

Federal Policy Agenda of the National Youth Employment Coalition

Approved by NYEC Board of Directors June 2022

Executive Summary: NYEC's Policy Agenda

NYEC Members Are a Resource: The National Youth Employment Coalition builds the capacity of youth-serving organizations and advocates on issues related to opportunity youth. NYEC members include around 80 organizations around the country that reach hundreds of thousands of young people each year. Members are eager to share their knowledge and recommendations with policymakers. Please contact Mary Ann (Mimi) Haley, Executive Director, mhaley@nyec.org, or Thomas Showalter, Senior Advisor, Thomas.showalter@nyec.org.

Rooted in Community: NYEC creates spaces for practitioners and young people to create solutions rooted in their community's needs. We sustain existing federal advocacy coalitions, bring in new partners, and create new venues. NYEC leverages elected leaders and champions for moving policies forward. In an era of [discontinuity](#), we will seek [disruptive transformations](#) that secure a better future for young people.

Across NYEC's work we:

- Center race and gender equity;
- Expand opportunities for the most vulnerable;
- Invest in capacity building and local decision-making;
- Co-design solutions with young people; and
- Prepare the next generation of leaders.

Pandemic Recovery: The COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect young people. As we have [called for since the beginning of the pandemic](#), we recommend:

- The creation of a national, permanent subsidized-employment program operated through the Dislocated Worker Assistance National Reserve.
- That the Senate pass the [Build Back Better Act](#), passed by the House last year, which included \$10 billion for a new Civilian Climate Corps (CCC).

Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA): [NYEC's comprehensive WIOA recommendations](#) call for:

- Radically increased funding to meet demand for services.
- A streamlined and more equitable Priority Populations eligibility framework for youth programs.
- Mandated self-attestation, to ensure eligible young people can access programs.
- More flexible performance measures.
- New access to mental health services through WIOA programs.

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In April 2022 the House Education and Labor Committee passed HR 7309, a WIOA reauthorization bill. [NYEC did not support the bill for several reasons](#). We recommend that Congress pass a WIOA reauthorization along the lines of NYEC's recommendations.

Green Jobs: As states and local governments implement the 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA, HR 3684), we recommend programs that:

- Have an explicit focus on opportunity youth;
- Use the green economy as a vehicle to promote innovation and entrepreneurship for communities and businesses; and
- Increase access to capital and resources for youth contribute and explore entrepreneurship in growing green economy.

Higher Education: The reach of Pell Grants must be expanded. We recommend that Congress:

- Make eligible for Pell Grants programs of at least 150 clock hours of instructional time, as called for in the House-passed version of the America COMPETES Act (HR 4521).
- Make Pell Grant funding mandatory, to ensure that aid is not undermined by the annual appropriations process.

Mental Health: To respond to the youth mental-health crisis, lawmakers can take several immediate steps:

- Increase funding in provisions authorized by the SUPPORT Act.
- Advocate for increased appropriations to existing funding streams such as the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, Interagency Task Force on Trauma-Informed Care, and Mental Health in Schools grant program.
- Support the comprehensive bi-partisan [RISE from Trauma Act](#).
- Join the Trauma Informed Caucus co-chaired by Reps. Gallagher (R-WI) and Davis (D-IL).

Make Systems Work for Young People: Many barriers prevent young people from accessing the programs that Congress does authorize. We recommend:

- The creation of a formula-funded Program Access Fund to ensure young people can access federally funded services.
- That Congress improve juvenile record confidentiality, mandate automatic records expungement of non-violent juvenile offenses, and require states to ensure young people leave custody with government identification and access to voter registration.
- A big expansion of community-based violence prevention and intervention models ([READI Chicago](#), [Boston Uncornered](#), [CAHOOTS](#), and [YAP's Violence Interruption Model](#) are all examples) with American Rescue Plan Act funding.

