



# Expanding Opportunity: Youth and Practitioner Perspectives on Apprenticeship Pathways

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## Introduction

Apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs are increasingly recognized as critical pathways to economic mobility, offering young people opportunities to earn while they learn, gain industry-recognized credentials, and access long-term career pathways. These programs have received growing bipartisan interest and support in recent years, reflecting a shared understanding of their value in strengthening the nation's workforce. However, despite growing federal attention, many young people, particularly [Opportunity Youth](#), continue to face barriers to accessing, participating in, and completing these programs.

Across the United States, an estimated [4.1 million](#) young people ages 16 to 24 are neither enrolled in school nor connected to work, commonly referred to as Opportunity Youth (OY). Research shows these young people are [eager](#) to pursue long-term stability and economic mobility, and their success matters for the broader economy, where persistent labor shortages underscore the need for an expanded talent pipeline. However, structural barriers often stand between OY and their goals, including housing instability, involvement with the foster care and justice systems, caregiving responsibilities, and limited access to supportive services.

Apprenticeship programs are uniquely positioned to provide Opportunity Youth with an on-ramp into the workforce by combining paid work experience with on-the-job training, mentorship, and clear career pathways. While federal policymakers across administrations have increasingly prioritized apprenticeship expansion as a workforce development strategy, apprenticeship programs are underfunded and underutilized across the nation. Only [0.4%](#) of the U.S. workforce is involved in apprenticeships, translating to about 4 apprentices per 1,000 workers. Recent [federal efforts](#) by the Trump administration have emphasized scaling Registered Apprenticeships nationwide, with a goal of reaching one million active apprentices per year. However, without intentional strategies to reach and support Opportunity Youth, these expansion efforts risk leaving behind those who could benefit most.



## Report Background

Building on [NYEC's 2024 Apprenticeship Policy Recommendations](#), this report examines the current state of apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs by centering the perspectives of young people, and shares policy recommendations shaped directly by youth experience and field input. Through apprentice and pre-apprentice interviews and stakeholder insight, this report identifies structural and programmatic barriers and proposes policy recommendations to better connect young people to apprenticeship programs.

## What Is Apprenticeship?

While the term “apprenticeship” is often used broadly, it encompasses several distinct program types. Apprenticeship, in a general sense, refers to structured work-based learning programs that combine employment and training, though these can vary in quality and oversight. [Registered Apprenticeships](#) are a specific, federally recognized model approved by the U.S. Department of Labor or a State Apprenticeship Agency and include key components such as paid employment, progressive wages, mentorship, classroom instruction, and a nationally recognized credential. [Pre-apprenticeship](#) programs serve as an initial entry point, preparing individuals with foundational skills, professional exposure, and sometimes supportive services needed to transition into Registered Apprenticeships or other career pathways. Pre-apprenticeship programs are [not registered or regulated](#) by the U.S. Department of Labor, though guidance on the elements of a quality program have been released.

[Youth apprenticeship](#) is a related but distinct model of work-based learning for young people, typically during high school or in the early stages of their career pathways. There is currently no federal legal definition of “youth apprenticeship,” so states have opted to create their own standards. While definitions vary across states and systems, youth apprenticeship programs are generally designed to connect education and workforce systems, allowing young people to gain experience while continuing their education. In some cases, youth apprenticeship programs are aligned with or transition directly into Registered Apprenticeships, while in others they operate as separate models with varying levels of structure and employer engagement.



## Connecting Opportunity Youth to Apprenticeship

Unlike some education and training models, apprenticeship provides an alternative pathway that combines paid work experience with structured learning. This model can expand access to career opportunities for young people with a wide range of goals, backgrounds, and circumstances. However, variations in definitions and structure of programs can make these critical pathways difficult to navigate. Without intentional design and adequate support, Opportunity Youth can face significant barriers to accessing and successfully progressing through these beneficial programs.

The economic case for expanding access is also clear, as reconnecting just one Opportunity Youth to education or employment generates an estimated **\$11,900 per year** in additional federal tax revenue while reducing long-term public costs.

