

White House Council for Community Solutions – Recommendations

Fostering Cross-Sector Collaboratives to Put Opportunity Youth on Paths to Prosperity

Established by Executive Order in December 2010, the White House Council for Community Solutions (the Council) worked to identify innovative cross-sector community initiatives that increased civic participation and helped solve our nation’s most serious challenge. In seeking to learn more about a distinctive group of community collaboratives that achieved significant improvement on local challenges, the Council chose to apply these findings toward creating substantial opportunity for young people who are out of school and work. While these young people are commonly known as “disconnected youth,” the Council identified them as opportunity youth because of the untapped potential they offer and high cost inaction poses for our nation.

The collaborative model has the power to help us tackle a compelling and urgent threat to our economy and society. Community collaboratives can help solve many persistent issues including connecting young people with education, training, flexible supports, jobs, and long-term economic stability.

At least 6.7 million youth – or one in six young people (ages 16-24) – are not connected to education or jobs. The scale of this issue makes addressing it compelling and urgent: Columbia University/CUNY researchers estimate taxpayers shouldered \$93 billion in 2011 in direct and indirect costs to support these young people. Over the lifetime of these youth, these costs reach \$1.6 trillion.

Opportunity youth offer untapped potential for the nation. While all young people have enormous promise to infuse our economy with new skills and leadership, connecting this distinct group to learning and employment could change the trajectory of their lives, as well as our economy and society.

Recommended Strategies

The following recommended strategies have the potential to unite all Americans – across all sectors – to address key community challenges and create real, systemic change for opportunity youth and their communities.

Strategy 1: Driving the Development of more Cross-Sector Community Collaboratives

Research and practice have shown that reconnecting opportunity youth is difficult, if not impossible, within the bounds of a single intervention. The exception to this is when this single intervention is not really a single program, but a collaboration of services brought together around the needs of youth.

Cross-sector community collaboratives that actually move the needle—realizing at least a 10 percent change in the problem they aim to address—share a select set of attributes and should be replicated increasingly across the nation. These attributes are:

1. Shared vision and agenda
2. Effective leadership and governance
3. Alignment of resources toward what works
4. Dedicated staff capacity and appropriate structure
5. Sufficient funding

Key Recommendations:

- 1. Prioritize Funding for Best Practice Cross-Sector Community Collaboratives.** Public and private funders should prioritize successful collaborative efforts that exhibit best practice characteristics. The Council strongly supports the \$20 million Disconnected Youth Initiative proposed in the President's 2013 budget. The departments of Education, Health and Human Services, and Labor are proposing a total of \$20 million to develop interagency strategies to strengthen the impact of federal programs serving opportunity youth and identify opportunities for enhanced flexibility and collaboration.
- 2. Promote Collaborative Use of Data Across Agency Lines.** Given that the ability to access and share data across systems is critical to successful solutions for complex social issues, the administration should allow local communities access to critical data across the continuum of a young person's life, improve the connection between federal, state, and local data sources, and provide clarity about the ability to share data. The Council recommends that the administration:
 - **Align funding for state and local data systems** and encourage states and localities to provide more flexibility in existing programs to build, adopt, or adapt data systems.
 - **Propose changes to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).** The Council calls on the administration to expand on new Department of Education FERPA guidelines by recommending changes to the legislation itself. More immediately, relevant agencies and their privacy attorneys should provide more helpful guidance, promising practices, and tools (i.e., sample memorandums of understanding and consent forms) for sharing data among agencies for opportunity youth.
- 3. Align Policies to Reduce Fragmentation, Improve Efficiency, and Achieve Better Results.** The Council recommends that the administration simplify and align eligibility criteria, uses of funds, and reporting requirements across programs and agencies to allow coordination of services. The Council strongly supports the \$113 million Performance Partnership Pilots for Disconnected Youth proposed in the President's 2013 budget. Pilot sites will be given the flexibility from federal regulations necessary to work across agency lines to achieve better efficiency. In areas where pilots are successful, this flexibility should be made widely available.
- 4. Create a National Community of Practice.** The nonprofit sector should establish a community of organizations dedicated to identifying and sharing best practices and developing tools for organizations committed to creating opportunities for opportunity youth.
- 5. Replicate Successful Aspects of Youth Opportunity Grants.** Based on evaluations of Workforce Investment Act's grants, the Council recommends that the administration encourage funding the successful aspects of YO through WIA.
- 6. Create an Incentive Fund.** The Council recommends that the administration allow for the use of existing WIA formula funding to create a pilot collective impact fund for communities that are committed to aligning existing community resources and setting specific targets to reconnect young people to school and work.

Strategy 2: Creating Shared National Responsibility and Accountability for Opportunity Youth

Shared national responsibility and accountability for opportunity youth requires both high-level consistent leadership to coordinate efforts across agencies and the collection, reporting, and sharing of rigorous data to ensure that leaders at all levels have a clear understanding of the scope of the problem and available public and private efforts to allocate limited resources with the greatest return on investment.