A New Vision for Young People: NYEC's Goal

All young people seek guidance on how to be adults from their family and community, from role models, and from the institutions in which they participate. For most young people, their schools have not focused on skills needed in the labor force, they've [missed out](#) on early work experiences, and postsecondary education has not provided a sturdy onramp to a career with family-sustaining wages.

The long-term need is clear: the nation [needs a plan](#) for affording all young people access to education and employment. Today, a patchwork of policies attempts to make this possible, but a unified and bolder strategy is needed to make it a reality. [NYEC's goal](#) is to cohere the field around a framework that equitably strengthens the transition to adulthood for youth 14-24 years old.

Any plan begins with significantly more investment in young people. A 2019 White House Council of Economic Advisers' [report](#) found that the U.S. would need to invest \$80 billion more per year just to reach the median level of investment in workforce development of other industrialized nations. The United States can rise to the occasion by investing in more diverse pathways to postsecondary education, new industries such as in the green economy, and building stronger pipelines to access high-quality jobs.

[We know what works](#). Decades of evidence shows what kinds of experiences lead to long-term success in the workforce for young people. Many states and localities have infrastructure well suited to scaling up effective practices. State workforce development boards, state boards of education, P-20 councils, [Children's Cabinets](#), former [Youth Opportunity sites](#), and [philanthropically supported efforts](#) can all play a part in [building stakeholder commitment and sustaining collective action](#).

Rooted in Community: How NYEC Makes Change

NYEC creates spaces for practitioners and young people to create solutions rooted in their community's needs. We sustain existing federal advocacy coalitions, bring in new partners, and create new venues. NYEC leverages elected leaders and champions for moving policies forward.

Working with our members and partners, NYEC's agenda advances a comprehensive youth agenda that centers dismantling systems of oppression. In an era of [discontinuity](#), we will seek [disruptive transformations](#) that secure a better future for young people.

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Pandemic Recovery

At the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, over half of unemployed young people were out of work due directly to the pandemic. The number of young adults disconnected from education and employment surpassed 10 million. Today [about 5 million are still disconnected, reversing years of gains](#). Even before the pandemic, the [percentage](#) of young adults who are working or looking for work had fallen to levels not seen since the early 1960s. Those who are working are likely part of the [low-wage economy](#). **Now is the time for bold action to fix an unprecedented crisis.**

Unfortunately, young people have been left out of each round of pandemic relief and recovery legislation. We need a comprehensive and aligned recovery effort that puts young people to work doing work critical to our national recovery, while helping them reenter the workforce. At minimum, a recovery plan for young people must include:

1. A national subsidized employment program; and
2. National-service opportunities, with an emphasis on green jobs.

A National Subsidized Employment Program

Recent evaluations of federal efforts that subsidize wages to put people to work have found positive returns on investment: a [2012 evaluation](#) found that “from the combined perspectives of taxpayers, victims, and participants, CEO’s benefits outweighed the costs by \$4,900 per program group member, resulting in a 2.4 benefit-cost ratio”; a [2018 evaluation](#) found that the “benefit-cost ratio for the program from society’s perspective was 1.20.”

Heartland Alliance has [proposed](#) a detailed national framework based on smaller subsidized-jobs programs implemented over decades. During the 115th Congress, Senators Baldwin and Booker introduced the [Stronger Way Act](#), S. 1938, calling for a national transitional jobs effort that would provide work experiences and services for up to 30 weeks, at a wage subsidy of at least two-thirds and in positions paying at least \$15 per hour. Building on the wisdom of disability-rights advocates, this program will not only help young people gain attachment to the labor force, but will help employers design jobs and organizational structures that facilitate the success of all workers.

