

A photograph showing a person's hands holding a resume over a laptop on a desk. The resume is titled 'PROFILE' and includes sections for 'Name', 'Date of Birth', 'Address', 'Phone', 'Email', 'JOB EXPERIENCES', 'EDUCATION', and 'SKILLS'. The person is wearing a dark jacket. A silver pen is visible on the desk to the right.

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# Opportunity Youth and Employer Engagement:

*Evidence and Next Steps for an Emerging Field*

Emily Ingram, Thomas Showalter, Dr. Mary Ann Haley,  
Julia Frohlich, and Charles Hiteshew

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## About the National Youth Employment Coalition

For more than 40 years, the National Youth Employment Coalition (NYEC) has worked toward an America in which all young people are supported and prepared to become thriving members of our economy and society, regardless of their race, gender, ability, geography, or means. Annually, we reach hundreds of organizations that work with hundreds of thousands of young people across the country. These community-based organizations, state agencies, and local government organizations focus on empowering young people to transition to postsecondary education and employment. Since its inception, NYEC has strengthened hundreds of youth-serving organizations and influenced dozens of pieces of federal legislation related to disadvantaged youth. Learn more at [www.nyec.org](http://www.nyec.org).

## Acknowledgements

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## Executive Summary

Today, [5 million 16-24 year olds](#) are neither in school nor employed, according to research by Measure of America. These [Opportunity Youth](#) represent a missed new pool of talent for the U.S. economy and employers. The COVID-19 pandemic has made the task of connecting youth to work all the more urgent. The COVID-19 pandemic, as with any economic downturn, makes for a particularly challenging time for young people, especially Opportunity Youth. By June 2020, the disconnection rate among young people [spiked to 28 percent](#). While these percentages have likely fallen as the economy rebounds, Opportunity Youth disconnection remains at unacceptably high levels.

Publicly funded workforce development programs and many employers recognize the urgency of connecting Opportunity Youth to employment and supporting their retention and advancement. To those ends, the goal of this literature review is to examine past research, case studies, toolkits, and other evidence from the field on employer engagement, with an eye toward developing an evidence-based pathway to optimizing and expanding employer engagement strategies that work. We find:

- Employer engagement strategies are characterized by a lack of rigorous and detailed study of evidence-based approaches, though commonalities exist across how workforce programs establish, maintain, and deepen relationships with employers.
- Employers cite basic literacy and numeracy skills, soft skills, and increasingly executive skills as needs among their workers, with the [pandemic heightening](#) needs for soft skills and accelerating changes in expectations by employers and employees.

- CBOs seek to align the needs of Opportunity Youth and employers, while juggling funder incentives and metrics often focused more on short-term outputs than outcomes.
- Opportunity Youth face many of the same challenges as other young people seeking employment, but may face additional barriers related to mental health, housing instability, justice involvement, and access to transportation and childcare.
- The federal workforce-development system has long mandated a “dual customer” approach that values the needs of employers and jobseekers equally. However, measuring employer engagement is a nascent area within the publicly funded workforce system and elsewhere. We identify some promising metrics for further exploration.
- Disconnects abound among employers, Opportunity Youth, and CBOs: Employers are not accessing the documented return on investment of hiring diverse talent generally and Opportunity Youth in particular. CBOs are not effectively tracking employment and retention of OY in job placements. And employer policies still often hinder the hiring and retention of OY.

The experiences of Opportunity Youth in the labor market are different from other young workers in scale, but not in kind. They are experiencing trends more intensely that affect all young adults. The challenges Opportunity Youth face today will eventually affect all young people. Thus, the actions we take to improve the hiring and retention of Opportunity Youth will pay dividends far into the future.

In contrast to other areas of the workforce-development and youth-development fields, there is limited agreement on the nature of the work of employer engagement, how this work gets measured and evaluated, and where improvement is needed. However, there is growing consensus around the value of a portfolio of best practices and approaches. Further, funders, including the federal government, also have a strong, longstanding interest in forging durable relationships among employers, CBOs, and young people.

Measurement of employer engagement is still an evolving field. We review many measures of employer engagement, including ones used in the public workforce system and outside of that system. Given other findings in research on employer engagement, we are particularly interested in a few of these pilot measures of employer engagement:

- Retention with the same employer, which sheds light on employer satisfaction.
- Business placement rate, which measures the quality of referrals that CBOs provide to employers.
- Employer engagement by category, which could serve as a measure the depth of employer relationships; and
- The percentage of employers engaged compared with all employers in the measurement area, which addresses the absolute scope of employer-engagement efforts.

There are a few commonsense next steps that major players in youth-employment ecosystems can take. First, as employers struggle for workers and worry about the costs of turnover, what better time to develop strategies that center the voices of young people and allow them to engage with employers to maximize effective working relationships? Throughout our review of the literature on employer engagement, we found virtually no reference to youth voice, youth co-design, and youth-adult partnership. Through engaging with young people, CBOs customize their employer-engagement efforts to the desires of young people, and employers could learn more granular information about the individual and community barriers facing young people.

Other steps include:

- CBOs and employers should establish as much continuity as possible in staffing, shared files, and shared data.
- CBOs, employers, and school systems alike should do a better job of teaching soft skills and incorporating employment information and trends over the arc of a young person's development.
- Employers should take the initial diversity, equity, and inclusion steps that we [identify](#).
- CBOs should communicate clear expectations to employers for job placement, including sectors and job quality indicators (benefits, stable hours, advancement opportunities, belonging).
- Workforce system leaders should develop more longitudinal data about young adults' duration in employment, wages, and satisfaction.
- CBOs and employers should engage young leaders and employees to improve their experience of employment programs and workplaces, respectively.

Across research on employer engagement, we note a lack of consideration of the effects of the public workforce system. Services funded by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act are underfunded and variable in quality, but they provide a baseline set of expectations for the relationship among young people, CBOs, and employers, as well as a set of performance measures, including for employer engagement. All research in this area should consider the influence of federally mandated program elements and performance measures.

This review of the research on employer engagement reveals what many practitioners have long known: the employer engagement field is still seeking to identify a shared set of practices that make a difference. Given this reality, the youth employment community, in partnership with employers, educators and workforce practitioners, must develop a shared understanding of employer-engagement practices that make a difference, as well as measures of success. This continuum should include recommended activities beginning in middle school and describe preparation/strategies/etc. that will result in access to high-quality jobs, mentorship and social capital, and agency for all young adults.

## Introduction

As previously mentioned, the COVID-19 pandemic has made the task of connecting young people to work all the more urgent. As the virus spread across the world, economic activity stalled, unemployment soared, and unemployment insurance claims skyrocketed. This pandemic, as with any economic downturn, makes for a particularly challenging time for young people, especially Opportunity Youth. By June 2020, the disconnection rate among youth [spiked to 28 percent](#). This impact on unemployment is felt both in the short and long term: young adults who experience even 1 year of unemployment before age 23 [bear “wage scars” 10 years later](#).

Career and workforce development designed to foster economic sustainability and self-sufficiency for the future of young people is an economic imperative. A [study by Georgetown University](#) found that by the end of 2020 there would be 31 million new jobs created due to retirement. As we enter a [fourth industrial revolution](#), coupled with workers aging out of the workforce in historic numbers, cultivating the economic potential of Opportunity Youth is more important than ever. If left unfulfilled, this will have profound and long-term negative effects on our society and its workforce, including continued wage disparity and an inability to compete with emerging global economies.

