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CREATING OPPORTUNITIES: STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORTED WORK EXPERIENCE

Evaluation of the DYCD Opportunity Youth Program

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Opportunity Youth: Strategies for Supported Work Experience

Executive Summary

Launched in 2015, the Opportunity Youth program funded by the NYC Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) serves young people who are not enrolled in school and not employed. For 14 weeks, participants receive:

- 5 hours/week work readiness workshops
- 10 hours/week paid work experience
- Biweekly individual case management meetings

From July 2016 to June 2017, 735 young people participated in the 30 Opportunity Youth programs funded by DYCD and operated by community-based provider organizations:

- 62% were ages 20-24
- 36% did not have a high school diploma or GED
- 20% lived in NYCHA communities, subsidized housing, or shelters
- 39% received food stamps

DYCD and the community-based organizations implementing Opportunity Youth programs wanted information about promising strategies used across the 30 programs, to help strengthen supports. In summer 2017, 93% of program directors responded to a survey administered by Policy Studies Associates. Directors from 11 programs shared additional reflections in follow-up interviews.

Strategies from the Field

Hire staff with both interpersonal and technical skills

Staff need to understand youth employment policies. They must leverage networks to establish partnership with worksites and other agencies to provide social, health, and legal services that support youth in meeting employment and education goals. Effective case management also requires strong interpersonal qualities, including the ability to relate to youth, compassion, attention to detail, and flexibility.

Leverage the resources of the provider organization

Staff can leverage their organization's other programs to create recruitment and employment pipelines. They can also use their agency's resources to streamline administration and minimize management burdens.

Ensure that supports are aligned to participants' long-term goals

Staff can engage participants through workshops that reflect their specific career interests and passions. They can target partner worksites that are likely to hire after program completion. Periodically, they must reassess the extent to which workshops and worksite partners align to the learning, occupational, and life goals of participants.

Recommendations for DYCD

Facilitate more learning opportunities, including peer learning

Forums for cross program interactions, focused on sharing program strategies, not on compliance, can foster a stronger community among Opportunity Youth program directors.

Articulate workforce development pathways across programs

DYCD can explicitly define the links between its funded programs to create pathways of support and growth for participants.

Promote a collective impact approach

Facilitate interactions among businesses, social services, and governmental agencies to create a comprehensive and steady continuum of support for youth.

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Overview

The New York City Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) awarded 30 three-year contracts to community-based organizations in 2015 for the launch of the *Opportunity Youth: Supported Work Experience* program. Funded by the federal Community Services Block Grant (CSBG) and administered by DYCD's Neighborhood Development Area (NDA) Initiative, the Opportunity Youth program is designed to provide work-readiness training to teens and young adults ages 16-24 who are not enrolled in school and not employed. Eligibility for the program also requires participants to meet the CSBG poverty guidelines and live in NDA-designated communities.

Community-based provider organizations offer the program to two cohorts per year, with at least 10 participants each, from September to December and from March to June. Over the course of 14 weeks, Opportunity Youth participants receive:

- Five hours of work-readiness workshops each week
- Ten hours of work experience each week, paid at minimum wage
- Individual meetings with a case manager, at least once every two weeks

At the end of the 14 weeks, Opportunity Youth participants are expected to have a resume; to have demonstrated gains in work-readiness skills (as measured through pre- and post-assessment tests); and to have secured or developed a plan for obtaining a job, enrolling in continuing education, or enrolling in occupational training or the military.

To ensure compliance with program regulations and to help programs deliver high-quality, comprehensive services to participants, DYCD program managers provide ongoing support to Opportunity Youth provider organizations through site visits and technical assistance, and by sharing knowledge, resources, and tools.



Opportunity Youth programs served **735 participants**, who worked over **59,000 hours** from July 2016 to July 2017.

Source: NYC DYCD

DYCD contracted with Policy Studies Associates (PSA) to conduct an evaluation of the Opportunity Youth program to **(1) document and share promising implementation strategies from providers** and **(2) help DYCD better target and strengthen the guidance and support provided to programs**. The PSA evaluation team administered an online survey to directors of the 30 Opportunity Youth sites in summer 2017, and received 28 responses (93 percent response rate). The PSA team also conducted in-depth telephone interviews with directors of 11 sites, purposively selected based on their survey responses.

As directors reflected on their approaches and lessons learned after two years of program operations, they shared the strategies they developed to help their programs be responsive to participant needs and promote positive outcomes. They also identified program constraints. The intent of this report is to share these strategies and to spark conversations among programs and with DYCD about resources, approaches, and policies that reconnect participants to educational and career pathways. In the report we explore:

- The context of the DYCD Opportunity Youth program
- Strategies from the field for hiring, leveraging resources, and ensuring relevance
- Next steps for the Opportunity Youth program, including recommendations for DYCD

Setting the Context

Nationwide, nearly 5.5 million young people between the ages of 16-24 are identified as “opportunity youth.”¹ They are disconnected from school and work, likely have low educational attainment and limited skill set, and face socioeconomic challenges that can keep them in a cycle of poverty. These disconnected teens and young adults tend to be women and minorities (Bridgeland & Milano, 2012). New York City has an estimated 200,000 teens and young adults who can be identified as opportunity youth.² According to DYCD records, the 30 funded Opportunity Youth programs have delivered services to 1,386 young people since 2015, including 735 from July 2016 to June 2017.