Apprenticeship holds strong potential as a pathway for Opportunity Youth, and that potential requires intentional investment.

## Methods

To better understand the experiences of young people in apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs, NYEC conducted a series of interviews with 10 individuals who are currently enrolled in or have completed a pre-apprenticeship or apprenticeship program. Participants were asked about their pathways into pre-apprenticeship or apprenticeship, including how they first learned about opportunities, the accessibility of application processes, and any barriers they encountered when applying. Interviews also explored participants' experiences during their programs, including challenges related to transportation, financial stability, workplace culture, and access to supportive services such as mentorship and mental health resources. Young people were also asked to reflect on program quality, outcomes, and what policy or programmatic changes they believe would improve access, participation, and completion for others. To supplement these findings, we administered a digital survey with similar questions to a separate group of more than 80 current and former apprentices and pre-apprentices who represented a variety of industries, including the skilled trades, healthcare, information technology, and public leadership.

To complement the youth perspective and understand what organizations are experiencing on the ground, NYEC convened a working group on apprenticeship through NYEC's Policy Committee, our national network of members that guide our policy work including



practitioners, intermediaries, and employers involved in apprenticeship programming. Multiple convenings of the Apprenticeship Subgroup provided important context on system-level challenges, including funding constraints, administrative barriers, and gaps in employer engagement for this report.

This approach centers a youth-informed, field-driven perspective that is often missing from traditional apprenticeship research and policy development. While many existing reports on apprenticeship focus on system design or employer needs, fewer efforts directly capture the lived experiences of young people navigating these programs.

While we did not incorporate employers' perspective in this report, we recognize the importance of their perspective in apprenticeship conversations. We plan to release a brief that provides employers' voice as a companion to this one.

This report aims to bridge the gap between policy and reality, ensuring that recommendations are responsive to the needs of the young people that apprenticeship systems are intended to serve.

### What We Heard from Young People

- **Apprenticeship Programs Change Lives:** Across interviews and in survey responses, young people consistently described apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs as transformative experiences that expanded their opportunities and altered the trajectory of their careers. They shared stories of gaining stable employment, developing confidence in their abilities, and accessing career pathways they had not previously considered attainable. Many emphasized that the combination of hands-on learning, mentorship, and (when applicable) paid work-based experience helped them envision a future that felt both achievable and rewarding.
- **Pre-Apprenticeship Provides Critical Exposure to Industries and Careers:** Young people highlighted pre-apprenticeship programs as an important opportunity to explore industries and determine whether a career path was the right fit before making a longer-term commitment. For example, some individuals may find early start times incompatible with their schedules or preferences, while others may not. This early, hands-on experience is invaluable in helping youth make informed decisions about their career trajectories.



- **Awareness of Apprenticeship Opportunities Remains Limited:** A recurring theme across interviews was that many young people were unaware that apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship opportunities existed until someone in their personal network introduced them to a program. Most participants reported learning about opportunities through friends or family members, while fewer discovered programs through social media, online searches, workplaces, schools, or community-based organizations. These findings suggest that limited awareness continues to be a significant barrier to participation and that more intentional outreach is needed to connect young people with apprenticeship pathways.
- **Youth Voice and Engagement Strengthen Programs:** When asked what kind of changes would be beneficial to their pre-apprenticeship or apprenticeship program, respondents shared that incorporating youth engagement and input into program design was crucial. They expressed support for mechanisms such as anonymous surveys, listening sessions, and compensated youth advisory boards, noting that these approaches help ensure programs remain responsive to ever-changing participant needs and foster a greater sense of belonging and value.
- **Supportive Services Improve Retention and Completion:** Young people stated that supportive services were essential in helping them persist and succeed in apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs. Transportation assistance, including bus passes, gas support, and support in getting their driver's licenses, was the primary support cited by respondents that helped them remain in and complete their programs. Respondents also highlighted the value of financial literacy education, which aided them in navigating work and personal responsibilities both in the program and after.

