Improving Community Responses:
Employment & Education for Transition-Aged Youth

MANY Network - www.manynet.org

MANY

Improving Community Responses

Employment & Education for Transition-Aged Youth

There are countless policies, laws, research, training, and white papers that talk about the challenges transition-aged youth are experiencing. Yet even with this focus, direct service providers continue to state that employment and education is top on their list of needs for transition-aged youth.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary

MANY convened providers from 31 states, representing various sectors of the youth services field, to a roundtable discussion. The goal was to highlight what's working in their programs and to share critical challenges. As part of this discussion, providers identified emerging or persistent needs in their local communities. Multiple themes emerged, but none were more prevalent than the employment and education challenges of transition-aged youth. From housing programs, to substance abuse programs, to mental health programs – all identified education and employment as the top two challenges youth and young adults were experiencing. Following this convening, a series of calls and additional in-person meetings were conducted to dive deeper into the root of these challenges – identifying the top barriers that transcended specific localities or states. This report synthesizes those barriers, cross-walks these barriers with existing evidence, and shares recommendations crafted by the field.

Across the nation, there is a population of youth in need of opportunities to connect with the employment and education world or run the risk of disconnecting for critical support systems. The number of youth (ages 18-24) disconnected from school and work is growing and effective community responses are not growing at the same rate. There is a clear need to understand the pipeline to this disconnection and ensure providers' ability to respond effectively.

In this report, MANY explores what youth need to find success in obtaining employment and/or educational opportunities, as well as the barriers that make this success difficult. More than anything else, youth need a comprehensive and developmentally appropriate approach to services, coupled with job opportunities that match the skills of the youth with the needs of the business community. MANY will explore two of the most critical barriers transition-aged youth face when it comes to connecting with employment and education services: fragmented services and fragmented data and outcomes.

**To address these barriers, MANY makes the following recommendations to practitioners and policy makers:**

- **Build Resiliency of Providers Across Sectors by:**
    a. Effectively engaging providers across multiple sectors
    b. Hosting local/regional cross-sector innovation labs
    c. Aggregating and utilizing knowledge from demonstrations, pilots, and effective programs
    d. Disseminating resources that encourage action
- **Develop Cross-Sector Partnerships and Collaboration by:**
    a. Incentivizing cross-sector partnerships and coordinated services
    b. Developing shared measures of success at the local level.

Together with the youth services field, MANY will continue to explore these trends and their implications on the field, unearth innovations, and determine where new research and evaluation can support this work. As part of this process, MANY will continue to share its learning back with the field in order to elevate the work all of us do through blog posts on our Knowledge Center, articles in our eMessages, and regular links and updates through Facebook & Twitter. Make sure to follow us and continue to be part of this critical conversation!

Unemployment is disproportionately high for transition-aged youth. The Bureau of Labor Statistics find that the unemployment rate for youth 16 to 24 is over 12%; more than double that of the overall population. [1] The potential adverse impact of a disengaged, under-skilled, and underemployed generation is formidable and may have severe, lasting social and economic costs for individuals, families, businesses, and communities. There is a unique subset of transition-aged youth, where there are additional barriers beyond unemployment rates. For opportunity youth (youth who are disconnected from secondary education and/or employment, or youth who are disconnected from post-secondary education and/or employment), the challenges continue to mount as many live in poverty and/or in single parent homes where

there is rarely a history of college graduation. Today, there are over 2.4 million young adults are neither working nor in school. [2] While over half of these youth report looking for work in the past year, the barriers to securing work go beyond having the necessary education and skills for employment.
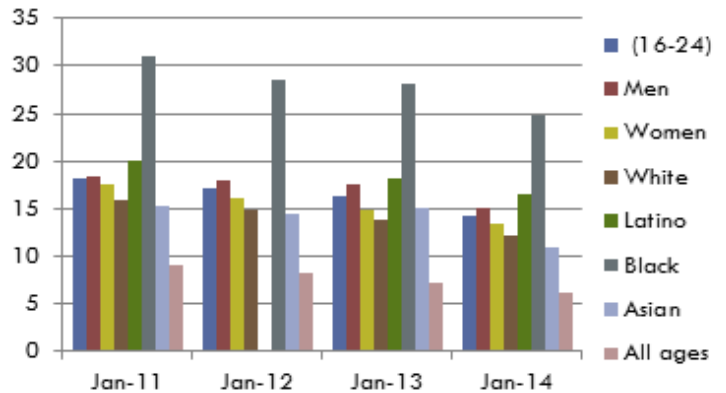
More systemic and deeply-rooted barriers often include [3]:

