In the **1980s**, Congressional dissatisfaction with CETA culminated in the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) of 1982. JTPA was guided by a “dual customer” philosophy focused on increasing efficiency in the labor market for jobseekers and businesses. Under JTPA, employment and training programs were further focused on job placement and meeting the needs of private-sector employers. Long-term supports were cut back and performance contracting came into vogue.

At this point, NYEC received a grant from the Ford Foundation to examine JTPA’s impact on young people and community-based organizations. The conclusion of the study was that JTPA steered less funding to community-based organizations and fewer services were being provided to out-of-school, Black, and Latinx youth.

In the mid-1980s, NYEC began launching local youth employment coalitions, with funding from the U.S. Department of Labor (USDOL). NYEC’s local coalition-building efforts would continue for more than 10 years, efforts in New York, Boston, Phoenix, Boston, Kansas City, and San Francisco.

The **1990s** saw further federal cutbacks, and new efforts by the field to highlight best practices. In 1993, the USDOL released the national evaluation of JTPA, which found that out-of-school males who participated in JTPA youth employment programs did not benefit significantly, as measured by employment rates and earnings. Despite criticisms from the field that the evaluation was flawed, this study was weaponized to justify an 80% cut to JTPA’s out-of-school youth programming from \$610 million (\$1.03 billion in 2019 dollars) to \$127 million.

Youth advocates rallied to identify and publicize demonstrably effective programs and practices. To challenge the belief that “nothing works,” NYEC members convened in Andover, Massachusetts, in 1993 and called for the development of quality standards for the field to identify the highest-impact youth employment programs, ultimately leading to the launch of the Promising and Effective Practices Network (PEPNet) in 1995. With support from USDOL, over the next 10 years PEPNet captured lessons from research and practice, establishing a framework for organizational improvement and creating a forum for sharing, adapting, and scaling effective strategies.

Other seminal contributions by the field include the American Youth Policy Forum’s *Some Things Do Make a Difference* (1997).¹⁰ Through profiles of four-dozen youth programs, the report showed that application of key principles—such as adult support, connections to the workplace, tapping the wisdom of young people, and supportive and follow-up services—could have powerful results for youth. In addition, a series of publications from the Levitan

¹⁰ James, Donna Walker, editor. *Some Things DO Make a Difference for Youth: A Compendium of Evaluations of Youth Programs and Practices*. American Youth Policy Forum, 1997.

Center at the Johns Hopkins University Institute for Policy Studies helped to identify and elevate effective practices for disconnected young people.

Eventually, these and other efforts by advocates informed the youth components of the next iteration of federal workforce legislation, the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA). WIA represented a significant departure from JTPA by incorporating required elements for youth programming – work experience, leadership development, support services, adult mentoring, and follow-up services – informed by positive youth development principles advocated by NYEC and others.

Investments under WIA remained too small to allow effective youth-workforce programs to truly scale up. As Karen Pittman, Merita Irby, and Thaddeus Ferber put it, “There is a general need to foster investment in long-term, sustained growth services, opportunities and supports [...] Too many programs remain at the pilot level, offering services and supports to a small fraction of those who need it.”¹¹ At the same time, the labor market for young people was becoming more challenging: “the demands of the new ‘global economy’ are more rigorous, and less forgiving of individual shortcomings and early mistakes, than was the American economy from the postwar period to the present.”¹²

Nonetheless, programs demonstrated that appropriate levels of investment significantly expanded youth access to jobs and education. The Youth Opportunity Grant (YO)—a five-year demonstration program funded by the USDOL between 2000 and 2005—made substantial investments in three-dozen communities to create place-based, re-engagement strategies for low-income, high-risk youth and young adults. Despite positive evaluations, YO grants were not renewed.¹³ The YO experience was a transformative one for many communities, and the work continues today: A group of former grantee communities continues to meet regularly as the Communities Collaborating to Reconnect Youth Network,¹⁴ with the support of the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP).

In the **2000s**, NYEC’s efforts expanded to connecting systems. For example, the organization:

- Developed a self-assessment tool for education programs and schools serving vulnerable youth;
- Launched a youth-designed project that tackled institutional racism;

¹¹ Pittman, Karen, et al. In *Youth Development: Issues, Challenges, and Directions*, p. 24. Public/Private Ventures, 2000.

¹² Introduction. In *Youth Development: Issues, Challenges, and Directions*, p. 8. Public/Private Ventures, 2000.