Based on the pandemic-related and long-run challenges facing young people attempting to enter the labor market, a national, permanent subsidized-employment program is an evidence-based approach. Depending on services offered and wage subsidy rates, a [CLASP survey of programs](#) found costs, including wage subsidies and wraparound services, ranged from \$1,143 to \$2,620 per month in 2019 dollars, or \$10,276 to \$23,556 for a 30-week program. [Another evaluation](#) found an average cost of \$17,161 in 2019 dollars for a six-month experience. Assuming a per-slot cost for a 30-week model of \$20,000, creating opportunities for 2,000,000 young workers over the next 18 months would require a \$40 billion investment. Adding in start-up and program administration costs of at least 10 percent, *we recommend the creation of a \$44 billion national, permanent subsidized-employment program operated through the Dislocated Worker Assistance National Reserve.*

National Service and Civilian Climate Corps

The green economy presents an opportunity to scale-up the demand for and supply of jobs for youth, while providing living wages and growth opportunities. Green jobs include but not limited to, water and energy systems, manufacturing, services and experiences, conservation and disaster management, and infrastructure. A national service program modeled on the Civilian Conservation Corps, but directed at climate change, is a [high return-on-investment opportunity](#) to tackle climate change and create millions of opportunities for young people. *We recommend that the Senate pass the [Build Back Better Act](#), passed by the House last year, which included \$10 billion for a new Civilian Climate Corps (CCC).*

WIOA: Reauthorize with Equity in Mind

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) is up for reauthorization. WIOA must be strengthened to center racial equity, social capital, and the hardest-to-serve populations. Much more funding is needed to meet the scale of need.

[NYEC's WIOA recommendations](#) – developed over the course of 14 months by practitioners, program and system leaders, and policy experts – focus on expanding WIOA programs to fit demand, overall system governance, streamlined and more equitable eligibility criteria, and programmatic improvements to the WIOA Youth formula program. They match the tenor of [comprehensive recommendations](#) from a nationwide panel of experts, the Better Employment and Training Strategies Taskforce, of which NYEC was a part.

NYEC WIOA Recommendations: Highlights

- **Stronger Focus on Priority Populations:** Congress should replace the current in-school versus out-of-school youth (ISY/OSY) framework to a priority populations framework that requires programs serve young people ages 16-24 including but not limited to those who are experiencing homelessness, justice involvement, disability, pregnant/parenting, etc. This framework removes perverse incentives, most notably the “in-school dropout problem,” and streamlines access to serving the hardest-to-serve youth.
- **Self-Attestation:** Pioneering states like Washington use self-attestation (allowing participants to declare that they are SNAP recipients, for example, rather than requiring documentation) to speed enrollment and increase engagement for young people. USDOL guidance in June 2020 authorized self-attestation for WIOA programs, however, Congress needs to codify this into reauthorization of WIOA.
- **Streamline Performance Measures:** Congress should allow flexibility in allowing Local Workforce Boards to add additional measures, choose among a menu of performance measures and get additional credit for serving hardest-to-serve youth.
- **Mental Health and Trauma Supports:** WIOA should provide competitive grants to states to conduct trauma-informed approaches in job training programs. A shifting economy increased economic inequality and aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic requires resilience among the future workforce.

In April 2022 the House Education and Labor Committee passed HR 7309, a WIOA reauthorization bill. [NYEC did not support the bill for several reasons.](#)

We recommend that Congress pass a WIOA reauthorization along the lines of NYEC's recommendations.

Green Jobs: Young Adults Will Create the Green Future

The green economy represents an effective vehicle for responding to today's environmental and justice needs of our communities while also bringing needed training and employment programs to scale. Robust infrastructure will require the integration of new technologies, workers and insights to strengthen the nation. Work on this is already happening: Several states have launched initiatives to guide their energy and environmental transformations including Colorado's "[Green Bank](#)," New York's ambitious [clean energy and jobs agenda](#), and [Maine's](#) targets for growing a renewable energy workforce by 2040.

Beyond our support for the Civilian Climate Corps, structural changes are needed for young people to join in the expansion of the green economy.