Publicly funded workforce development programs and many employers recognize the urgency of connecting Opportunity Youth to employment, and advancement within employment. Our goal with this literature review is to examine past research, case studies, toolkits, and other evidence from the field on employer engagement, with an eye toward developing an evidence-based pathway to optimizing and expanding employer engagement strategies that work.

In this brief, we find:

- Employer engagement strategies remain “the black box of workforce program services,” with a lack of rigorous and detailed study of evidence-based approaches, though commonalities exist across how workforce programs establish, maintain, and deepen relationships with employers.
- Employers cite basic literacy and numeracy skills, soft skills, and increasingly executive skills as needs among their workers, with the [pandemic heightening](#) demands for soft skills and accelerating changes in expectations by employers and employees.
- CBOs seek to align the needs of Opportunity Youth and employers, while juggling funder incentives and metrics often focused more on short-term outputs than outcomes.
- Opportunity Youth face many of the same barriers as other young people seeking employment, but may face additional barriers related to mental health, housing instability, justice involvement, and access to transportation and childcare.
- The federal workforce-development system has long mandated a “dual customer” approach that values the needs of employers and jobseekers equally. However, measuring employer engagement is a nascent area within the publicly funded



workforce system and elsewhere. We identify some promising metrics for further exploration.

- Disconnects abound among employers, Opportunity Youth, and CBOs: Employers are not accessing the documented return on investment of hiring diverse talent generally and Opportunity Youth in particular, CBOs are not effectively tracking employment and retention of Opportunity Youth in job placements, and employer policies still often hinder the hiring and retention of Opportunity Youth.

In a future effort, we will synthesize this evidence into a set of proposed core practices for the field, with a particular focus on practices that lead to sustainable relationships and significant impacts on hiring Opportunity Youth.

The experiences of Opportunity Youth in the labor market are different from other young workers in scale, but not in kind. They are experiencing trends more intensely that affect all young adults, many of whom face barriers historic and recent to their effort to enter the workforce. The summer job [has all but disappeared](#) as a rite of passage, jobs [no longer open the door](#) to homeownership, and expectations for retiring at the end of a career [are eroding](#). The challenges Opportunity Youth face today will eventually affect all young people. The actions we take to improve the hiring and retention of Opportunity Youth will pay dividends far into the future.



## Defining the Practice of Employer Engagement

Employer engagement [refers to](#) the different ways in which local workforce development boards (workforce boards) and community-based organizations (CBOs, also called “workforce programs” or “service providers” throughout) engage with employers. The goals of these efforts

are to meet employer needs, align program offerings to industry demands, and support employers as they work with young people. Employer engagement occurs in many contexts and takes many forms; to include its deep roots with [Career Technical Education \(CTE\)](#), providing K-12 and post-secondary work-based learning and early professional development approach. For the purposes of this review, we focus primarily on the ways that employment-focused CBOs attempt to connect Opportunity Youth with employers.

The activities that fall under the umbrella of employer engagement reflect a few premises about the relationship between entities in the workforce-development system and employers, including:

1. Workforce programs are the entities primarily responsible for preparing jobseekers for work.
2. These programs prepare participants for jobs with current private-sector employers in existing sectors of the economy, not self-employment and generally not non-profit or public-sector employment.
3. Workforce programs must engage with employers to find and develop work for their program participants (i.e., most employers will not seek out programs or their participants without engagement).
4. Workforce programs must align their offerings with the needs of existing employers and industry sectors (which may be in tension with the needs and desires of their participants and quite possibly, philosophy of the CBO); and
5. Workforce programs must provide ongoing support to participants after they are hired, presumably because their employers may not provide them or may fire participants if they show a need for support.

## Exploring the “The Black Box of Workforce Program Services”

The [introduction](#) to a collection of resources on the federally-funded technical assistance website WorkforceGPS paints a provocative picture of the place of employer engagement within the workforce-development system:

Organizations and agencies running programs to help participants find jobs often hear the mantra of employer engagement. To help participants get jobs, it is necessary to engage employers. But in many ways, the term “employer engagement” is the black box of workforce program services. It is where all the answers lie, but no one knows what is in the black box.

1. Commonalities exist across how CBOs conduct employer engagement, even in the absence of field-wide clarity on the nature of the work. An Urban Institute analysis of practices at three CBOs [identified several common strategies](#):

Careful selection of employers (are they a good match for our jobseekers?).



1. Targeting employers (can we meet an employer's needs?).
2. Strong knowledge of employer needs.
3. Involving employers in program design.
4. Supportive services that help jobseekers and attract employers.
5. Building trusting relationships with employers by building a track record.
6. Leveraging relationships with other CBOs, intermediaries, and employers to access new employer networks.
7. Providing non-employment services to employers, such as knowledge of their community and customer base; and
8. Doing everything possible to overcome stigma against jobseekers (focusing on applicants' assets, creating non-hiring settings for connection, offering transitional jobs to create low-risk employment opportunities, and advocating for jobseekers).

Another [study](#) by the Urban Institute identified a few of the challenges employers and workforce programs face as they strive to build effective relationships. Of course, one of the biggest challenges for CBOs is the scarcity of resources available to undertake this work, and the ongoing competition among workforce organizations to secure limited funding. With such limited resources, the goal for some is to simply place youth in a job, rather than providing training or focusing on long-term job fit.

Employers face challenges in working with CBOs, as well. Many employers closely track return on investment (ROI). If engagements with CBOs do not produce an immediate return in terms of high-quality candidates, many choose not to continue their relationship. Employers may also be wary of working with populations with barriers to employment or little work experience, like Opportunity Youth. Finally, employers may be concerned about working with employers from the same industry, which could expose their hiring tactics or operational strategy to competitors.

## Frameworks and Assessments that Describe Employer Engagement

Workforce organizations have proposed numerous **frameworks** for designing and implementing employer-engagement strategies (see [Appendix A](#)). For example, the California-based intermediary New Ways to Work (NWW) frames employer engagement as a basket of key strategies for community-based organizations to undertake. In [Employer Engagement Quick Guide](#), NWW outlines ways for workforce programs to improve their approach to employer engagement by shifting the way they view and interact with employers, including by promoting customer service, targeting resources, focusing on outcomes, applying a comprehensive approach, and viewing employers and both partners and customers. [Urban Institute's framework](#) focuses on the differing goals of employers and workforce programs, and shares activities that can advance both sets of goals and produce outcomes for jobseekers and participants. Employers may have goals of finding qualified applicants, reducing costs, addressing specific needs, and meeting diversity goals, while workforce programs may seek to help participants find and keep

jobs, establish and maintain credibility with employers, effect change for workers broadly, and raise funds. The challenge is to find activities that meet both goals.

Randall Wilson of Jobs for the Future (JFF) frames this work as a chronological “ladder of engagement” in the [Resource Guide to Employer Engagement](#). The JFF framework focuses on the changing nature of relationships over time, with examples from the context of collaboration between employers and community colleges. At each level, trust and alignment increase, as do the possibilities for collaboration. In the final stage, employers and service providers meet each other's strategic needs.

Integrating ideas from these frameworks, we offer a structure for employer engagement from the perspective of CBOs. This framework conceives of employer engagement as a deepening relationship, with a changing set of core activities and potential outcomes.