### What We Heard from the Field

- **Structural Funding Challenges Limit Program Growth and Sustainability:** Practitioners consistently identified funding as one of the most significant challenges facing apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs. Limited and inconsistent funding can constrain programs' capacity to serve participants, forcing providers to serve fewer than demand would otherwise support. As interest in apprenticeship continues to grow, many organizations report that they need additional resources to expand access and maintain high-quality services.



- **Employer Awareness and Buy-in Remains a Challenge:** Employer awareness and buy-in was also cited as a significant barrier to expanding apprenticeship opportunities. Many employers remain unfamiliar with apprenticeship models, the benefits they can provide to businesses, or the resources available to support program development and implementation. As a result, organizations often spend substantial time educating employers and building support before apprenticeship opportunities can be created. Providers emphasized that increasing employer awareness of the return on investment of apprenticeship, such as talent pipeline development and employee retention, is essential to expanding participation and scaling programs across industries.
- **Capacity Limitations Constrain Program Delivery:** Many organizations reported capacity challenges that affect their ability to recruit participants, provide supportive services, engage employers, and manage program operations. Community-based organizations and other apprenticeship intermediaries frequently operate with limited staff and resources, requiring them to balance multiple responsibilities while serving growing numbers of participants. Practitioners noted that expanding organizational capacity, including staffing, technical expertise, and operational infrastructure, is essential to meeting demand and ensuring high-quality program delivery.

### [NYEC Policy Recommendations](#)

Because federal law provides the foundation for Registered Apprenticeship and some pre-apprenticeship models, this report builds on [NYEC's 2024 Apprenticeship Policy Recommendations](#) and focuses on federal policy actions that could address the challenges identified by young people and providers. While NYEC's prior recommendations outlined a comprehensive federal framework for expanding apprenticeship, this report shares the recommendations most critical to improving access, participation, and completion for Opportunity Youth. Across interviews, young people consistently emphasized the importance of financial stability, flexible supportive services, and program quality. These themes, reinforced by practitioners and employers, point to a need for federal policy that not only expands various apprenticeship opportunities, but ensures those opportunities are navigable, as well.

- **Define Pre-Apprenticeship, Youth Apprenticeship, and Youth Apprentice in Federal Statute:** NYEC recommends these [definitions](#) for each proposed term to establish or codify federal definitions for pre-apprenticeship, youth apprenticeship, and youth apprentice in order streamline systems across states.



- **Create Consistent and Robust Federal Investments in Pre-Apprenticeship, Youth Apprenticeship, and Registered Apprenticeship:** Rather than fluctuating year-to-year federal appropriations, Congress should create a permanent, formula-funded program so that apprenticeship can grow steadily nationwide.
- **Formalize Data Collection for Pre-Apprenticeship:** While the federal government collects data on certain pre-apprenticeship programs authorized under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), there is no data system for other pre-apprenticeship programs. Creating a standardized data collection for pre-apprenticeship would enable policymakers, pre-apprenticeship sponsors, and young people to better understand which pre-apprenticeship models are most effective and beneficial for young people.
- **Continue to Enable Apprenticeship Programming to Provide Supportive Services:** Respondents overwhelmingly identified supportive services as a key reason they were able to remain in and complete their respective programming.

### Conclusion

NYEC stands ready to grow and support registered apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship pathways for young people, especially Opportunity Youth. By implementing NYEC’s policy recommendations, Congress and the Administration can exceed the Administration’s goal to have 1 million active apprentices, create a stronger career pathway opportunity for young people, and strengthen America’s workforce and talent pool.

### Appendix: These Recommendations Come from the Field

These recommendations were developed by members of NYEC’s Apprenticeship Subgroup and by dozens of young apprentices and pre-apprentices.

Name	Organization	Location
Danielle Owen	The Corps Network	Washington, D.C.
Jacqueline Alejandre	City and County of San Francisco	San Francisco, CA

Kevin Hickey	New Door Ventures	San Francisco, CA
Mary Ellen Sprenkel	The Corps Network	Washington, D.C.
Simone Ziazaris	New Door Ventures	San Francisco, CA
Trinh Nguyen	City of Boston	Boston, MA

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