

# PUTTING EQUITY AT THE CENTER

The Opportunity Youth Forum

By Monique Miles and Yelena Nemoy

March 2018



THE ASPEN INSTITUTE  
Forum for Community Solutions

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## The Opportunity Youth Forum

By Monique Miles and Yelena Nemoy

March, 2018

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## About the Authors

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## Acknowledgements

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# Executive Summary

**T**he Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions Opportunity Youth Forum (OYF) collaboratives seek a world in which all young people – especially youth who have been disconnected from school and work – have the opportunity to attain the skills needed to succeed regardless of their background or socioeconomic circumstances. In order to make this vision a reality, collaboratives are placing equity at the center of their collective impact efforts for opportunity youth. The Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions (AIFCS) defines equity as just and fair inclusion in a society in which all can participate, prosper and reach their full potential.

Recognizing that community collaboratives operate within a context of structural inequity that makes equitable outcomes unlikely, OYF collaboratives know they must pay explicit attention to policies and practices that reinforce inequity in their communities. In fact, OYF collaboratives know that without constant attention to equity, their work to align and coordinate systems for opportunity youth can easily reinforce institutional patterns of disparity, negating their efforts to improve outcomes for these young people. By using an equity lens to focus on both systems change and the unique needs of priority populations (such as youth in foster care or boys and men of color), AIFCS is ensuring the needs of youth who face the most significant barriers to success are met.

Collaboratives across the OYF learning community are using a range of strategies to keep an explicit focus on equity in their work to improve outcomes for opportunity youth, including:

- **Creating a culture within the local community of focusing on equity**  
OYF collaboratives are working to create a culture that focuses on and in some instances prioritizes equity by focusing on system and institutional change with equity at the center. Some are beginning this process by

embedding an equity lens into the practices of the collaborative's backbone. Others are beginning by bringing equity in to community-wide discussions of opportunity youth (or even broader discussions of youth, employment, or education) with local stakeholders, partners, employers, etc.

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**“The Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions defines equity as just and fair inclusion in a society in which all can participate, prosper and reach their full potential.”**

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- **Using disaggregated data to document and track disparities**

OYF collaborative partners are using data to hold themselves accountable for both the community-wide opportunity youth agenda and to establish shared measurement systems to track progress toward goals. Cross-system data collection is helping OYF communities identify and track progress of young people entering and completing postsecondary education and achieving work readiness. This data can be disaggregated by race, gender, and other indicators to identify inequitable outcomes and suggest where resources and attention are most needed.

- **Focusing on priority populations (such as foster-care youth or boys and men of color) to mitigate the effects of structural inequity**

OYF collaboratives operate with an understanding that youth and young adults are often marginalized in community decision-

making processes. Most have made youth and young adult engagement a central pillar of their work with an abiding belief that young people have the right, and are the most qualified, to represent their own interests, identify their challenges, and design their own solutions. In addition, OYF collaboratives seek to mitigate the effects of structural inequity by devoting additional resources to programming for particular populations who face the most difficult barriers to education and employment success.

needs of youth and young adults who are impacted the most by those disparities.

An explicit focus on equity is critical to collective impact efforts to improve outcomes for opportunity youth because it enables cross-system and sector partners to examine historical patterns of institutional and systemic disparities with an aim to address and dismantle these gaps as part of a comprehensive community-wide strategy to get to better outcomes. Absent such a focus, a collective impact effort may at best move the needle on a set of community-wide indicators that do not address the root cause of the issue. At worst, a collective impact effort may actually reinforce and perpetuate institutional and systemic patterns of inequity.