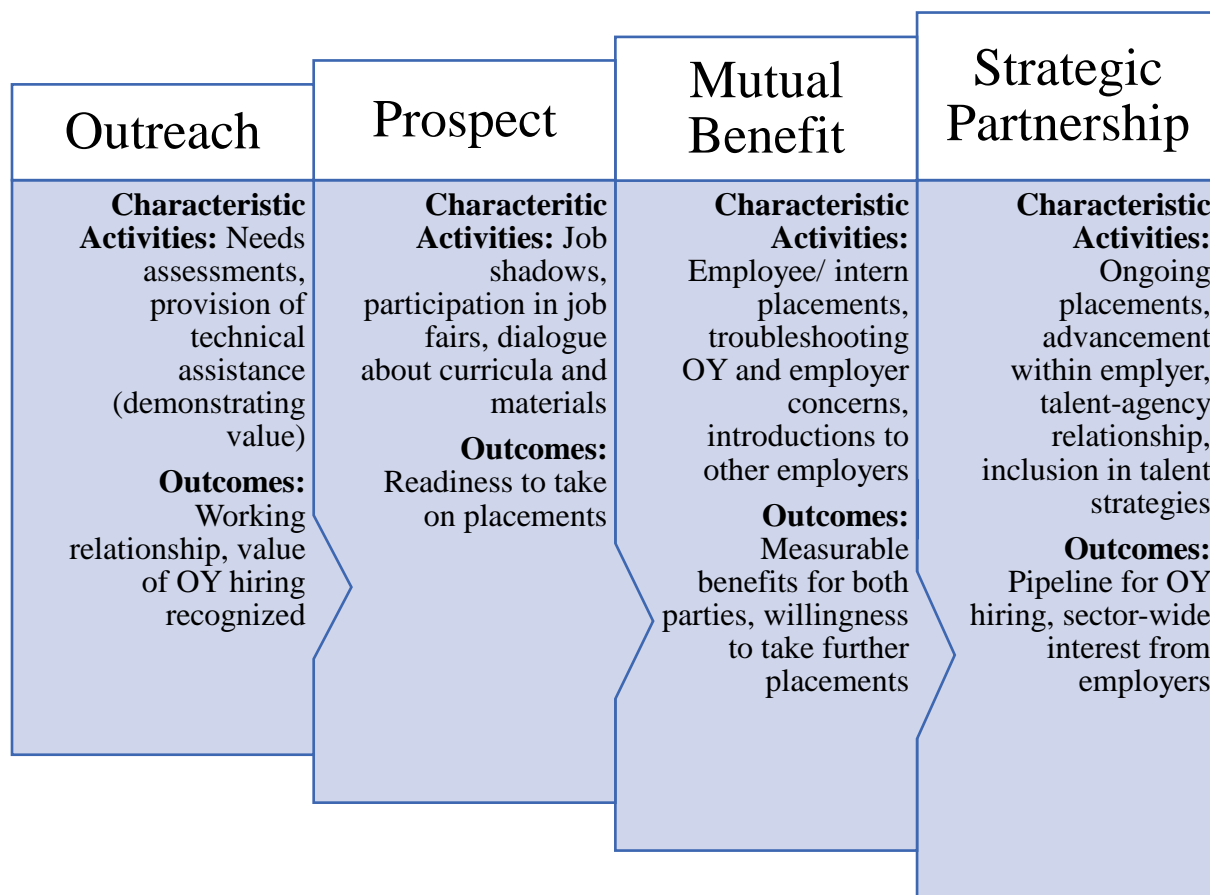


Figure 1. A Proposed Synthesis of Employer Engagement Frameworks for Community-Based Organizations, emphasizing different activities and outcomes over time. Several **Assessments** exist to support efforts of CBOs and employers to hire Opportunity Youth. One of the most powerful tools for this is FSG’s Investing in Entry-Level Talent and the Opportunity

Navigator, recently developed for employers interested in building their capacity to source, hire, retain and advance Opportunity Youth. [Investing in Entry-Level Talent and the Opportunity Navigator](#). This simple tool helps companies understand how they are performing against an evidence-based set of best practices, resulting in a roadmap of next steps for those trying to enhance their outcomes. NWW's [Employer Engagement and Recruitment: A Quick Guide to Effective Resource](#) offers a self-assessment for CBOs, which drills down on activities related to the five strategies from its framework (described above) and compares the current efforts of workforce professionals to a wide range of employer engagement activities. For example, to assess whether the organization views employers as both customers and strategic partners, it asks if team members are familiar with regional needs and trends, if they have defined the value proposition and are focused on win/win opportunities, and if the organization cultivates long term relationships with employers.

## Getting Started: There's No One Right Way to Engage Employers

An effective [employer engagement strategy](#) works to provide job opportunities for young as a first step in [engaging with employers](#), CBOs must understand employers' needs, including skills required for job success, workplace culture and expectations, how the employer considers applicants with different barriers to employment, and preferences regarding forms of contact and communication. Employers must also understand their potential employees, e.g., what are their needs regarding wages, benefits, transportation, and/or work schedules? Beyond skills, employers should consider what kind of personalities thrive at their company and in the specific roles for which they are hiring.

The [role of intermediaries](#) when engaging with employers is to identify their current and future hiring needs. Intermediaries act to reduce transaction costs in the operation of the hiring process, for both job seekers and employers. The [National Fund for Workforce Solutions](#) (NFWS) is an intermediary founded to create a national network of sites using a demand-driven model for workforce development, i.e., one that works back from the needs of employers. Nonetheless, NFWS has not reached a consensus on the best approach to employer engagement. In fact, a review of employer engagement approaches across NFWS finds [great variation](#) in strategies, with some engagement coordinators primarily working with employers one-on-one, some focusing on groups of employers, and still others working through industry associations. Even in the context of the demand driven NFWS model, “funding, staff, and time” among nonprofit conveners of workforce partnerships remain major barriers to engagement.

Ultimately, employers, young people, and CBOs all have roles to play in expanding economic opportunity for Opportunity Youth – and their work takes place in the context of a system that can support or impede their efforts. In the sections that follow, we delve into the unique needs of employers, young people, and CBOs:

- Skills and experiences that employers seek
- Needs and barriers facing Opportunity Youth
- Role of CBOs in matching employers with young workers
- Workforce-development system that sets the context for these interactions

## Meeting the Needs of Employers

As workforce programs seek to engage employers, understanding their needs is an essential first step. Employers vary greatly in the skills, experiences, and credentials they seek from their employees. In this section, we briefly examine a few common categories of workforce needs, including basic literacy and numeracy skills, soft skills, and executive skills. Because they are learned and practiced over time, Opportunity Youth may have had fewer opportunities to attain these skills. Therefore, workforce programs must develop and foster these skills needed to meet employer demands.

### Basic Literacy and Numeracy Skills

In some instances, employer needs have been at the forefront of both higher education institutions as well as workforce development programs, but there seems to be a disconnect in the types of skills employers are looking for. That is, many service providers prioritize hard skills, when employers need workers who are functional adults with basic skills.

According to research on the [essential skills that employers are searching for](#), the workforce needs skills that are seemingly in short supply; such as problem solving, personal management, and interpersonal skills in addition to the ability to organize and verbalize thoughts, and work well in teams and resolve conflict.

### Soft Skills

[Soft skills](#), also known as 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, power skills, or core skills, are applicable to most occupations, and include attributes such as critical thinking, problem solving, public speaking, and teamwork. (A related concept, employability skills, tends to combine soft skills with basic academic competencies). Although soft skills are desired, they are rarely explicitly taught in the K-12 education system and have become the [coded language for white favoritism](#) in workplace practices, often leaving behind people of color.