DYCD’s Opportunity Youth program is designed to serve young people who face multiple barriers to success, so its strategies for engaging young people in work-readiness training must reflect the prior experiences and competencies—and the challenges—faced by participants. The PSA evaluation team also asked leaders in surveys and interviews to report more broadly on the needs and characteristics of participants served. These evaluation data suggest that providers understand the challenges faced by the targeted population and are working to design approaches that respond to those challenges and to participant needs within the limits of the 14-week cohort program.

The profile of DYCD Opportunity Youth participants reflects the intent of the program. Program providers collect participant-level information in the DYCD Capricorn case-management system, and these data are available to DYCD for analysis. DYCD’s analyses of the data show that from July 2016 to June 2017, 62 percent of all Opportunity Youth participants were between the ages of 20-24, and 38 percent were between the ages of 16-19. Fifty-two percent of participants were female, and 48 percent of participants were male. Thirty-nine percent of all participants received food stamps. These Opportunity Youth participants had:

- **Limited prior work experience.** In surveys, 18 of 28 Opportunity Youth directors reported that, overall, the participants they served had little to no work experience. A director shared, “We might have a cohort that we have to really do a lot of work around getting them ready for the interviewing process, and gaining confidence, and maybe they’ve never been on interviews before. They’re nervous.”
- **Limited formal education.** More than a third (36 percent) of participants lacked a high school diploma or an equivalent credential (e.g., GED), according to DYCD’s analysis of Capricorn data. In interviews, directors reported that these participants often do not have strong reading and writing skills. They experienced roadblocks obtaining the preparation or training necessary for “getting on track,” and need additional supports to do so.

¹ <http://aspencommunitysolutions.org/the-fund/>

² DYCD 2014 RFP for NEA Opportunity Youth: Supported Work Experience

- Housing instability.** Housing stability has important implications for job prospects and security. Chronic homelessness or involuntarily displacement from one's home (e.g., by eviction) may require individuals to spend time away from work as they look for more stable housing. Workers may be more likely to make mistakes on the job if they are worried about securing housing (Desmond & Gershenson, 2016).

DYCD asks program sites to capture data on whether Opportunity Youth participants access formal housing assistance, including whether they live in New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) communities (14 percent), in a shelter (4 percent), or in Section 8 subsidized housing (2 percent).

However, these data do not capture other conditions of housing instability that the young people may encounter, including difficulty paying rent, frequently living with different people, or living in crowded conditions with friends or family members. The PSA evaluation team asked directors to report more broadly whether they served participants without stable housing (e.g., living in a shelter or moving from place to place): the majority of Opportunity Youth directors (22 of 28) reported serving at least some participants without stable housing.

In interviews, directors discussed the effects of housing instability on participants and the need to develop strategies to effectively retain and support these participants. One director observed:

You're supporting, you're building, you're helping to get them in a better place and then they're transferred to another location.... With young adults who are involved in services for homelessness, helping them navigate that can be a challenge.



- **Family responsibilities.** Opportunity Youth directors noted in interviews that many participants balance “adult responsibilities” as caregivers with their participation in workforce training. Participants accompany family members to the Social Security office, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) center, and medical appointments. Others are parents themselves—DYCD data show that 30 percent are single parents— and need to secure childcare to participate in the Opportunity Youth program, which can be challenging. A director said, “An internship isn't going to be a big enough incentive to keep them engaged in this program when what they really need is child care support. That becomes the bigger need.”

Opportunity Youth sites must first help participants develop foundational employment skills. It came as no surprise to directors that participants needed to develop additional foundational skills to strengthen their employment and educational prospects. Surveyed Opportunity Youth directors frequently reported communication, interviewing, and time management skills as the job-readiness and life skills participants most need to develop. In interviews, directors expanded on the need for these foundational skills: “They're not working and they're not in school, so [we teach these skills] in order to just get them back on their feet and help them gain the skills and tools they need to be functional in society. Because right now, a lot of them are not even able to keep a job, or they're not able to go on interviews because they don't know how to really dress for the part or maybe speak a certain way.”

In interviews, program leaders also described needing to offer case management approaches and to work with employers to address the particular needs of new immigrants and formerly incarcerated participants. For example, young people involved in the justice system had to navigate the responsibility of employment while also attending court dates, whereas new immigrants needed to culturally adapt to American work norms.