This begins with the implementation of the 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA, HR 3684). *We recommend that states and local governments design IIJA programs that:*

- *Have an explicit focus on opportunity youth;*
- *Use the green economy as a vehicle to promote innovation and entrepreneurship for communities and businesses; and*
- *Increase access to capital and resources for youth contribute and explore entrepreneurship in growing green economy.*

Higher Education: An Historic Opportunity on Pell Grants

The America COMPETES Act now awaiting action in the Senate and the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA) represent opportunities to expand and safeguard the federal Pell Grant program.

Expand the Reach and Power of Pell Grants. One of the nation's most effective avenues for social mobility, the reach of Pell Grants should be expanded. *We recommend that Congress:*

- *Make eligible for Pell Grants programs of at least 150 clock hours of instructional time, as called for in the House version of the America COMPETES Act (HR 4521).*
- *Ensure year-round access to Pell for students who take courses outside the traditional fall and winter semesters.*
- *Ease access for young people without high school diplomas to Pell Grants under the "ability-to-benefit" provision.*
- *Make permanent Second Chance Pell, a critical supplement to criminal-justice reform efforts.*
- *Index the maximum Pell Grant to the average total cost of attendance at an in-state four-year public college or university (\$25,487 in 2021).*
- *Make Pell funding mandatory, to ensure that Pell policies are not undermined by the annual appropriations process.*

FAFSA: HEA's TRIO programs already allow for self-attestation. As with WIOA eligibility determination, *we recommend moving to 100 percent self-attestation on the FAFSA form.*

Minority-serving institutions: Historically black colleges and universities, Hispanic-serving institutions, and other minority-serving institutions (MSIs) provide valuable supports to students historically shut out of higher education. They often offer short-term programs responsive to labor-market demands and employ more culturally competent faculty. *Congress has provided additional HEA Title III funding for MSIs in recovery legislation; we recommend that these increases be made permanent.*

Mental Health: More Responsive Services

A mental health crisis is playing out among young people. A June 2020 [CDC report](#) found that younger adults, racial/ethnic minorities, essential workers, and unpaid adult caregivers reported having experienced disproportionately worse mental health outcomes, increased substance use, and elevated suicidal ideation. The report also found that one in four young adults between 18-24 have had suicidal thoughts and mental-health related emergency room visits among those 12-17 years old had risen 31 percent. More than 140,000 children in the United States lost a primary or secondary caregiver to COVID-19; youth of color are disproportionately impacted. As many as [3 million “missing” young people](#) experienced little or no school as a result of the pandemic.

Leaders are taking note of the scope of the problem. The [U.S. Surgeon General](#) and the [American Academy of Pediatrics \(AAP\)](#), [American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry \(AACAP\)](#), and [Children's Hospital Association \(CHA\)](#) have recently released starkly worded warnings about the severity of the crisis.

NYEC worked with the Employment and Training Administration and Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration to field a survey of frontline practitioners, which yielded over 500 responses. Youth employment programs around the country want to meet the mental health needs. However:

- 64% of respondents indicated that they did not have a process for screening or monitoring youth people for mental health needs,
- 72% of respondents indicated that less than half of the youth can access mental health services when they need them, and
- 90% of respondents indicated they did not have sufficient resources to deliver quality mental health training to staff.

Some promising, initial steps have been taken to address the crisis. The American Rescue Plan Act [opened the door](#) to increased federal funding for mobile response units. This summer, [988 will become a nationwide hotline](#) for mental health crises and suicide prevention. Congress' creation of the Interagency Task Force on Trauma-Informed Care provides a step in the right direction to enhance federal coordination.