¹³ See “[Fact Sheet: The Youth Opportunity Grant Evaluation](https://www.clasp.org/sites/default/files/public/resources-and-publications/publication-1/FACT-SHEET-FROM-the-YOUTH-OPPORTUNITY-GRANT-EVALUATION.web.pdf).” Center for Law and Social Policy, Available at <https://www.clasp.org/sites/default/files/public/resources-and-publications/publication-1/FACT-SHEET-FROM-the-YOUTH-OPPORTUNITY-GRANT-EVALUATION.web.pdf>. The fact sheet summarizes Bruno, Lee and Carol Pistorino. *Youth Opportunity Grant Initiative: Process Evaluation Final Report*. Decision Information Resources, Inc., 2007. Available at https://wdr.doleta.gov/research/FullText_Documents/YO%20Process%20Evaluation%20Report.pdf.

¹⁴ Up-to-date information about the Community Collaborating to Reconnect Youth Network may be found at <https://www.clasp.org/about-ccry-network>.

- Strengthened the linkages between the workforce development and juvenile justice systems;
- Provided bridging supports for at-risk young people entering postsecondary education;
- Served as part of a national collaborative designed to equip state and local workforce development systems to better serve youth with disabilities; and
- Ran a program to cultivate new leaders in youth-serving organizations.

In the **2010s**, NYEC has been a consistent and influential voice on behalf of young people. As a leader in the Campaign for Youth in partnership with CLASP, NYEC shaped the youth provisions in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), the federal job training legislation developed with lessons learned from JTPA and WIA.. WIOA added required expenditures on work experience, increased spending on out-of-school youth, and aligned performance measurements across programs. NYEC has also been a leader in linking systems that serve the hardest-to-serve young people. This has included linking secondary, youth development, and postsecondary options through the Postsecondary Success Initiative, and prioritizing undocumented young people, out-of-school youth with disabilities, and justice-involved young people in service delivery improvements. NYEC continues to be a leading advocate for opportunity youth, partnering with organizations like the Forum for Youth Investment, YouthBuild USA, the Corps Network, and CLASP to launch the Reconnecting Youth Campaign in 2017.

What Works to Prepare Young People for Success

From these decades of practice, research, and innovation, today's youth employment practitioners and policymakers have a strong evidence base for designing and delivering high-quality programming that prepares young people for economic success. These are strategies that work.

- **Connect School and Work.** Evidence from the national school-to-work experience and career-connected strategies like career academies demonstrated that participating students were more likely to improve on a range of academic indicators, go to college, and earn more. Further, young people without high school diplomas or postsecondary credentials can benefit from blended learning opportunities that combine both academic and occupational skills. Conversely, it's important to keep the school doors open to young people of all ages. The National Reengagement Network's efforts to scale reengagement models and promote laws such as the Opening Doors legislation in Washington State speak to the need to offer blended, flexible, and nonlinear educational pathways.

- **Provide Early and High-Quality Work Experience.** One of the most powerful success strategies is early connection to jobs and job-related activities. In addition to income, early work experience provides exposure to different workplaces and increases professional connections, strengthening young peoples' agency in future career decisions.
- **Create Connections to Caring Adults.** Access to caring adults – family members, teachers, coaches, pastors, supervisors and colleagues, mentors – is critical for adolescent development and success in education and employment. Not only do caring adults increase employment opportunities, they support young peoples' resilience, mental health, and self-efficacy. Ultimately, they provide the network of long-term connections that help young people become successful adults.
- **Prioritize Youth Voice, Empowerment, and Leadership.** From the outset, positive youth development has put young people and their talents at the center of programs and services. Evidence also shows the benefits of co-creating programming with young people, tapping into their wisdom as practitioners and peer support workers, and empowering them as leaders promotes academic and workplace success.
- **Implement Sectoral Employment Strategies.** Research from sectoral employment strategies, which are driven by specific industry sector needs and managed by community collaboratives, suggests that young adults who have the preparation for access to this type of training can better master job requirements, successfully enter high-demand fields, and earn higher wages than their non-participating peers.
- **Adapt Lessons from Other Disciplines.** More recently, lessons learned from the worlds of psychology, neuroscience, and social work have begun to exert powerful influences on how we can understand and address the needs of young people. Trauma-informed care, knowledge of adolescent brain development, and the restorative justice framework are enabling practitioners to build programs and services that can help young people to identify, remediate, and overcome challenges which hinder their success.
- **Develop Highly Trained Professionals.** An increasing body of literature suggests that even the best models and research-based approaches will mean little if they are not planned and managed by individuals who not only care about young people, but also understand the importance of program management, evaluation, and accountability. Therefore, continuing attention to professional development and rigorous program delivery is essential to success.
- **Commit to Sustained Investments in Young People.** Young people with significant life barriers or gaps in opportunity may require longer investments of time and intensive resources to equip them with the skills and opportunities that they need to compete and succeed in the labor market. Practitioners must be empowered to work with