Strategies from the Field

Consistent with the program model, DYCD-funded Opportunity Youth provider organizations support each cohort of participants through case management, work-readiness workshops, and paid work experience at job sites over the course of 14 weeks. Nonetheless, program outcomes analyzed by DYCD also indicate room to strengthen program strategies. In 2017, at the end of 14 weeks, 20 percent of enrollees had entered employment, an education program, an advanced training program, or military service, and an additional 42 percent had career plans and an updated resume. However, nearly 40 percent had not met these targeted outcomes.

In surveys and interviews, Opportunity Youth directors described being attuned to the foundational needs of participants to help them better benefit from the program experiences and achieve the targeted educational and work readiness outcomes. Directors knew they faced implementation challenges, and were eager to access resources, share promising strategies, and explore approaches to most effectively providing workforce training and auxiliary supports to the youth they serve. Directors were especially interested in strengthening strategies that will help them better:

- Recruit and retain program participants
- Provide engaging workshops and services that address participants' needs
- Identify and manage worksites

This section of the report summarizes three core strategies emerging from the experiences of Opportunity Youth directors interviewed by the PSA evaluation team. The goal is to summarize locally developed strategies to share across programs, so that they can be resources and collectively strengthen the implementation and outcomes of the Opportunity Youth program.

For each core strategy, we (1) offer concrete examples based on successes experienced by Opportunity Youth programs, and (2) discuss implications as Opportunity Youth directors plan their programs and services.

Hire staff familiar with the population and resources

In any program, staff are key to success. Staff provide the know-how and energy that drive the program and are the face of the program for participants. The ability of staff to connect with participants and respond to their collective and individual needs is fundamental to achieving programmatic and participant goals, particularly for youth in high-risk situations. Staff with backgrounds or experiences similar to those of participants can help foster a sense of belonging and encourage participant engagement (Treskon, 2016; Hirsch, Deutsch & DuBois, 2011). But specialized skills are also needed. An evaluation of the DYCD-funded Fatherhood Initiative highlighted the value of having staff members with specialized knowledge or access to resources to help participants navigate successfully through social services and legal systems (Palmiter et al., 2016).

In the Request for Proposals for Opportunity Youth, DYCD established the expectation that providers hire staff with experience serving low-income residents, experience working in the NDA community served, and knowledge of workforce development. DYCD also mandates that staff working at

Opportunity Youth programs participate in trainings that reinforce DYCD’s core competencies for youth workers and implement practices aligned with the agency’s *Case Management Standards Toolkit*.

Interviews with Opportunity Youth directors offered evidence that providers recognized the advantages of having skilled staff who could respond to participants’ needs, barriers, and potential. In particular, Opportunity Youth providers relied on strategic staffing approaches as they worked to engage: (1) youth disconnected from education and the workforce; (2) staff with the interpersonal skills and knowledge to deliver work-readiness training and case management; and (3) employers offering worksite placements.

Examples from the field

Staff with relevant professional and personal experience can connect with youth and support their work-readiness development. For example, hiring a multilingual leader—with experience managing another DYCD workforce development program and experience working with refugee youth—ensured that the coordinator at one Opportunity Youth program had the necessary policy knowledge and cultural competence. This coordinator brought to the program existing relationships with worksites and an understanding of the regulations of work-readiness programs, including experience working with DYCD programs. This technical knowledge was complemented by the skill that came from knowing how to communicate and engage with youth in challenging circumstances.

“We put a lot of thought into who we hire, and they have to really be able to engage. That’s everyone from the job developer to the job trainer, to the case manager, because the only way that we can be successful is if these young people can connect to the staff.”

A job-readiness trainer who grew up in a homeless shelter was an asset to another program because the trainer understood when to push participants, when to give them space, and how to motivate them. The trainer could speak the “language” of participants. The director explained, “We put a lot of thought into who we hire, and they have to really be able to engage. That’s everyone from the job developer to the job trainer to the case manager because the only way that we can be successful is

if these young people can connect to the staff.”

Directors emphasized the need to be adaptable and proactive in delivering case management services, and to respond to participant needs and concerns that may not be evident—or reported during the intake process at enrollment in the program. One director noted, “Participants may tell you one thing but the application says another.” Another director said that his program developed an additional intake form to get a better sense of who the participant is. The second form asks questions such as: Tell us about yourself and what you’re interested in, what kind of work would you like to do, and what experiences have you had before. This line of questioning helps the staff to identify participants’ interests and to develop individualized service plans. Overall, directors discussed the delicate balance involved in providing case management: pushing participants and meeting them where they are, helping them to learn from their mistakes while holding them accountable, and introducing them to various career and educational options but keeping them focused. Finding this balance comes from developing a trusting relationship with participants over time.