Much more is needed. *Lawmakers can take several immediate steps in the short term:*

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- *Increase funding in provisions authorized by the SUPPORT Act, including Mental Health in Schools grant and across agencies eager to integrate trauma-informed responses into existing programs.*
- *Advocate for increased appropriations to existing funding streams such as the Children Exposed to Violence Initiative (Commerce, Justice, Science appropriations bill), Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (Labor, Health and Human Services, and Related Agencies appropriations bill, LHHS), Interagency Task Force on Trauma-Informed Care (LHHS), Mental Health in Schools grant program (LHHS), Every Student Succeeds Act (LHHS).*
- *Support the comprehensive bi-partisan [RISE from Trauma Act](#) that would expand and support the trauma-informed workforce in schools, health care settings, social services, first responders, and the justice system, and increase resources for communities.*
- *Join the House Trauma Informed Caucus co-chaired by Rep. Gallagher (R-WI) and Rep. Davis (D-IL).*

We must learn from what communities are doing to help young people find safety, healing, purpose, and joy. In the long term, we *recommend the creation of an entitlement program for mental health services*. While consolidating existing funding opportunities, this new program could have as a focus:

- Training for frontline practitioners across human-services fields, so they are able to identify mental health warning signs and make initial assessments.
- Mental health screening for all young people, as our healthcare system does for many other medical conditions.
- Mental-health services that 1) are of sufficient scope to meet needs, 2) are [culturally responsive](#), 3) address the social determinants of health, such as racism, and 4) are equitably distributed nationwide.

Make Systems Work for Young People

Congress must expand protections and security of all opportunity youth. Over the past years Congress has made strides in focusing federal resources and actions on youth with multiple barriers, such as the 2018 FIRST STEP Act's efforts to reduce mass incarceration. Several areas of improvements still need to be made to increase the safety and security of some of the largest subpopulations of opportunity youth:

1. **Tackle cross-system barriers to access, such as transportation, child care, and housing.** Across systems that serve opportunity youth, some barriers come up time and again as those that prevent young people from accessing and benefitting from services. *We recommend the creation of a formula-funded Program Access Fund to ensure young people can access federally funded services, including those authorized by WIOA, the Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program (YHDP), McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, and the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act.*
2. **Comprehensive juvenile-justice reform.** Building on the recent reauthorizations of the Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention Act and the Second Chance Act, *We recommend that Congress:*
 - *Improve juvenile record confidentiality, mandating automatic records expungement of non-violent juvenile offenses of children before they turn 15;*

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- *Require states to ensure young people leave state custody with a form of government identification and provide access to voter registration; and*
 - *Incentivize states to increase access to credential programs, including expanding access to post-secondary education.*
3. **Communitywide responses to violence.** Concurrent with the mental health crisis, gun violence is on the rise. Proven communitywide models to reduce violence focus on addressing trauma ([READI Chicago](#)), repurposing social capital ([Boston Uncornered](#)), expanding nonpolice emergency responses ([CAHOOTS](#)), and creating multi-layered systems of support to prevent and interrupt cycles of violence ([YAP's Violence Interruption Model](#)). All of these model need much more funding. We [join the White House in recommending](#) that states and localities use American Rescue Plan Act funding to expand these interventions.
 4. **Protections for undocumented young people, including comprehensive immigration reform.** Of approximately 800,000 DACA recipients, an astonishing [97%](#) are working or in school (a significantly higher rate of connection than the population at large). A “clean DREAM Act” is a critical first step for our nation to ensure economic self-sufficiency for young immigrant youth. However, to protect the most vulnerable young immigrants, including those who may be ineligible for DACA because of high mobility, status offenses, or other barriers, we recommend that Congress pass comprehensive immigration reform legislation.
 5. **Strengthened and stabilized entitlement programs, including Medicaid, SCHIP, SNAP, SSDI, and TANF.** As opportunity youth pursue economic self-sufficiency, they often support others: one study found participants in a transitional-jobs program contributed [78.5%](#) of their household's income. Approximately [28%](#) of opportunity youth receive health care through Medicaid. Many opportunity youth also have disabilities and rely on SSDI as they seek employment. Safety-net programs make it possible for young adults to work or pursue training programs.

NYEC Members Are a Resource

The National Youth Employment Coalition builds the capacity of youth-serving organizations and advocates on issues related to opportunity youth. NYEC members include around 80 organizations around the country that reach hundreds of thousands of young people each year. Members are eager to share their knowledge and recommendations with policymakers. Please contact:

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