As most workforce development programs focus on training for hard skills, employers can help by advocating for soft skill training to be included not only in the workforce development programs with which they work, but also in secondary schools which also may be feeding their entry-level pipelines, either directly or indirectly. Employers can also champion and develop employee soft skills via a broader effort within their own companies over time through formal workforce training efforts and mentorship programs.

[According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers](#), young people are lacking soft skills, which are needed to succeed in the marketplace. The key attributes employers seek revolve around more than just soft skills, but a more [unified skills approach](#), to include social awareness, verbal communication, and problem solving, among others. When we help young people entering the workforce understand that they have the capacity to develop these foundational skills, all while supporting employers to embrace different work styles, the more meaningful gainful employment will be for both employers and young people.

## Executive Skills

As [defined](#) by the Harvard University Center on the Developing Child, executive skills (also called executive function or executive function skills) are those that:

Enable us to plan, focus attention, remember instructions, and juggle multiple tasks successfully. Just as an air traffic control system at a busy airport safely manages the arrivals and departures of many aircraft on multiple runways, the brain needs this skill set to filter distractions, prioritize tasks, set and achieve goals, and control impulses.

A [knowledge-based economy](#) prizes executive skills, though they have not been a historic focus of the education or workforce-development systems. [Research](#) by Building Better Programs finds that these skills are important for sustained employability. The [cognitive skills that structure executive skills](#) help us to limit impulsive responses, regulate emotions, and avoid bad decisions that may bring short-term gain but longer-term problems. These thinking skills contribute to the ability to perform well in school or in the workplace.

## A Rapidly Changing Landscape

In addition to these general needs around literacy and numeracy, soft skills, and executive skills, CBOs must also be aware of the individual needs of employers. For example, Commonwealth Corporation, a Massachusetts-based organization working on building skills for a stronger economy, emphasizes in their [employer-engagement guide](#) the differing needs of smaller and larger enterprises. For example, engaging larger employers requires connecting with employees at different levels in the organizations' hierarchy, and across different functional areas – posing a coordination and communication challenge for CBOs. Smaller organizations often possess a more direct line of communication for CBOs, but the point of contact may wear multiple hats and have more difficulty engaging deeply.

While the need for literacy and numeracy, soft skills, and executive skills will doubtless continue, the mix of these skills required in any given job is changing rapidly. As a 2022 [Burning Glass Institute report notes](#), soft skill needs are appearing in postings for jobs in the tech sector that used to focus more on technical know-how. This is happening in the context of a rapid reshuffling. The Burning Glass report paints a picture of the challenging landscape employers are today navigating:

There's a need to seek talent with new skills, to reskill and upskill employees, and to train and develop those in search of jobs. And all of this must happen while the skill profiles of many jobs continue to morph—it's a moving target.

Beyond skills, employers are managing an upheaval in where work is done, when, and what supports employees need to succeed. Employers are even taking on some of the work associated with human services organizations: a McKinsey blog post urges employers to [“manage fundamental human needs.”](#)



## Meeting the Needs of Opportunity Youth

Engaging employers and supporting employers when they hire Opportunity Youth lessen the structural disadvantages these young people confront in their search for employment. Opportunity Youth face some barriers that are common to all young people, as well as challenges stemming from historical and systemic bias.

Rates of disconnection and the barriers facing Opportunity Youth vary widely across the United States. CBOs can play an important role in educating employers on the nature of the Opportunity Youth population in their local service area, and employers have a duty to understand their pool of potential employees.

### Opportunity Youth Face Barriers in the Labor Market

Many young adults struggle to get a foothold in the labor market. Unemployment rates for young adults aged 20-24 are approximately [twice as high](#) as those for workers 25 and older. Further, the youth labor force participation rate (a broader measure of interest in and engagement with the labor market) shows a decades-long slide; since the Great Recession levels have [fallen to match those not seen since the early 1970s](#).

Like other young adults, Opportunity Youth may be filtered out of hiring processes by [unnecessary educational requirements](#). [Previous research](#) has found significant gaps between the education requirements of current job listings and the credentials possessed by workers already in those fields. This so-called "[degree inflation](#)" keeps competent workers out of good jobs in which they could do well and makes life more precarious for those without a degree.

Initial research by Burning Glass and Harvard Business School suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic [contributed to an easing](#) of degree inflation. The same research found evidence that employers see bachelor's degrees as a proxy for soft-skills attainment: in many occupations where degree requirements eased, mentions of soft skills in job descriptions increased.

Opportunity Youth often lack connections to people, organizations, and institutions that can help them get work, a concept known as social capital. Research shows that social capital is associated with a host of [positive outcomes](#) including greater educational attainment, full-time employment, and career advancement opportunities. These, in turn, allow youth to acquire jobs through referrals and thus, lead to higher wages when entering the working world.

In addition to these challenges facing other young people, Opportunity Youth face barriers related to historical and systemic bias. Measure of America (MOA) analyzes Census Bureau data to [catalogue](#) the challenging circumstances faced by Opportunity Youth. For example, compared to their peers, Opportunity Youth are about twice as likely to live in poverty, three times more likely to have a disability, 20 times more likely to live in an institution (such as a jail or prison), and eight times more likely to have failed to complete high school. Female Opportunity Youth are four times as likely to be mothers compared to other young women. Previous MOA research [has found](#) that Opportunity Youth are more than three times as likely to

have a disability, and that boys and young men are slightly more likely to be disconnected. These barriers are intergenerational: Opportunity Youth are about [three times as likely](#) to come from a high-poverty area.

Racial gaps in youth disconnection are wide and have remained stable over the years: The most recent Measure of America data [finds](#) disconnection rates of 23.4% for Native youth, 19.6% for Black youth, 14% for Latino youth, 10.6% for White youth, and 7.3% for Asian youth. These gaps reflect even wider disparities than in the broader labor market: The unemployment rate for White adults is [consistently about half that](#) of Black adults.

These racial gaps result from and are amplified by justice involvement:

- Youth with juvenile records can experience a variety of [barriers to their continued education](#) and employment, even as a result of committing minor offenses.
- In a [2019 study](#), researchers reported that 58 percent of Black teenagers living in urban areas were stopped by police, compared to only 14 percent of White teens.
- The [CSG Justice Center](#) found that White men with a criminal record received more callbacks than Black men with no criminal record.

Finally, Opportunity Youth face barriers related to retaining employment, including access to transportation, safe housing, childcare, healthy food, and banking and financial services. For example, in an analysis of the Chicago metro area, MOA [found](#) that the neighborhoods with the highest youth disconnection rates also had the highest rates for workers who commute more than an

## The Ban the Box Movement

Opportunity Youth are more likely to be connected to the juvenile or criminal justice system than other young people. OY are [20 times more likely](#) than connected youth to live in institutionalized settings such as jails, prisons, or residential treatment facilities, with the most recent data showing about 6% of OY living in such arrangements. This rate rises to one in six for Black male Opportunity Youth. Like adults, youth with juvenile records can experience a variety of [barriers to their continued education](#) and employment, even as a result of committing minor offenses. A [2011 study](#) conducted by the National Bureau of Economic Research found that 71% of employers would “probably not” or “definitely not” accept applicants with criminal records. To address this discrimination, the [Ban the Box movement](#) seeks to remove inquiries about criminal history from job applications. The movement takes its name from boxes on job applications asking whether applicants have ever been convicted of a felony. Over 150 cities and counties and 34 states and Washington, DC, have [\(BTB\) policies](#). Many private employers have also voluntarily adopted ban-the box-hiring policies, including Walmart, Target, the Home Depot, Bed Bath & Beyond, and Koch Industries Inc. Initial research finds that policies are enacted [hiring rates increase](#) after BTB policies are enacted other studies find racial discrimination [may increase](#) after BTB policies are enacted, underlining the need to address systemic barriers in a comprehensive way.

hour each way to work. The inverse was also true: areas with low rates of disconnection featured fewer workers with long commutes.