- High cost of education
- Need to care for family members
- Lack of transportation
- Struggle to balance school and work
- Lack of knowledge to navigate college application and financial aid process

Without education and employment opportunities, the challenges opportunity youth face will only grow until they find themselves connected with other systems, often the social service or justice systems.

If changes are not made, the nation is missing out on a population of employees that can bring unique skills and experiences that will only serve to make our companies stronger and more diverse. Indeed, according to a report from the US Chamber of Commerce, savvy business leaders are realizing revenue increases, cash savings, and tangible workforce improvements by tapping into the potential of 16- to 24-year-old workers. They create a robust pipeline of their company's next generation of talent, as well as filling critical skills gaps, and providing greater diversity that better reflects the customers serviced by many companies. [4] Additionally, transition-aged youth serve as a huge asset in spurring innovation within their companies and various fields by bringing in fresh ideas and different life experiences.

1. http://www.bls.gov/news.release/youth.nr0.htm
2. Fernandes-Alcantara, Adrienne (2015). Disconnected Youth: A Look at 16 to 24 Year Olds Who are Not Working on IN School. https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R40535.pdf
3. Bridgeland, J. and Milano, J. (2012) Opportunity Road: The Promise and Challenge of America's Forgotten Youth. Retrieved from: www.civicenterprises.net/reports/opportunity_road.pdf
4. Center for Education and Workforce (2015). Making Youth Employment work: Essential Elements for a Successful Strategy. Retrieved from: http://www.uschamberfoundation.org/sites/default/files/Making%20Youth%20Employment%20Work.pdf

Creating a path forward for youth in transition requires a holistic lens that pulls from multiple service sectors to operate in a collaborative approach that considers all aspects of the transition-aged youth's realities and needs. [5]   More often than not, when a youth enters a program, they are segmented and served based on one of these needs rather than looking at the youth and their needs holistically and developing a comprehensive approach to support them. In addition to taking a comprehensive approach, the services must be developmentally appropriate and tailored to address the unique needs of the youth. [6] Research on adolescent brain development finds that the human brain is not fully developed until youth are in their mid-twenties and this should significantly impact how adolescent youth are served. [7] Rather than treating them as "mini-adults", youth in late adolescence possess unique strengths and challenges that must be embraced as part of their preparation for education and employment opportunities. Once equipped with the right services and support, it is essential that there are jobs available to youth that meet both their developmental experience and skill level. This section of the report will further explore how to offer comprehensive and developmentally appropriate services to youth.

Comprehensive Support

First and foremost, employment and education success requires a holistic approach that addresses housing, employment, education, and an array of basic needs such as healthcare, childcare, transportation, legal support, and connection to the community. Based on the Positive Youth Justice model, the 4 Life Domains identify those critical elements that must be in place in order for youth to reach their full potential. [8] Unmet needs in one area can prevent youth from progress in another. A systematic exploration of the critical life domains provides youth with a holistic view of their individual realities and assets to inform goal development. For example, if youth are struggling to secure housing or cannot access reliable transportation, they will not be able to focus on higher level needs like being a contributing employee or student. Beyond connecting to the youth, service providers in a given community must also be able to connect

4 Life Domain Needs

1. Basic Needs
2. Housing
3. Employment
4. Education

with each other in order to provide coordinated services. Too often services live at the extremes- either too many services are available, providing a duplication of resources and making navigation difficult, or there is a gap in service that prevents youth from receiving the comprehensive support they need. Regardless of the scenario, in order for youth to connect into the employment and education world, there needs to be access to support that is comprehensive and coordinated.