Connected leaders establish linkages that address barriers to both work readiness and future employment. Collaborations and partnerships across a broad range of organizations and sectors can help reach youth, offer more opportunities, and provide

critical access to social services once participating youth are placed in schools or jobs. The Annie E. Casey Foundation's KIDS COUNT 2012 policy report, for example, noted that reaching and reengaging disconnected youth requires coordination across a broad range of youth-serving organizations, including school districts, workforce development initiatives, juvenile justice systems, and social service agencies. Likewise, a 2016 MDRC review of programs and practices for disconnected youth found that one program alone may not be able to address the varied needs of young people and encouraged programs to coordinate with a range of partners (Treskon, 2016).

DYCD requires Opportunity Youth providers to have linkages to other agencies to supplement the services they can provide and to ensure that individual participant needs identified through case management are addressed. Survey responses indicate that directors valued these linkages and referred participants to many needed services to ensure a comprehensive system of supports (Exhibit 1). For instance, most Opportunity Youth directors offered legal services and supports for domestic violence to participants through linkages (each reported by 23 of 28 directors). Most directors also relied on linkages to help participants obtain professional clothing (18 directors), health assistance (18 directors), and substance abuse supports (15 directors). A director advised, "See the problems before the problems come...you want to be able to have resources available before those things become challenges, so that when they do become challenges you have an immediate solution."

For example, one director reported having linkages with a nearby organization that operates a NDA Healthy Families program. The director refers participants who need assistance obtaining benefits, who are facing eviction, or who need a higher level of case management support. This director expressed the importance of case managers knowing when to "pass the baton" and refer participants to other organizations for services beyond the program's capacity. She said, "The linkages [are] hypercritical.... We have to be honest with ourselves [about] what we have and what we don't have because we can't be the end-all, be-all for everybody." Another director shared that his Opportunity Youth program has linkages with Hostos Community College, Borough of Manhattan Community College, and Bronx Community College to support participants looking to enroll in college.

Exhibit I Supportive services offered by Opportunity Youth providers

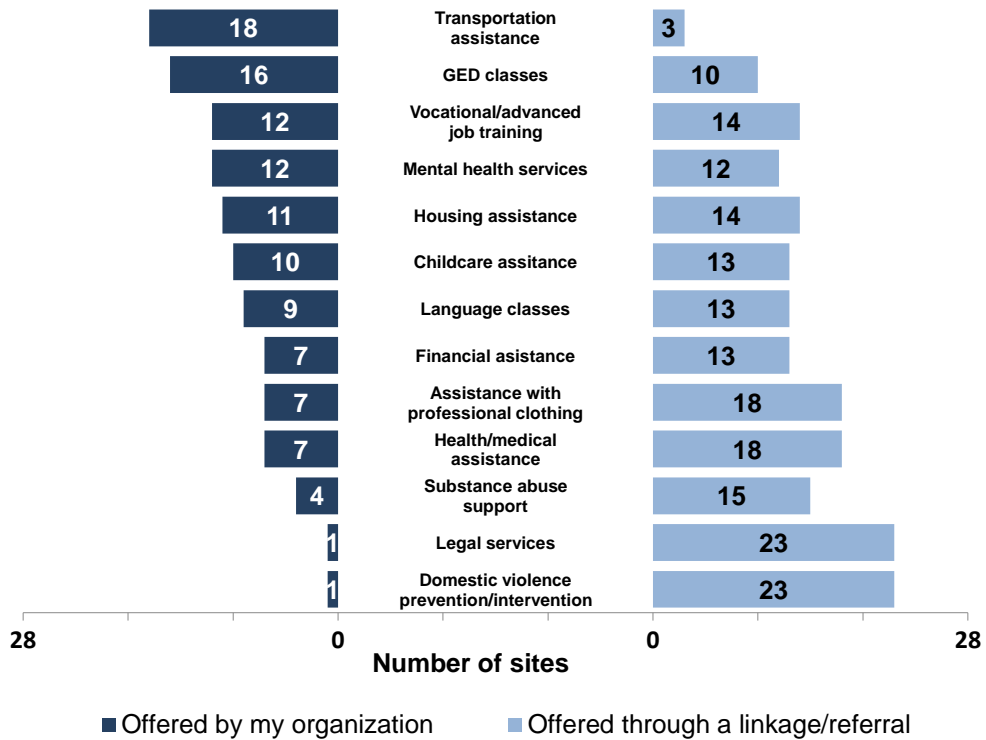


Exhibit reads: Eighteen Opportunity Youth directors offered transportation assistance through their provider organization; three offered that service through a linkage.

Leaders and staff leverage professional networks to forge partnerships with worksites that offer interesting experiences and open doors for youth.

For example, one director drew on more than 20 years of civic and social engagement. To establish worksite placements, she encouraged other directors to first reach out to the networks they have developed in the community, including the local community board, block associations, and schools. This director observed, “Most of the worksites, I’ve personally known the owners, or the directors, or whatever the case may be. These are people that I’ve worked with and see regularly on my off hours.” Drawing on this broad network allowed the program to offer an array of work experiences that exposed participants to a range of fields that matched their interests.