## Connecting Employers and Young People: The Role of Community-Based Organizations

In the United States, CBOs are often called upon to bridge the needs of employers and young people, mostly by increasing their readiness to work while simultaneously trying to alleviate the challenges and obstacles they face in this new experience. Through career-readiness workshops, training programs, and wraparound supports, CBOs strive to help young people meet the immediate needs of employers and increase their long-term earning potential. These practices are documented in a [federally funded compendium](#) that reviews research on the experiences of 78 programs serving Opportunity Youth.

### Preparing Opportunity Youth for the World of Work

According to the [American Student Association \(ASA\)](#), middle school students should become knowledgeable of the world of work and have opportunities to explore potential career pathways that reflect their interests and talents. In other countries, these exploratory experiences are woven into education and training systems that are guided by employer needs and enable most young people to transition smoothly to employment; e.g., see [this comparison](#) of U.S. pathways efforts to those of Germany, Switzerland, and Singapore.

But too many Opportunity Youth have not had these exploratory experiences. As Jerome Jupiter of the Youth Empowerment Project in New Orleans puts it:

Soft skills are the biggest need. No career exploration is happening in schools. We need to do a lot of this for our young people (Jupiter, 2022)

As a result, many CBOs apply a [career pathway framework](#) to encourage career exploration, while also preparing young people to enter jobs in one or more industry sectors. For Opportunity Youth, a pathway model can provide what more privileged young people often take for granted: a way to identify a promising field, gain the necessary competencies to prepare for a family-sustaining, long-term career, and then secure employment in that field. Pathways models usually include:

- Career exploration opportunities (interest inventories, introductions to workers and workplaces).
- The basic skills needed to succeed in postsecondary education or training that leads to jobs in those sectors.

- Internships and initial work experience in those jobs and sectors.
- Continued training opportunities to advance while working; and
- Supportive services throughout.

High-quality secondary schools may provide some of these experiences, but Opportunity Youth are likely to have missed chances for basic exploration opportunities, including locally available jobs the training and education required, the costs of getting to work, likely salaries, and trends that affect job openings.

Similarly, Opportunity Youth may have never completed an interest inventory that matches their preferences and aptitudes to available work in their area. (The federally funded [O-Net Interest Profiler](#) is an example of this kind of tool.) They may also need to complete job-search prerequisites, such as making a resume and creating a profile on LinkedIn or other social-media apps.

Other forms of career exploration include visits to worksites, connections to mentors in different sectors, career-contextual educational content, and participation in career technical education student associations. These experiences are critical for youth, giving them a chance to imagine different kinds of work, different kinds of workplaces, and different futures. They also provide initial exposure to the workplace and a venue for increasing awareness and [career readiness](#). Finally, Opportunity Youth need chances to develop and experience the sense of agency that wealthier young people take for granted: the chance to explore different options, change their minds, and pursue varied experiences.

## Common Program Structures for Increasing Employer Interest in Opportunity Youth

Since the Civilian Conservation Corps was founded in 1933, workforce-development programs have been evolving to prepare young adults for the world of work. Today most programs offer a mix of education, training, life skills, career pathways, and mentorship opportunities – all with an eye to preparing young people for employment. These are similar to the 14 required program elements of the federal WIOA law [discussed below](#).

Several OY-focused program models have gained national notoriety: [Job Corps](#), founded as part of the 1960s War on Poverty, offers residential education and training programs. [YouthBuild](#) programs provide sector-based training pathways, paired with GED preparation and life skills instruction. And most large cities are home to sophisticated youth-employment organizations that offer services responsive to the needs of young people in their area.

For decades [transitional employment](#) (And subsidized employment, a closely related concept) have relied on time-limited, wage-subsidized job placements that reduce the risk of hiring for employers and give employees a chance to try out a job for a brief period. These models have helped youth and others with barriers to employment “get their foot in the door” with employers and help them build work experience.

[Encouraged](#) by federal legislation, an increasingly important approach to workforce development programming is [sector-based strategies](#). The Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program [defines](#) a sector strategy as one that:

- Targets a specific industry or cluster of occupations, developing a deep understanding of the interrelationships between business competitiveness and the workforce needs of the targeted industry.
- Intervenes through a credible organization, or set of organizations, crafting workforce solutions tailored to that industry and its region.
- Supports workers in improving their range of employment-related skills, improving their ability to compete for work opportunities of higher quality.
- Meets the needs of employers, improving their ability to compete within the marketplace; and
- Creates lasting change in the labor market system to the benefit of both workers and employers.

Sectoral approaches often need to go beyond the workforce system to improve outcomes for disadvantaged workers. For example, a [sectoral strategy in Cleveland](#) needed to address mismatches between public transportation options and worksites.

OY-focused apprenticeships are also an expanding program model. Apprenticeships combine a promise of future employment with sector-specific skills training. Apprenticeships incorporate a “earn-while-you-learn” approach, which provides participants with a salary while enrolled in the program. The Los Angeles Economic and Workforce Development Department [now focuses its apprenticeship efforts](#) on high-growth sectors in LA, including healthcare, green technology, information technology, and logistics. Apprenticeships have the potential to change hiring patterns and address workforce shortages in these sectors, equipping a new labor force with necessary skills and training to advance career pathways and reduce Los Angeles’ middle-skill employment gap.

For basic information about job openings, skill inventories, and referrals to other services, individuals as young as 14 can visit [American Job Centers](#) (AJCs, also known as “one-stop centers”). Part of the federally funded workforce-development system, AJCs number 2,400 nationwide.

Most youth workforce program offerings focus on preparing young people for work in the private sector, though “entrepreneurial skills training” is one of the 14 program elements required under the federal WIOA law. The federally funded technical assistance website WorkforceGPS [classes](#) classifies entrepreneurship programs as “entrepreneurship education,” “enterprise development,” or “experiential programs,” with [common elements](#) including “education or skills training, skills application, mentorship, and peer networking.” The International Youth Foundation offers a [detailed handbook](#) for creating entrepreneurship programs, including finding connections to financing, monitoring and evaluation, and follow-up services for new businesses. The Aspen Institute Opportunity Youth Forum has supported several sites through its Youth Entrepreneurship Fund, [finding](#) interest among Opportunity Youth in entrepreneurship as well as work in the so-called “gig economy.”



## Employer Engagement: Current Practices

When CBOs begin engaging with employers, building this relationship is no small task. This Commonwealth Corporation [handbook](#) is intended to be a comprehensive aid in planning and executing successful employer engagement activities. To capture specific, actionable practices that can jump-start employer engagement, we reviewed implementation studies of employer engagement by CBOs, including a [study](#) by Urban Institute of three CBOs, Cara Chicago, Henry Street Settlement in New York City, and Community Learning Center Inc., in the Dallas-Fort Worth area; another [study](#) of the Urban Alliance program; and EmployIndy's [Talent Bound Toolkit](#). We group practices underway to align with JFF's' [Ladder of Employer Engagement](#) framework, cited below.