A recent report [9] by ICF supported this approach through their research of workforce development programs. In their review of services, they found that when youth employment is connected to financial support, education, and addresses the 4 Life Domains, progress and long-term sustainability is much higher. This approach is the basis of MANY's Positive Pathways model for youth employment and education. Viewing youth through a holistic lens that accounts for their physical, emotional, social, and mental needs while helping them to secure employment and/or achieve higher education, allows for a higher likelihood of success. After participating in MANY's Positive Pathways model, youth in the pilot period had a .03% recidivism rate and 92% maintained enrollment in school. The project also saw 88% of participants achieve placement in education and employment, as well as experience a significant increase in career maturity, a decrease in reactive violence, and a significant increase in perceived support from peers. Projects such as this provide the comprehensive support necessary to equip youth to identify lasting employment and education options.

5. Curan, S., et al. (2015). Enough is Known for Action! Ready to Employ, Education, and Support Youth. (Center for Youth and Communities.) Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, ETA
6. Searle, R. et al (2014). What We Know about Youth Employment: Research Summary and Best Practices. (Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, Inc.) Bowling Green, OH.
7. Johnson, S. et al. (2009). Adolescent Maturity and the Brain: The Promise and Pitfalls of Neuroscience Research in Adolescent Health Policy. Journal of Adolescent Health. Volume 45, Issue 3, 216-221
8. Butts, Jeffrey A., Gordon Bazemore, & Aundra Saa Meroe (2010). Positive Youth Justice--Framing Justice Interventions Using the Concepts of Positive Youth Development. Washington, DC: Coalition for Juvenile Justice
9. Marks, V and Ed. Trumbull (2105). New Opportunities to Support Youth Employment. Youth Today: http://youthtoday.org/2015/12/new-opportunities-to-support-youth-employment/

Developmentally-Tailored Service Approach

Establishing a developmentally-tailored service approach requires a sustained relationship with a caring adult to engage with the youth, navigate services and support, and to stabilize youth who have experienced trauma. [10] Successful **engagement** begins with effective outreach that is relevant to this population, and utilizes a resiliency framework that actively involves youth in identifying specific needs and assets. [11] This includes use of assessment tools that recognize the interdependence of the 4 Life Domains and effectively identifying pathways to success. The **navigation** of services and support requires knowledge of and access to a wide array of social and supportive service providers within the community that are aligned with the 4 Life Domains to provide comprehensive support. More than just requiring service providers to connect youth with the necessary services to meet those basic needs, youth need a relationship with a caring adult (such as a mentor) to help design and navigate a pathway forward and then guide them as they achieve success. With the involvement of a case coordinator or manager and another caring adult, youth can have multiple supports on their side as they navigate a path toward steady employment. The final piece of this approach, **stabilization,** is helping youth to establish a sense of stability within themselves and their environment. Not only are youth often dealing with past trauma, but it's likely they will continue to experience trauma moving forward. Building the protective factors that foster resiliency is important, this includes connecting them with permanent caring adults in their lives. Doing this well requires sustained support after they've connected to employment.
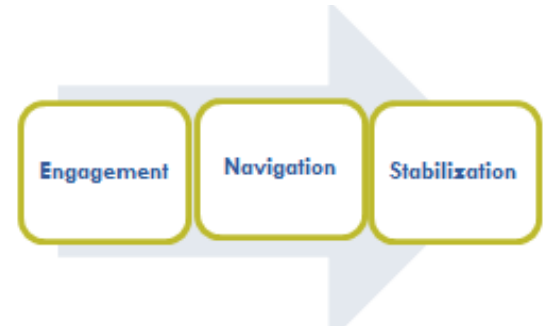
Job Opportunities

Beyond the necessary services and support, transition-aged youth are still looking for the opportunity to find and retain employment. Job opportunities are created through intentional and consistent employer engagement. To be effective, providers need to adopt a more business-driven approach to working with employers that places business hiring needs at the center of the workforce development programs and uses messaging that will help employers understand the value of investing in youth. At the same time, providers need to invest in understanding the needs and interests of the employers they hope to engage. Providers serve as the connection point to help find jobs that are available that match the skills of the youth and to help youth to navigate barriers that emerge in their search for employment. The sooner in the process that programs can bring employers to the table to understand their needs in terms of the number of positions that need to be filled and the skills needed to fill those positions, the more effectively programs can manage expectations and ensure they have the right youth in the right situations for that employer. There must be incentives for businesses to employ youth that makes sense for them. These employer/provider partnerships can also help programs better prepare youth for what will be expected of them after they are employed and lay a solid foundation for a successful placement and experience for both sides. The right training and support will ensure stronger retention rates as youth are ready and able to meet the desired outcomes for themselves and their employer.