Implications for program planning

“Connections in the community really is a plus. And they must be able to do everything. From administrative, to having to facilitate workshops.”

Opportunity Youth staff take on multiple functions, requiring both technical and interpersonal skill. Staff need specific technical skills and knowledge to work in Opportunity Youth programs. Case management involves using intake forms, assessment forms (e.g., career surveys, mental health assessments), and other tools to learn about participants and to ensure that their needs are being met. Staff also need to have a firm understanding of policies around youth employment to engage with worksites. Providers also need staff who can establish and draw on partnerships with worksites and with other agencies to provide additional social, health, and legal services needed to support youth in meeting employment and education goals. Directors also know that strong interpersonal qualities, including the ability to understand and relate to the targeted population and community, compassion, attention to detail, and flexibility, are vital to successfully working with Opportunity Youth participants.

As Opportunity Youth providers plan for implementation, consider the following questions to plan staffing:

- What are the unique individual needs of the Opportunity Youth we serve?
- What staff have the experiences and cultural competency to engage with participants and respond to these needs?
- How can we leverage the networks and resources of staff to develop strong partnerships with worksites and other service agencies?
- What gaps remain? What technical or personal skillsets or knowledge are needed?

2 Be resourceful in leveraging resources

Opportunity Youth providers are expected to serve at least 10 participants in each 14-week cohort, and receive \$1,200 per participant; DYCD directly pays the participant wages for work experience. The funding providers receive is intended to cover the administrative and programmatic costs of recruiting youth, providing case management, offering workshops, managing worksites, and tracking outcomes.

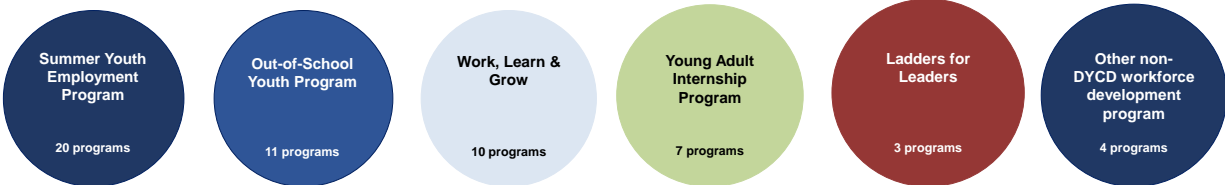
Opportunity Youth directors felt this was a lean budget, and many leveraged additional resources from within their provider agency to deliver supports and experiences to participants. Directors worked with other staff and other programs within their provider organizations, some of which were also DYCD-funded, to maximize available resources and avoid “reinventing the wheel.”

Examples from the field

Directors leveraged their organization’s workforce development capacity.

Twenty-two directors reported on the survey that their provider organization operated at least one other workforce development program, in addition to the Opportunity Youth program (Exhibit 2).

Exhibit 2
Other workforce development programs offered by provider organization (N=28)



Opportunity Youth programs whose provider hosted multiple workforce development programs could access a common pool of potential worksites. According to one director, these worksites were familiar with the provider organization and the director could select employers most suitable to the interests of Opportunity Youth participants. Others leveraged their agency’s job development team, which worked across workforce development programs and made it easier for Opportunity Youth programs to recruit worksites. A director emphasized that the job development team was knowledgeable about all the provider’s workforce development programs and could create tailored recruitment materials for businesses about the benefits of supporting each of the provider’s workforce development programs. The job development team visited local businesses to discuss the various programs, and organized business recruitment events for all workforce development programs, including Opportunity Youth.

Directors created a participant recruitment pipeline. While the top three participant recruitment strategies for Opportunity Youth programs included word-of-mouth (17 of 28 programs), linkages (16 programs), and community centers (15 programs), directors also recruited Opportunity Youth participants through other programs offered by their provider organization. For example, one director recruited graduates of the high school equivalency (HSE) course offered by the provider agency. This director noted that the Opportunity Youth program is listed on the agency’s promotional material so that teens and young adults are made aware that they can transition from its HSE program to its Opportunity Youth program into its college preparation program. Another director recruited participants who were placed at the agency as interns during the Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP), reaching out to the organization managing the SYEP placements and asking for referrals of SYEP participants who would benefit from continued workforce development opportunities.

Another director viewed the Opportunity Youth program as an entry-level step for participants with limited work experience. Once participants completed the Opportunity Youth program, they were referred to additional workforce training, such as the Out of School Youth (OSY) program, which gives yearlong exposure to occupational skills and provides social service support during and after the

program. The director viewed participants' progression through other DYCD and non-DYCD workforce development programs as a series of building blocks for participants.

"We have had young adults who—after being in our Opportunity Youth program—have turned around and said, 'Listen, I did the internship but I'm not 100 percent ready yet to maintain full-time employment.' So, we're able to refer them to opportunities [through my provider agency] to get assistance."