### *Establishing New Relationships with Employers*

- Dedicated business development managers conduct outreach and develop relationships, then hand off relationship (Cara Chicago)
- Job developer is responsible for both outreach and maintenance of employer relationships (Community Learning Center Inc.)  
Participant barriers are brought up strategically, only to employers that seek out the CBO because of its mission (Henry Street Settlement)

### *Maintaining Working Relationships with Employers*

- Corporate account managers help employers fill vacancies and maintain relationships (Cara Chicago)
- Employers organize regular, immersive job shadows where young people join and contribute to meetings (EmployIndy)
- Each participant is paired with a trained mentor; both receive support throughout work placement (Urban Alliance)
- Program coordinators keep in contact with employers, problem-solving challenges as they arise (Urban Alliance)

### *Establishing Strategic Partnership with Employers (Deep Employer Engagement)*

- Employers participate in CBO's daily "pep rally" for participants and staff (Cara Chicago)
- Employer representatives interview potential participants (Urban Alliance)
- Target industry co-creates curricula and trainings (Community Learning Center Inc.)
- Employees of target-industry employers deliver trainings (Community Learning Center Inc.)
- Employers host talent challenges aimed at solving real business problems (EmployIndy)
- Target industry representatives serve on the board of directors (Community Learning Center Inc.)

## Employer Engagement in Context: The Role of the Workforce Development System

Engaging employers is an [important strategy for workforce development programs](#): it can help align programs with employer needs so youth can secure jobs, help youth gain appropriate skills and experience, and positively impact their local communities. However, federal workforce development policies have for decades been [geared toward](#) “work-first” programs that emphasize meeting the immediate needs of employers, also referred to as the “demand” side of the labor market. As a result, workforce programs tend to offer short programs that focus on rapid job placement, which may not offer holistic support to Opportunity Youth.

President Obama signed the [Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act \(WIOA\)](#) July 22, 2014. WIOA was the first update to the nation’s workforce development programs since the passage of the [Workforce Investment Act \(WIA\)](#) in 1998. As with previous federal workforce statutes, WIOA mandates that workforce programs take a “dual customer” approach that equally values the interests of jobseekers and employers.

Local workforce development boards (LWDBs or workforce boards), which must be comprised of at least 50% employers, are designed to engage with businesses, meet their needs, and measure how well their needs are being met. Sec. 107(d)(4) of the law directs workforce boards to “engage with a diverse range of employers” for a variety of purposes, including “to ensure that workforce investment activities meet the needs of employers and support economic growth in the region...and to develop and implement proven or promising strategies for meeting the employment and skill needs of workers and employers (such as the establishment of industry and sector partnerships)”.

The new law updates, or reauthorizes, the nation’s job training, adult education, and vocational rehabilitation programs. Compared to WIA, WIOA increased the focus on Opportunity Youth and employer engagement in a few ways:

- Increasing focus on the most vulnerable workers, including increasing to 75 percent the amount of youth-focused formula funds that must be spent on “out-of-school youth” (similar to Opportunity Youth).
- Encouraging spending on several employer-focused models, including increasing the amount that can be spent on approaches such as on-the-job training, incumbent worker training, and transitional jobs: and
- Adding a new “effectiveness in serving employers” performance measure.

While designed to be a cohesive, comprehensive system that ensures high-quality services are available to meet the needs of employers and jobseekers, the WIOA-authorized system is vastly underfunded. As a percentage of gross domestic product, the average wealthy country [spends about three times as much](#) on training as the United States; France spends nearly 10 times as much. As a result, in the last program year before the COVID-19 pandemic, the

WIOA Title I Youth formula program only served [154,120 young people](#). During the program year ending June 30, 2021, the program served [123,359](#). Federal funding makes up most workforce-development spending in the U.S., but underfunding means that state and especially local and philanthropic funds are often required to keep programs operating.

## WIOA's Core Performance Measures

States, workforce boards, CBOs, and other entities that receive WIOA funding are held accountable to that law's performance measures. The WIOA Title I Youth formula program, federally funded YouthBuild programs, and Jobs Corps are accountable to the [indicators](#) specified in section 116(b) of WIOA:

- Percentage of program participants who are in education or training activities, or in unsubsidized employment, during the second quarter after exit from the program.
- Percentage of program participants who are in education or training activities, or in unsubsidized employment, during the fourth quarter after exit from the program.
- Median earnings of program participants who are in unsubsidized employment during the second quarter after exit from the program.
- Percentage of program participants who obtain a recognized postsecondary credential, or a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent during participation in or within 1 year after exit from the program.
- Percentage of program participants who, during a program year, are in an education or training program that leads to a recognized postsecondary credential or employment and who are achieving measurable skill gains toward such a credential or employment.
- Effectiveness in serving employers.

## Measuring Effectiveness in Serving Employers under WIOA

WIOA mandated the creation of a new core performance measure focused on “effectiveness in serving employers.” As an [Urban Institute](#) study notes, measuring service to employers presents a challenge to the workforce system: “Workforce development programs have had a great deal of experience defining and measuring program performance based on the experiences of participants, but they have had much less experience measuring performance in serving employers.” Furthermore, in most states core WIOA programs are spread across several state agencies, increasing the work required for data collection and reporting, and for taking up and implementing new measures. Partially for these reasons, Congress left the WIOA statute vague in what the new indicator should look like, simply specifying that one should exist.

The Department of Labor, charged with implementing the law in partnership with the Department of Education, has piloted different approaches to measuring service to the employers. In [guidance](#) issued August 23, 2017, the agencies laid out a plan for states in which they must choose 2 of 3 federally defined ways of measuring effectiveness. They also may add a third, state-defined measure. The three federally defined measures include:

1. **Retention with the same employer:** *The percentage of participants who exit a program for a job and are still employed with the same employer in the second and fourth quarters after exit.* This measure is intended to capture whether workforce programs are helping employers by providing workers with relevant skills and decreasing turnover. A benefit of this measure is that it uses data that workforce programs already collect. The downsides of the measure are that an employee may leave an employer for many reasons, such as getting a better job offer or facing discrimination on the job, and that retention rates naturally vary widely depending on geography and labor market.
2. **Repeat business customers:** *The percentage of employers who receive services that use core program services more than once.* This measure is intended to capture employers' satisfaction and the durability of relationships, and uses data already collected to serve as a proxy for employer satisfaction. However, the measure only makes sense when considering employers in economic contexts that allow them to hire repeatedly. It could also discourage outreach to new or smaller businesses.
3. **Employer penetration rate:** *This percentage of employers who are using program services, out of all employers represented in a local area or State.* The measure could track the reach of workforce programs. However, the measure would require programs to use a Bureau of Labor Statistics employer dataset with which they might not be familiar (and which does not capture all employers and jobs). The measure is also in tension with WIOA's general emphasis on targeting high-growth and high-wage sectors, rather than all employers. Finally, the penetration rate measures an output (connection with employers) rather than an outcome (hiring program participants or meeting employer needs).

These and other measurements are currently being piloted by states and localities. We discuss alternative measurements of employer effectiveness, and the state of evaluating these activities, [below](#).