Key Recommendations:

- 1. Establish High-Level Consistent Leadership.** The Council recommends that the federal government establish ongoing coordination and accountability, possibly within the Domestic Policy Council, and charge this leadership with creating goals and clarifying responsibilities amongst agencies for improving outcomes for opportunity youth.
- 2. Lead with Data.** To create greater national, state, and local accountability and to empower communities to drive change, the Council recommends that the administration begin regularly collecting and reporting information on opportunity youth through the Current Population Survey or American Community Survey.
- 3. Evaluate Current Programs.** The Council recommends that the administration conduct a comprehensive survey across departments and agencies to understand what programs and initiatives are currently serving opportunity youth, how effectively they reconnect youth to education or employment, and at what scale.
- 4. Scale Up and Reward Effective Programs.** The Council recommends that the administration encourage scaling of successful programs and establish selection criteria for Pay for Success proposals serving opportunity youth.
- 5. Invest in Innovation.** The Council applauds the administration's Investing in Innovation Fund, Social Innovation Fund, and the Workforce Innovation Fund and urges the administration to establish selection criteria that rewards proposals from organizations that are serving opportunity youth.

Strategy 3: Engaging Youth as Leaders in the Solution

Research shows that opportunity youth are more likely to respond to reconnection strategies that treat them as part of the solution rather than the problem. One core strategy for bringing success to scale is viewing youth as assets and engaging youth in designing, implementing and evaluating the solutions.

When youth are involved as community leaders, the decisions are more relevant and reliable, and more likely to be embraced by them. Perhaps most importantly, their innate understanding of their generation allows them to develop more authentic solutions to the issues they face.

Key Recommendations:

- 1. Formalize Youth Input.**
 - Create a Presidential Youth Working Group.** The Council recommends that the administration expand on existing efforts and establish a Presidential Youth Working Group composed of young people that reflects a diversity of backgrounds and experience, including opportunity youth, to advise the President and his cabinet secretaries on the perspectives of young people during funding and program management discussions.
 - Call on Leading Organizations in the Nonprofit and Faith-based Sectors to Create a National Youth Council.** The Council calls for the expansion of an existing effort, or the creation of a new national youth council, in addition to creating the Presidential Youth Working Group.
 - Incorporate Youth Input Into Program Development and Evaluation.** Nonprofit organizations (and foundations that support them) should incorporate authentic youth input in the design and evaluation of programs and services for opportunity youth,

2. **Create an Online, Youth-Rated Service Directory.** Expand an existing or create a new community-wide service inventory, youth networking and/or “customer feedback” tool that can be used for youth to be able to assess the quality and availability of local support services.
3. **Hire Opportunity Youth in Program Roles.** All youth-serving programs (government, business, nonprofit, faith-based, cross sector, etc.) should assess which of their program and advocacy needs can be filled directly by the youth they aim to serve.

Strategy 4: Creating More Robust Pathways to Employment for Opportunity Youth

Because of the diverse needs of opportunity youth, multiple robust pathways must exist as on-ramps. Research demonstrates that education and employment must be strongly linked to create successful pathways for opportunity youth. Service is another viable pathway and all pathways are reliant on a foundation of wraparound support systems provided through youth serving organizations.

Key Recommendations:

1. **Encourage All Sectors to Increase Job Opportunities for Opportunity Youth.** The Council recommends:
 - Deepening Summer Jobs + by increasing the number of jobs each year for opportunity youth, encouraging the creation of year-round opportunities, and expanding to include the faith-based community.
 - Continuing to build on the Disconnected Youth Opportunity Tax Credit and to strengthen it by including incentives for employers to provide a range of valuable experiences from job shadowing, career awareness, mentoring or internship programs to hiring opportunity youth.
2. **Provide High-Quality, Relevant Educational Opportunities for Opportunity Youth:**
 - The Council supports the administration’s Blueprint for Investing in America’s Future: Transforming Career and Technical Education (CTE). The Blueprint suggests a combination of technical assistance, competition, and a system of structured rewards to ensure that more students, regardless of backgrounds or circumstances, have access to high-quality CTE programs.

The Council recommends:

- Scaling effective examples of community and faith-based organizations to provide opportunity youth the remediation, support services, and career-oriented instruction necessary for their success, such as those supported by the Department of Education’s Together for Tomorrow initiative.
 - Encouraging the K-12 system to do more data-driven early identification and prevention of school disconnection.
 - Encouraging school districts, community- and faith-based organizations to provide high-quality remedial and dropout recovery services to opportunity youth.
 - Continuing its support of efforts that meet the needs of local employers in today’s dynamic economy such as Skills for America’s Future.
 - Encouraging the military and employers to work closely with higher education institutions to align work experience with curriculum for degree-granting programs.
3. **Increase Service Opportunities Available to Opportunity Youth and Ensure Strong Linkages to Education and Employment.** The Council recommends:

- Setting annual targets to increase the percentage of opportunity youth slots available in service programs and establishing a cross-cutting priority for programs that engage opportunity youth to ensure impact priorities do not disadvantage these programs.
- Scaling service programs that have been proven successful in reconnecting opportunity youth.
- Implementing the Opportunity Corps in the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act.
- Supporting service programs that continue to incorporate employment and education linkages into existing programs.

4. Help Opportunity Youth Find Mentors. The Council recommends expanding efforts for mentoring young people, especially peer-to-peer mentoring where youth who have successfully navigated programs and services assist other youth.