Similarly, another director said that depending on eligibility and selection, participants progressed through both SYEP and Opportunity Youth. However, this director did not see each program as separate phases building on one another, but rather as reinforcing the same content. This reinforcement is important for his Opportunity Youth participants because a single short-term program is not enough time to change habits and attitudes. The director commented, "The Opportunity Youth program serves as both a recipient of participants from other programs as well as a

feeder. We have had young adults who—after being in our Opportunity Youth Program—have turned around and said, 'Listen, I did the internship, but I'm not 100 percent ready yet to maintain full-time employment.' So, we're able to refer them to opportunities [my provider agency] has, like Summer Youth Employment Program, to get assistance."

Directors created an employment pipeline. Directors created worksite placements for participants in other programs operated by the provider agency, simplifying the recruitment and management of worksites. For example, in one program, the DYCD-funded Cornerstone Centers and Beacon Community Center programs served as internship sites. This approach had several benefits. A director reported that these centers were receptive worksites because they understood the Opportunity Youth program and the needs of its participants. The director also shared that placing participants in internships within the agency demonstrated to other local employers that the agency made an investment in the mission of the Opportunity Youth program: "They can see that we too believe in what I'm saying." In addition, placing participants within the provider agency created an "employment pipeline" because it was not uncommon to hire participants after completion of the Opportunity Youth program.

Placing Opportunity Youth participants in worksites operated by the provider agency demonstrated commitment to the mission of the program.

Other employers could "see that we too believe in what I'm saying."

Implications for program planning

Consider how the provider agency's programs can work in tandem.

By leveraging their agency's other workforce development and supportive services for recruitment and worksite placement, directors can streamline administration and minimize management burden. One director challenged peers to think beyond the Opportunity Youth program, emphasizing that with Opportunity Youth's limited funding and ambitious goals, providers should consider how to involve other departments and leaders within their agency. "You definitely need your whole agency... your whole agency has to be willing to assist you, whether it be the executive director, or the department director, somebody more than just you and your team has to help."

As Opportunity Youth providers plan for implementation, consider the following questions to leverage resources:

- How does the Opportunity Youth program complement other services offered by the provider?
- How can pathways be created across programs to create recruitment pipelines?
- How can connections be created for program-to-employment pipelines?
What capacities and connections exist within the agency to forge relationships with worksites?

3 Ensure that supports are relevant to long-term goals

Opportunity Youth programs expose participants to workforce development opportunities; connect participants to housing, health, childcare, and educational services; and tailor workshops based on participant needs and interests. Programs are accountable to DYCD for helping youth achieve program outcomes, including creating a resume; demonstrating measurable gains in work readiness; obtaining a job or creating a plan to obtain a job; applying for continuing education; seeking further training; or enlisting in the military after the program.

Directors reported that keeping a focus on longer-term goals helped them meet these short-term outcomes.

Examples from the field

Reflect the interests of participants. To keep participants engaged in and convinced of the value of the Opportunity Youth program, the workshops and training opportunities offered need to be relevant to participants' interests and post-program goals. For example, one director used workshops both as an engagement strategy and as an opportunity to help participants think about next steps after completing the 14-week program, bringing in representatives from or conducting field trips to organizations such as Brooklyn Educational Opportunity Center, NPower, and Job Corps. The director commented, "They don't get paid for [workshops]. So unless you are a really dynamic facilitator, you have to start doing things that make them feel like it's what they want, and [reflects] their interests.... We are trying to do things that are relevant in terms of what they can do next when the program is over."

"You have to start doing things that make them feel like it's what they want and [reflects] their interests... We are trying to do things that are relevant in terms of what they can do next when the program is over."

Another director said, "We had participants who expressed interest in music, but none of them had actually experienced what it would be like to be in that type of environment." The director arranged for a field trip to a local music studio to expose them to the field and to learn about the career trajectories of staff who worked in the studio.

"If I come across a company in an industry where they are short-staffed, they are going to be more likely to hire someone, especially after 14 weeks with that person and seeing that this person has learned in the work environment."

Consider long-term employment prospects when identifying worksites.

Opportunity Youth programs can identify worksites that are likely to hire participants upon program completion. For example, one director sought out large stores, which he believed to be consistently looking to hire new people. In recruiting worksites, this director asks companies about hiring needs: "If I come across a company in an industry where they

are short-staffed, they are going to be more likely to hire someone, especially after 14 weeks with that person and seeing that this person has learned in the work environment." This director also sought companies located in areas of heavy retail competition because these businesses were more likely to need trained customer service associates.

Create multiple opportunities that expose participants to employers.

One Opportunity Youth program partners with local businesses to conduct mock interviews with participants. These mock interviews provide participants with real-world simulations and feedback to help them later when interviewing for a job. The director of this program also noted that the mock interviews resulted in some participants being hired on the spot.

Plan engaging workshops and supports directly relevant to future success.