## Next Steps for Employing More Opportunity Youth

### Employers Can Access the Diversity Bonus by Hiring and Retaining Opportunity Youth

Hiring and retaining Opportunity Youth can unlock significant returns on investment for employers. A 2016 [Bridgespan Group report](#) offers an illustrative example, drawn from its findings that well-prepared Opportunity Youth stay in entry-level jobs longer than other employees:

The average employee makes \$21,000 per year, and costs about \$3,400 to replace. Turnover is 5 percent per month, or 60 percent per year, on average. So, for a company with 5,000 entry-level retail employees, annual turnover will be just over \$10 million. If this company can cut turnover in half by paying a workforce intermediary \$5,000 per worker to source and train each, it would save \$2.5 million per year.

This [tool from JFF](#) provides a process to calculate the return on investment for employers, as well as to assess the cost of employer engagement. It is a powerful window into the criteria by which many employers make decisions, and a business vocabulary for workforce programs to ensure more fruitful engagement with employers.

Hiring Opportunity Youth can also help employers unlock the [diversity bonus](#), a name that has emerged for improvements in business operations and outcomes that comes from a diverse and inclusive workforce. There is mounting research that confirms that a [diverse workplace tends to lead to a more productive and inclusive workplace](#). Therefore, business leaders should understand and embrace [the unique perspective and set of capabilities that OY can bring to employers](#). As the U.S. economy evolves, hiring, retaining and advancing Opportunity Youth increasingly becomes a market imperative.

The University of Maryland recommends the following [inclusion practices](#) for organizational recruitment.

- **Rethink job descriptions:** Changing the messaging on job descriptions can have a significant impact on attracting diverse backgrounds and experiences. Establishing objective criteria, defining “culture fit,” and demanding accountability is important to establish an objective criterion and rate each applicant using a standard rubric. If technology is utilized, ensure those tools are built on data that is fair to all socio-demographic groups and insist on a diverse pool of candidates to choose from.
- **Policy changes:** Accessing diverse talent includes unconscious bias training, revamping recruitment and hiring practices, and strengthening onboarding processes.

*Many frameworks have emerged to describe the work of increasing diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace. Some frameworks include accessibility for those with disabilities, while others include social justice or other efforts to change inequitable systems. Whether the acronym is DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion), DEIJ (diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice), or IDEAS (inclusion, diversity, equity, accessibility, social justice), the shared principle of these efforts is to create workforces that both reflect the communities’ companies serve, value everyone’s contributions, and acknowledge them. Definitions of the three most common terms in the field – diversity, equity, and inclusion – are as follows:*

- Diversity refers to an employer’s effort to create a culture and workforce that reflects the variety of visible and invisible traits making up the human experience.
- Equity refers to an employer’s efforts to ensure employees, customers, and other stakeholders are not only treated fairly and without bias, but to also address the legacy of power imbalances and past wrongs.
- Inclusion refers to an employer’s effort over time to create and maintain conditions that enable everyone to feel valued, and to capture the business benefits that accrue from accessing this wisdom.



- **Retention:** Increasing the number of employees with a diverse background in an organization does not dismantle the inequality that may still exist internally. Many organization-wide DEI initiatives stop at the recruitment stage and fail to retain and promote employees of color, leading to the “illusion of inclusion.” While many leaders recognize the importance of a diverse workforce, they often fail to create an environment that values these individuals for their unique background and perspectives.

Major employers are changing their practices to capture the diversity bonus. A common retention strategy for entry-level workers is [Tuition Assistance Programs](#) in which employers pay for an employee’s educational expenses. For example, Chipotle’s generous [tuition reimbursement plan](#) covers 100% of tuition covered for select degrees, high school diplomas, and college preparation courses leading to higher retention rates of employees. Company-led training has the benefit of directly tailoring skill development to the company’s specific needs. [Wegmans](#) a chain of grocery stores, offers a new employee training program that includes six in-depth core classes. All trainings are conducted by their own employees, which provides a developmental opportunity for managers, and establishes a culture of high expectations and high support among employees.

## Community-Based Organizations Can Adjust Program Models to Meet the Needs of OY and Employers

Workforce programs face a challenging tension: The Opportunity Youth they serve have often missed opportunities to explore different careers, develop soft skills, gain social capital, or set long-term goals. Their funders, meanwhile, including the public workforce system, measure their success through program outputs: countable data points, such as job placement, credential attainment, and wage growth, that incentivize short-term programs and quick placements in credential programs or employment. However, a young person’s feeling of self-efficacy, satisfaction, or happiness is harder to quantify on a quarterly basis.

YouthBuild USA, the technical assistance provider and convener of programs that use the namesake model, is seeking to address these tensions by shifting more YouthBuild sites to [focus on work-based learning](#). By deeply integrating more kinds of education and work experiences into YouthBuild programs, leaders hope to increase career exploration and social capital-building opportunities.

Employers must also do more to measure the effectiveness of their efforts. While many companies consider youth to be an important part of their talent pipelines, [few](#)

[currently separate](#) them out to track outcomes. Because of this, it can be easy for youth to get lost in the shuffle of employee metrics, particularly at larger companies.

[Professional Training Corps \(PTC\)](#), a Year Up program model, has changed how it supports employers and young people to create better experiences for both. Managers at companies where PTC interns are placed now receive deeper orientations that include roleplaying situations identified from past Year Up cohorts. PTC staff across the organization now engage more deeply with corporate partners throughout the year, providing more chances for employers to learn about the Year Up/PTC culture. PTC staff have instituted new tools for real-time data gathering and sharing, which allows for adjustments to ensure that interns get more out of their placement experiences.

## Measuring Employer Engagement: New Measures Offer Promise

Quantitative measurement of employer engagement is an emerging field and needs further definition and alignment. In addition to the pilot measures identified in the federal guidance and [discussed above](#), the [Urban Institute](#) [has studied](#) several alternative measures of employer engagement, some of which are in use now by states. These include:

- **Active job orders with referrals:** The percentage of job postings reported to the workforce system that received a candidate referred from a program. This measure could demonstrate the depth of a workforce program's candidate pool, by measuring the extent to which the program has relevant candidates to refer to postings. This measure is in use by Pennsylvania.
- **Business placement rate:** The number of establishments that received a business service and employed a recent program participant, as a percentage of all establishments that received a business service. This would presumably measure how effective employer-focused services are at translating to employment. However, the measure would not account for business services not directly tied to employment, such as job shadows or career fairs, or

## One of the largest Employers CVS Health Finds Success with Hiring Opportunity Youth

Pharmaceutical companies, CVS Health acquired a welfare-career program used as a way to build youth pathways. They created an industry-based career pathway that allows at-risk youth to build a lasting relationship with the company. The findings of this program were the realization that strong leadership was key in developing a strong career pathway for youth in the program.

Since the program first began, 80,000 employees have been hired and many are still on a career path with the company. 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 taxes credits and rate reductions received for offering job training to disadvantaged job seekers and for opening stores in economically depressed communities.

for employees hired not from a program but indirectly related to business services (such as an employer who received assistance in changing hiring practices and began hiring more justice-impacted people overall).

- **Customer satisfaction:** One state is already piloting a biennial customer satisfaction survey with a sample of employers. This measure would capture overall employer sentiment, and areas that employers feel need improvement – and could be skewed by self-selection among respondents, lack of knowledge about potential improvements, or even ability of employer respondents to report on all their firm’s interactions with the system.