clients who need more resources and also be recognized for interim progress toward the longer-term goals of employment placement or educational attainment.

Looking Forward to a Future of Abundance

The Continuing Need for Advocacy

Advocacy on behalf of youth and young adults has never been more important.

Federal investments in youth workforce development have plummeted over the last 20 years. In federal fiscal year (FY) 2001, the first year of funding under the Workforce Investment Act, appropriations for youth activities were more than \$1.2 billion. Today, that number is slightly over \$900 million, a cut of 48% when adjusted for inflation. This resource-poor environment limits the ability of youth employment practitioners to expand their efforts and serve those left out of the labor market.

A lack of resources means a fragmented system. A lack of resources have kept the system for youth workforce services disconnected and fragmented. As Larry Good and Ed Strong write:

[A] key dimension of twenty-first century labor markets is that they're incredibly difficult to navigate. As industries and occupations rapidly and continually change, it has become enormously challenging for learners to understand their career/employment choices and the educational requirements associated with those options.¹⁵

Disinvestment and today's complex, unforgiving labor market mean that the need for a national workforce strategy, and a commensurate field-building effort, is greater than ever.

The Role of Philanthropy

National and regional philanthropies play crucial roles, identifying solutions, supplementing public-sector efforts, convening leaders, and seeding innovation. There are also several ways that the sector can do more to serve communities:

- Engaging grantees and young people as partners in identifying funding priorities;
- Prioritizing capacity building and support for existing work;
- Using measures aligned with existing metrics, data, and funding streams;
- Providing ample support for administrative costs;
- Committing to multi-year investments; and
- Supporting grantees to share their successes with the field.

¹⁵ Good, Larry and Ed Strong. "Reimagining Workforce Policy in the United States." In *Transforming U.S. workforce development policies for the 21st century*, p. 24. Aspen Institute, 2015. Available at https://assets.aspeninstitute.org/content/uploads/2015/10/Transforming-US-Workforce-Development-Policies.pdf?_ga=2.25786424.48557993.1573092729-446317003.1573092729.

A consensus for change is growing. Many states and communities understand the importance of preparing young people for employment, putting in place an array of high-quality programs and services. States have:

- Launched unified efforts to expand postsecondary pathways, such as Tennessee’s Drive to 55 initiative and California Career Pathways Trust;
- Allowed K-12 dollars to flow to efforts to reengage young people, such as Washington State’s Opening Doors legislation; and
- Created lockbox mechanisms, such as in Kansas, to direct savings from reduced juvenile incarceration toward community-based programming.

Cities around the country have supported summer youth employment programs, with many now embracing comprehensive approaches to retain at-risk youth and reengage opportunity youth in school. National and regional philanthropies have also made important contributions, highlighting the importance of sector-based approaches, the need for postsecondary bridging supports, and the potential for collective-impact models to leverage new funding streams. These actions show what enlightened leadership on these issues looks like. These and other partners will magnify new federal investments.

The President’s Council on Economic Advisors, in “Addressing America’s Reskilling Challenge,”¹⁶ speaks positively about the need for publicly funded workforce training. The Council states that “taxpayers have a stake in successful reskilling” due to the benefits it brings for workers and because of its potential to increase public revenue and reduce reliance on safety net programs. The Council¹⁷ also points out that the federal, state, and local governments in the U.S. have “historically spent far less on such active labor market policies...than other developed countries.”

NYEC’s advocacy will remain inspired by the field. Through it all, the ideas, innovations, and breakthroughs of the people who do this work every day will continue to inform NYEC’s advocacy. NYEC benefits from a member base that includes practitioners, system leaders, researchers, and policy experts: All of these voices are necessary to create responsive plans and solutions that meet the needs of young people in all of our nation’s diverse communities.