DYCD provides a curriculum that Opportunity Youth providers can use to guide workshops over the course of the 14-week cohort. This is the same curriculum used by the Young Adult Internship Program, and programs are encouraged to

adapt the curriculum as needed. Directors can also use a different curriculum if they prefer. In general, however, directors appreciated the DYCD-provided curriculum and its relevance to the knowledge and skills that participants need to be successful in the workplace.

The majority of Opportunity Youth program directors (N=28) agreed that the DYCD curriculum is...

- ✓ Relevant to knowledge/skills participants need (25 directors)
- ✓ Easy for participants to understand (24 directors)
- ✓ Easy to facilitate (24 directors)

Directors agree that participants need to learn communication, conflict resolution, decision-making, and goal-setting skills. Workshops are also an opportunity for participants to be exposed to different jobs and the paths leading to those professions. The curriculum provided by DYCD can help guide those lessons. However, many directors also adapted and supplemented this curriculum to be more interactive and engaging. In survey responses, 24 of 28 directors said that they or their staff developed their own lesson plans.

According to one director:

The curriculum covers all the bases, and all the relevant topics. For agencies that are not as experienced as mine is in workforce development, it could be a really great tool. Luckily for us, we've been doing this for a long time so we're able to expand on it when we need.... It's a really good blueprint, but it is really up to the trainer to kind of add flavor. You don't want to go up there and just facilitate, and read from it, but you do want to make it your own and present it in a way that is going to be fun and engaging

DYCD also encourages programs to highlight opportunities that reengage participants in their formal education. Directors reported taking Opportunity Youth participants on college visits and connecting them with GED programs upon completion of the program. One director shared that the agency's college counselor works with Opportunity Youth participants to identify financial aid resources. Another director reported that Opportunity Youth participants receive priority when enrolling in the agency's literacy program.

Implications for program planning

Consider ways in which the workshops and worksite placement offered are relevant to youth goals and interests. Opportunity Youth provider organizations can evaluate and periodically reassess how the workshops and the worksite partnerships align to efforts to address the learning, occupational, and life goals of participants.

As Opportunity Youth providers plan for implementation, consider the following questions to ensure that programs help participants plan for future goals:

- Are the curriculum and lesson plans guiding the workshops engaging and aligned to the priorities of participants identified through case management?
- Do the worksite placements, and workshop partners help youth connect their interests to career pathways?
- Are worksite placements in companies and industries with good future employment potential?

Next Steps for the Opportunity Youth Program

Opportunity Youth directors are eager to share strategies that they found to be most promising for staffing and maximizing the resources and supports available to participants. But they also continue to search for ways to strengthen their delivery. In interviews and surveys, directors identified ongoing challenges and guidance needed.

Opportunity Youth directors were most likely to report success in their ability to respond to the needs of participants, and meet the employment goals of the

program. However, Opportunity Youth directors also identified significant challenges. The most frequent challenges reported in surveys involved engaging participants: Eighteen of 28 directors identified attendance and retention as a significant challenge, and 12 identified recruitment as a top challenge. Some believed that the policies of the Opportunity Youth program reinforced barriers.

Top challenges (n=28)	Top successes (n=28)
1. Encouraging attendance and retention (18 programs)	1. Responding to diversity of participant needs (13 programs)
2. Recruiting participants (12 programs)	2. Meeting additional needs of participants (11 programs)
3. Competition from other programs (9 programs)	3. Helping participants obtain employment (10 programs)

Participant eligibility policies create challenges for recruitment. Eligible participants are 16-24 years of age, not in school, and not working; and 80 percent must live in the designated NDA for the grant award. Opportunity Youth directors reported that more flexibility with policies for identifying and recruiting participants would enhance their success:

- **Limitations on participant employment reinforced a negative cycle of poverty.**

Opportunity Youth directors questioned DYCD’s requirement to recruit participants not otherwise employed during the program. To some, this requirement seemed to reinforce—not disrupt—the cycle of poverty. The Opportunity Youth program placed participants in short-term worksite placements, for minimum wage, for 10 hours per week. Especially for the large portion of youth ages 20-24, with adult responsibilities, this is unlikely to cover living expenses, such as housing and childcare costs. Directors felt that it was natural that participants would take additional jobs to supplement their work placement income. One director said, “I feel like it’s a contradiction from a societal standpoint. Yes, [a kid is] in the internship program for 14 weeks; but it’s only 10 hours, and they’re making \$11 an hour. That kid is still in poverty.”

“I feel like it’s a contradiction from a societal standpoint. Yes, [a kid is] in the internship program for 14 weeks; it’s only 10 hours, and they’re making 11 dollars an hour. That kid is still in poverty.”