Outside the public workforce system, different initiatives and organizations have proposed their own measures of employer engagement. As identified by the Urban Institute study, these include:

- **Employer engagement by category:** Annie E. Casey Foundation-funded Generation Work sites are tracking the total number of employers engaged, as well as those engaged in different parts of the initiative, such as career exposure, work-based learning, hiring or apprenticeships, financial or in-kind support, and guidance or advocacy.
- **Employer participation in policy and system change:** The National Fund for Workforce Solutions tracks how many employers contribute regularly to strategic decision-making, change practices in pursuit of partnership goals, or participate in workforce advocacy at state or national level.
- **Measuring engagement with a points system:** The Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program proposed to DOL a measure that would award points based on the intensity of employer services provided, with lower points awarded for activities such as filling job orders, basing training on input from employers, market penetration rate, and business retention. More points would be awarded for “transformational” services such as providing training to supervisors, assisting employers in redesigning jobs, switching to competency-based hiring models, developing an apprenticeship program with employer partners, or securing employer contributions to training costs.
- Given other findings in research on employer engagement, we are particularly interested in research on a few of the pilot federal and non-federal measures of employer engagement:
  - Retention with the same employer, which sheds light on employer satisfaction.
  - Business placement rate, which measures the quality of referrals that CBOs provide to employers.
  - Employer engagement by category, which could serve as a measure the depth of employer relationships; and
  - Employer penetration rate, which addresses the absolute scope of employer-engagement efforts.

## Conclusion: Next Steps for an Emerging Field

NYEC embarked on this project with the goal of producing a digestible compendium of research on employer engagement for employers, workforce practitioners, and researchers. We have found wide variation in terms of how employer engagement is defined, how CBOs pursue their work with employers, what data is gathered about this work, and how success is defined.

In contrast to other areas of the workforce-development and youth-development fields, there is limited agreement on the nature of the work, how work gets measured and evaluated, and where improvement is needed. However, there is growing consensus around a “portfolio” of best practices and approaches. There is also a strong and longstanding interest in forging durable relationships among employers, CBOs, and young people, encouraged by federal and other funders.

There are a few commonsense next steps that major players in youth-employment ecosystems can take. First, CBOs and employers can take steps to center the voices of OY. Throughout our review of the literature on employer engagement, we found virtually no reference to youth voice, youth co-design, and youth-adult partnership. Through engaging with young people, CBOs customize their employer-engagement efforts to the desires of young people, and employers could learn more granular information about the individual and community barriers facing young people.

### Other steps include:

- CBOs and employers should establish as much continuity as possible in staffing, shared files, and shared data.
- CBOs, employers, and school systems alike should do a better job of teaching soft skills and incorporating employment information and trends over the arc of a young person’s development.
- Employers should take the initial diversity, equity, and inclusion steps that we [identify](#).
- CBOs should communicate clear expectations for job placement, including sectors and job quality indicators (benefits, stable hours, advancement opportunities, belonging).
- Workforce system leaders should develop more longitudinal data about young adults’ duration in employment, wages, and satisfaction.
- CBOs and employers should engage young leaders and employees to improve their experience of employment programs and workplaces, respectively.

Within the research on employer engagement, we notice a lack of consideration of the effects of the public workforce system. Services funded by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act are underfunded and variable in quality, but they provide a baseline set of expectations for the relationship among young people, CBOs, and employers, as well as a set of performance measures, including for employer engagement. All research in this area should consider the influence of federally mandated program elements and performance measures.

We've uncovered a field still seeking to identify a shared set of practices that make a difference. In partnership with employers, education and workforce organizations must eventually move toward a shared understanding of employer-engagement practices that make a difference, as well as measures of success. Earlier and more comprehensive exposure to different occupations, sectors, and worksites for young people will smooth entry to the workforce. This continuum should include recommended activities beginning in middle school and describe activities that will result in access to quality jobs, mentorship and social capital, and agency for all young adults.

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## Appendix A: Frameworks for Employer Engagement



Figure 2 New Ways to Work's Strategies for Employer Engagement defines buckets of key strategies

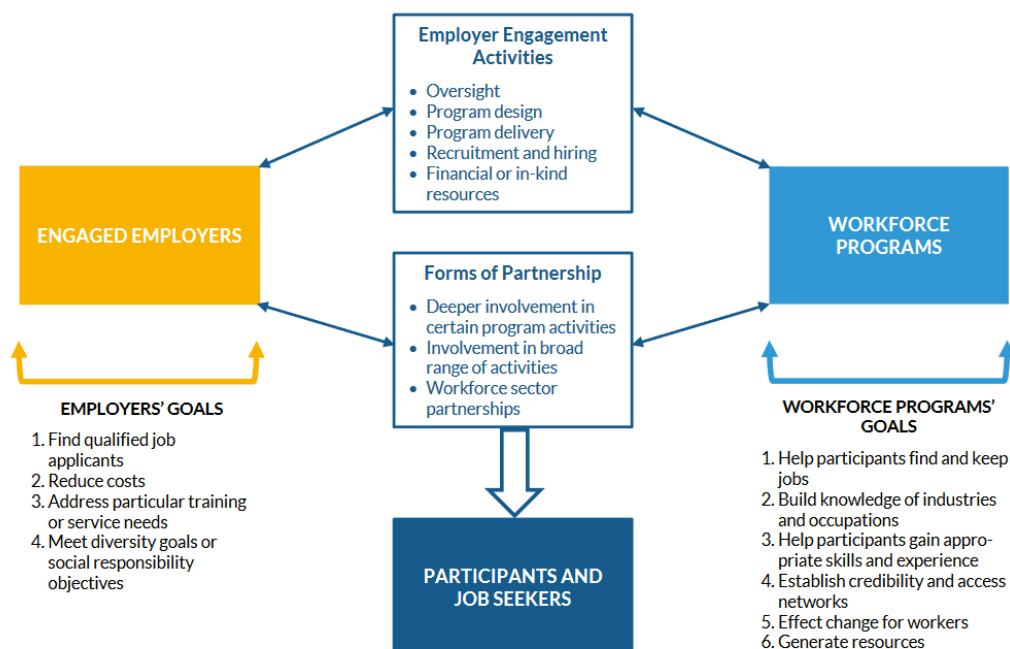


Figure 3 Urban Institute's Framework for Employer Engagement focuses on goals for employers and workforce programs

	New Relationship	Working Relationship	Strategic Partnership		
	Level I	Level II	Level III	Level IV	Level V
<b>Key employer role</b>	Advising	Capacity-building	Co-designing	Convening	Leading
<b>Stage of relationship</b>	Initial contact / new relationship	Establishing trust and credibility	Working relationship	Trusted provider and collaborator	Full strategic partner
<b>Activity examples</b>	Discuss hiring needs, skills, competencies; advise on curricula; contract training; hire graduates	Job site tours; speakers; mock interviews; internships; needs assessment; loan/donate equipment; recruiting	Curriculum and pathway development; adjunct faculty and preceptors	College-employer sectoral partnerships	Multi-employer / multi-college partnerships
<b>Engagement examples by level</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>&gt; Western Technical College (Wisconsin Shifting Gears)</li><li>&gt; Monroe Community College</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>&gt; Bristol Community College</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>&gt; Owensboro Community and Technical College</li><li>&gt; Automotive Technical Education Collaborative (AMTEC)</li><li>&gt; Columbus State Community College (LogisticsART)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>&gt; NorTEC</li><li>&gt; Northern Virginia Community College (NoVAHealth FORCE)</li><li>&gt; Cabrillo College / Bay Area Community College Consortium</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>&gt; Health Careers Collaborative of Greater Cincinnati / Cincinnati State Community and Technical College</li><li>&gt; Health Professions Pathway (H2P)</li></ul>

Figure 4 Jobs for the Future's Ladder of Employer Engagement describes a deepening relationship