Community Barriers To Achieving Employment & Education Success

Through extensive conversations with service providers across the nation, two major themes emerged related to challenges in helping youth fully achieve employment and education success: a fragmentation of local services and a fragmentation of evidence.

---

10. Charnley Eveland, A. (2014, November 17). BRIEF: Childhood trauma subject of discussion. Walla Walla Union-Bulletin (WA).
11. Wolin S. et al (1993). The Resilience Self: How Survivors of Troubled Families Rise Above Adversity. New York: Random House Publishing Group.

As a whole, although comprehensive support is a key component to success, local employment and education services are often fragmented and uncoordinated. Consider the number and types of programs in local communities providing employment and education services. Independent living programs, transitional living programs, Title I programs, Youth-Build, various state or locally funded programs, alternative schools, vocational schools, and community colleges can all be present in the same community. For example, a recent scan of employment and education programs available to youth and young adults ages 12-25 in King County, WA revealed more than 60 different programs – each with a varied focus on employment, education, or both. With this vast array of providers, it may not be shocking to learn that even local services providers were unaware of the full list of other programs in the county.

Navigation is challenging
This level of fragmentation is difficult for providers to navigate and even harder for youth who are disconnected. The more challenges a youth faces, the harder this navigation becomes when they have to traverse multiple "systems" to stabilize basic needs, housing, employment, and education. Often, there is no single person navigating across domains, therefore youth experiences are dependent on which services youth first "enter". For example, a housing program may be oriented towards strict compliance with specific program requirements such as experience with the juvenile justice system, or drug usage, rather than prioritizing reconnecting the youth to education and/or career planning.

Services driven by program eligibility and outcomes vs. youth needs
When services are fragmented, ultimately services are led by eligibility requirements, often structured to meet required programmatic outcomes rather than being driven by meeting the needs of individual youth and the larger community. This leads to gaping holes in the pipeline for many subpopulations.

No shared measures of success and data sharing at the local level
Lastly, the varied measures of success and siloed data collection makes it difficult to collect, aggregate, and translate findings into actionable data. Without a common set of measures and the subsequent data, it is difficult to effectively improve outcomes and promote strong practices among the community, and the field.

In a space where so little exists in the form of robust evidence, the need to collectively foster and cross-share innovation to cultivate this evidence base is clear. The fragmentation of services locally has greatly fostered two key challenges resulting in a fragmentation of evidence: inconsistency in language, and limited sharing of innovation and evidence across sectors.

Inconsistency in language
How organizations and systems define their services varies by program and this makes it difficult to identify common practices that can be evaluated and supported. This language inconsistency also effects how program practices are delivered, as programs may be implementing a practice that is not following an evidence-informed approach, though the description of the service may appear as such. There is a growing need for consistent language that can streamline approaches and help to create common metrics and measures so that providers can identify and provide truly effective practices.

Limited sharing of innovation & evidence across sectors
Conducting work in such silos seriously limits the innovations that can be shared among programs. For example, youth disconnected from employment and education are often accessing other local programs. These include low barrier programs such as drop-in centers and short-term shelters as well as programs targeted at basic needs such as re-entry programs for juvenile justice involved youth, and transitional living programs. Often, these initial points of connection are key opportunities to re-engage youth in employment and education. However, traditionally, these programs largely exist in silos separate from traditional workforce development programs such as alternative schools, community college

options, and employment training programs, and vice versa. These siloes prevent the sharing of emerging effective practices across each of the 4 domains, and can lead to duplicative services and unleveraged resources.

Recommendations From The Field

Together with our members and partners spanning multiple sectors and all 50 states, we have identified the following innovative, practical actions designed to build on the existing strengths in the field and simultaneously address barriers in order to strengthen outcomes:

Build Resiliency of Providers Across Sectors

EFFECTIVELY ENGAGE PROVIDERS ACROSS MULTIPLE SECTORS. To reduce fragmentation of services, the field reported that there must be a strategic approach to engage providers (and funders) across sectors in a community-wide solution. This includes bridging relationships between youth service providers, Workforce Investment Boards, adult workforce training providers, community colleges, employers and other stakeholders.