- **Education eligibility criteria felt at odds with the placement goals of the program.**

The eligibility requirement that youth could not be simultaneously enrolled in school and in the Opportunity Youth program had implications for placement after the program—potential employers are unlikely to hire participants who did not earn a high school diploma or the equivalent. One director noted, “[Participants] finish my program, they don’t have a GED, and I can’t place them in a job because at 99.9 percent of the jobs, the basic

education credential is a GED.” Another reflected, “It would be great if a student could be enrolled in a HSE program and in an internship.... Hopefully at the end [of the Opportunity Youth program], they’re able to get their HSE diploma, go to college, or go to employment....”

Directors want more clarity on program expectations. DYCD offers guidance on program expectations through contract management, site visits, and quarterly meetings; technical assistance is provided to help providers meet expectations. However, while some directors secured exceptions from DYCD to loosen program eligibility criteria, others reported that they were unsure if any flexibility was possible. For DYCD, clearly and consistently communicating policies and program expectations will be essential to set up all Opportunity Youth programs for equal success. For directors, resolving hurdles related to eligibility and enrollment criteria is key because, as one explained, participant recruitment has implications for whether the program achieves desired outcomes, including number of participants enrolled and their placement in jobs and education.

Survey data reinforced directors’ desire for clarity and support, with more than half of directors (15 of 28) reporting that they needed additional support with administrative and reporting requirements. Directors also reported the need for additional guidance around case management support. In an interview, one director noted that this was especially needed as the program budget did not cover the level of salary needed for a social worker trained to address the mental health needs of participants during case management sessions. Without that funding, other staff needed the guidance to fill that role.

Opportunity Youth directors (N=28) said that they needed additional guidance to support:



Administrative requirements/reporting requirements
(15 of 28 directors)



Case management (12 of 28 directors)



Worksite management (8 of 28 directors)



Workshop coordination and facilitation
(6 of 28 directors)

Recommendations for DYCD

Throughout the Opportunity Youth program, DYCD leaders and staff have learned from the implementation experiences of provider agencies and evolved program policies and technical assistance and support. Based on the themes that emerged during this evaluation, the PSA evaluation team offers perspective on how DYCD can enhance supports to providers for delivering a robust workforce development program to the young people in the NDAs targeted by the program.

Facilitate more learning opportunities, including peer learning. DYCD periodically convenes Opportunity Youth providers to review program policies and provide guidance; directors also receive feedback and assistance from DYCD managers. DYCD also convenes directors for training on the Capricorn case-management system and offers technical assistance through the Mental Health Association (MHA) of New York and the Workforce Professionals Training Institute (WPTI) on recruitment, retention, and employer engagement.

- However, directors expressed a desire for additional **learning opportunities focused less on compliance, and more on sharing promising strategies** and deepening the quality of services. For example, one director recommended more in-depth training on case-management practices, including how to build trust between program staff and participants.
- Another director suggested bringing in service providers to provide information about various **resources in the city** that could help provide additional supportive services to address issues faced by Opportunity Youth participants that are beyond the workforce training scope of the program.
- A **forum for cross-program interactions and learning** was central to the wish-list of directors. One director recommended a mentorship model in which Opportunity Youth programs are paired for visits, program observations and peer coaching. This director believed these types of opportunities to share practices would foster community and a “win-win” attitude among programs.

Cross-site interactions can create opportunities for directors to learn from one another and promote synergy across providers and programs. When cross-site sharing has occurred, directors have described the experience as valuable. One director said, “Providers are able to get together and talk about what their challenges are. I know that the struggles we have with recruitment are often across the board, so we’re able to learn from other programs doing the same things.” Directors want more of these opportunities.

Articulate DYCD workforce development pathways. DYCD funds several workforce development programs, each with its own eligibility and accountability requirements, and program structures. But many of these programs have some overlap in goals and in population served, and many are limited in duration and exposure for participants.

- Articulating a DYCD vision for **how workforce development programs connect to each other** would enable DYCD to provide guidance to providers in creating a pathway of support and growth for participants.
- Opportunity Youth providers have tentatively begun **defining some pipelines** for recruitment and placement within their workforce development programs. DYCD could learn from these strategies and help all programs by **mapping possible trajectories** for youth and young adults served through its programs.

Serve as a convener to promote collective impact. The population convened by the Opportunity Youth program needs support in being reconnected to employment or education pathways. But the Opportunity Youth program also need help addressing foundational needs. A collective impact approach that breaks down silos by bringing together representatives across sectors in a “structured way to achieve social change” could help to strengthen the program.³ A collective impact

³ Collective Impact Forum (<https://collectiveimpactforum.org>)

approach goes beyond linkages to gathering partners invested in the same goal to intentionally and strategically plan and implement steps towards that goal.

- In the short term, we recommend that DYCD compile existing resources that **bridge the agency's assets** across the community development, workforce development, and youth program areas and share these resources with Opportunity Youth providers to more cohesively address the needs of Opportunity Youth participants.
- Longer term, DYCD can **serve as a convener** to bring together the business, social services, and government agencies in designated NDA communities to create a comprehensive and steady continuum for the Opportunity Youth program that addresses barriers to success, workforce development training, and post-program support.

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