¹⁶ “Addressing America’s Reskilling Challenge,” p. 3. White House Council of Economic Advisors, July 2018. Available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Addressing-Americas-Reskilling-Challenge.pdf>.

¹⁷ Other federal work in this area include the ongoing work on opportunity youth by the Federal Reserve Banks of Dallas and Atlanta. See for example: “Opportunity Youth in Texas: Identifying and Reengaging the State’s Disconnected Young People,” available at <https://www.dallasfed.org/cd/pubs/19youth.aspx>, and “Creating Opportunities for Young Workers,” available at <https://www.frbatlanta.org/cweo/workforce-currents/2018/03-creating-opportunities-for-young-workers-2018-03-28>. The Federal Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs also demonstrates an ongoing focus on youth disconnection (<https://youth.gov/about-us>).

We Need New Solutions

NYEC was founded in response to a crisis, and we face a crisis again today. As then, we commit ourselves to bold new approaches to provide more opportunities for the young people who need them.

We need a transformative federal investment that, guided by local decision-making and consistent with the principles detailed above, fulfills our promise to young adults. New funds would rebuild local infrastructure for high-quality service delivery, create an opening for new models of decision-making and youth-adult partnership, and finally ensure that all young people who want to seek employment are able to do so.

Legislation should make work experience, postsecondary education, and service opportunities available to all young people. This new approach should not be constrained by current statutes, but may be aligned with or part of other national efforts, such as rebuilding infrastructure, overhauling our education system, or mobilizing to mitigate the effects of climate change.

Georgetown University's Center on Poverty and Inequality recently proposed a Youth Opportunity Guarantee¹⁸ that offers a detailed examination of what one version of this idea would look like. The plan states that “the status quo is not working for America’s youth and young adults. It falls short for employers, who struggle to hire and retain the workers they need, and damages our economy, which will have to rely increasingly on today’s younger workers to support an aging population. Any serious national economic agenda must address this challenge in an ambitious and viable way.” The report proposes a system guarantee which includes:

- High school or equivalent that prepares students for college and career;
- A range of postsecondary options that help lead to labor market success; and
- High-quality career training, national and community service, or employment.

Another direction are proposals related to infrastructure or the transition to a green economy. NYEC has been convening national organizations to ensure that young people are able to take advantage of large-scale legislative developments in this area.¹⁹ Whatever the vehicle, NYEC will work with members and partners to create and advocate for solutions that match our obligation to young people.

¹⁸ Tatum, Laura, et al. “The Youth Opportunity Guarantee: A Framework for Success.” Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2019. Available at www.georgetownpoverty.org/issues/employment/youth-opportunity-guarantee-framework.

¹⁹ For more information, read legislative principles, and join this work, please visit https://nyec.org/green_economy/.

We know what works to durably connect young people to education and employment, and we are confident that these investments will improve the lives of the young people we care about and, ultimately, Americans across the life course.

NYEC's Role

NYEC remains a vibrant alliance of organizations across the country, rooted in the many grassroots organizations that we count as members. Given our experience and composition, NYEC is uniquely positioned to be the convener, developer, and disseminator of solutions aligned with the principles we have described: building on the wisdom of practitioners, involving young people in their design, and supporting our members to carry them out.

Whether independently or in collaboration with other organizations, NYEC will continue to build the field and advocate for solutions that work. This means:

- Convening practitioners and policymakers to ensure that youth employment is a priority on federal, state, and local agendas;
- Building better integrated, high-quality youth delivery systems;
- Apprising the field of bold, new proposals and preparing practitioners to take maximum advantage as new initiatives emerge;
- Elevating promising and proven practices, and translating the wisdom of practitioners to policy;
- Leveraging NYEC's network to create a place for scaling, innovation, and dissemination; and
- Modeling youth leadership and decision-making in NYEC's operations and throughout the NYEC network.

Conclusion

As we have done over the last 40 years, NYEC will continue to work with members and partners to share effective practices and to identify needs and future directions for youth employment policy. We will maintain our leadership roles in national coalitions of organizations that advocate for increased appropriations for current youth workforce activities, and we will continue to seek opportunities to improve existing programs as well as to consider and shape new legislation.

Local practitioners and policy makers have always been the lifeblood of NYEC. The ideas, innovations, and breakthroughs of the people who do this work every day have helped to elevate the importance of youth employment, and to shape and strengthen the federal policy frameworks that help to support it.

Welcome to the next phase of NYEC's work. We hope you will join us.