HOST LOCAL/REGIONAL CROSS-SECTOR "INNOVATION LABS. Unemployment for transition-aged youth is more than double the national average and providers are being called on by funders and more importantly, those they serve, to reduce this reality. To bridge this divide, providers across the country are using what they know works to innovate and push for new solutions. Sharing (and translating) the collective knowledge of workforce, education, youth development professionals and others, increases the capacity of providers, researchers, and funders to incorporate evidence-informed and research-based practices to create comprehensive community solutions. Additionally, supporting local/regional innovation often advances innovation nationally when conveners or facilitators are able to report out to the larger field.

AGGREGATE AND UTILIZE KNOWLEDGE FROM DEMONSTRATIONS, PILOTS, AND EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS. Tracking and sharing successes, challenges, and even failures is critical to advancing practices at the local level. As communities are responding to new Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act (WIOA) requirements and the growing challenges of connecting transition-aged youth to the workforce, understanding what other communities and programs have tried, their pressure points, and their successes, will be critical to moving forward swiftly and effectively. With just a brief scan of providers from 31 states, we were able to identify a short list of programs and initiatives with critical learnings. As such, providers felt it would be useful to collect this wealth of information in a more intentional way. Additionally, effective and purposeful distribution (opposed to mass distribution) of this knowledge is critical to ensure it is utilized locally.

DISSEMINATE RESOURCES THAT ENCOURAGE ACTION. This is an area of continued learning and the more that can be done to share these learnings back to the field and those invested in this work in real time, the more powerful it can be. Beyond reports and recommendations, we need to develops guides, toolkits, and in-person learning events that not only provide context and information for the work that we do, but also offer tangible actions that we can take to respond to what we are learning.

Cross-Sector Partnership & Collaboration

INCENTIVIZE CROSS-SECTOR PARTNERSHIP AND COORDINATED SERVICES. Working across sectors and among agencies within states and communities is the first step in supporting youth on their path toward education and employment. For example, to effectively engage youth, particularly those who have been disconnected from traditional supports, outreach efforts must be integrated into natural access points within the community.

Offering coordinated access points requires a collaborative community approach that engages providers across domains to ensure that regardless of the door youth enter, they receive with consistent engagement and comprehensive navigation support. Effectively coordinated services also include educating providers on the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs), and identifying ways for these providers to help local WIBs meet new performance measures. Interagency partnerships can also help to ensure that we avoid duplication of services in communities and build on existing services and evidence-based practices so that agencies can focus on what they do best, and rely on partnerships for other services essential to success.

DEVELOP SHARED MEASURES OF SUCCESS AT THE LOCAL LEVEL. The creation of shared measures of success at the local level will make it possible for communities to communicate the needs and skills of transition-aged youth beyond their individual programs. The ability to collect data and report on outcomes is no longer enough for individual service providers. If there is no way to align those outcomes on a broader scale, it becomes very difficult to communicate the impact of education and employment programs to funders, policy makers, and the greater public. Agencies that are focused on aligning workforce outcomes, as well as solid data collection practices with youth, will have data that is better quality, easier to be aggregated, and more quickly translated into actionable steps.

About MANY Network

Providing high quality, effective services for youth and families who are at-risk requires constant monitoring of demographic, economic, social, technological, and political forces. Often, when direct service providers experience emerging trends, they begin crafting immediate service responses before researchers, statisticians, and lawmakers are even able to put a label on it. Across sectors, MANY works to fill the a gap in aggregating trends in real time and sharing them back to the field, researchers, lawmakers, and funders in an actionable way. MANY is a national network that offers organizations resources, supports, and training focused on improving outcomes for youth and young adults at highest risk for victimization and delinquency.

Annually, MANY connects with over 12,000 non-profit providers, funders, and researchers, and provides intensive training and support to about 3,000 of these organizations each year. MANY tends to attract the innovators in the field and has over 151 member organizations across the country who are engaged regularly to assess emerging issues in local communities —and offer real-time solutions.