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- **Challenging existing institutionalized barriers**

Across the initiative, OYF collaboratives are working to change systems and institutions that create barriers to young people's education and employment success. Collaboratives do this by focusing on systems that create disparities and then collectively designing strategies to disrupt them, while also focusing on both administrative and legislative policy changes that protect and sustain better system outcomes for opportunity youth. At the same time, collaboratives focus on serving the unique

# Introduction

A quest for equity – defined as just and fair inclusion in a society in which all can participate, prosper and reach their full potential – seeks to eliminate policies, practices, attitudes, and cultural messages that reinforce differential outcomes by social group, such as race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, or class. Strategies to achieve equity must target the unequal needs and conditions of people and communities created by structural and institutional inequity. To tackle the most complex social issues faced by our communities, we need informed policies and practices that are designed to address disparity and promote opportunity. Because collective impact approaches focus on systems change, they provide a natural framework through which equity goals can be advanced.

AIFCS's OYF collaboratives seek a world in which all young people have the right to self-determine their own futures, including the opportunity to attain the skills necessary to succeed regardless of their background or socioeconomic circumstances. In order to make this vision a reality, collaboratives are placing equity at the center of their collective impact efforts for opportunity youth. Recognizing that they operate within a context of structural inequity that makes equitable outcomes unlikely, OYF collaboratives know they must pay explicit attention to policies and practices that reinforce inequity in their communities. OYF collaboratives are designing and testing strategies that recognize existing social inequity and consciously engaging those people whose lives are most affected by their work. In fact, OYF collaboratives know that without constant attention to equity, their work to align and coordinate resources for opportunity youth can easily reinforce institutional patterns of disparity, negating their efforts to improve outcomes for these young people. A continuous focus on equity has led OYF community collaboratives to increase awareness of cultural competencies, implement a range of activities to address equity, and forge new connections with national efforts.

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## **"Strategies to achieve equity must target the unequal needs and conditions of people and communities created by structural and institutional inequity."**

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This paper:

1. Argues that collective impact initiatives must address inequity to be successful.
2. Highlights a range of OYF efforts to place equity at the center of local collective impact efforts for opportunity youth.
3. Identifies ways backbone organizations, practitioners, and system leaders can address institutional inequity.
4. Encourages community collaboratives to start where they are now by beginning to consciously strive for greater equity in their communities.

We know this work is difficult and complex. However, our aim is to share strategies that may serve as a roadmap for other communities to consider in their own efforts to embed an equity frame into their collective impact and system change efforts, particularly when opportunity youth and/or other marginalized populations are the focus of the effort.



# *Chapter 1*

## Creating a Culture of Equity through Local Collective Impact Efforts for Opportunity Youth



The Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions (AIFCS) is a program, established in 2012, that seeks to spotlight and support communities successfully engaging leaders and advocates across all sectors — business, education, non-profit, philanthropy, and government — to collectively solve seemingly intractable social and economic challenges. AIFCS promotes collaborative, community-based efforts that build the power and influence of those with the least access to opportunity. AIFCS supports communities to come together to expand mobility, eliminate systemic barriers, and create their own solutions to their most pressing challenges.

AIFCS's Opportunity Youth Form (OYF), the first funding collaborative developed and led by AIFCS in 2013, seeks to support existing collaboratives and backbone organizations focused on building and deepening education and employment pathways for opportunity youth. Opportunity youth are defined as young people between the ages of 16-24 who are out of school and work. Using a collective impact or community collaboration approach, OYF collaboratives bring together multiple stakeholders (e.g., schools, community-based programs, postsecondary institutions, employers, youth leaders, and government agencies) to remove barriers and improve the systems that serve opportunity youth. With a focus on creating education and career pathways to reconnect opportunity youth to school and employment, OYF collaboratives are making it possible for young people to get back on track to successful adulthood.

AIFCS is working with OYF communities to encourage them to engage youth with two goals in mind: 1) improving systems and programs for youth, based on youth expertise in the realities of their lives and viable solutions to challenges they face, and 2) developing a pipeline of youth leaders with the skills and expertise to lead this work in the future. Believing

that it is critical to engage those most affected by its work, AIFCS OYF collaborates with Opportunity Youth United (OYU), a grassroots movement of young people and allies working to increase opportunity and decrease poverty in America, to support youth leadership development at the local, state, and national levels.

Recognizing that the five conditions for collective impact (common agenda, shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and backbone support organizations) are not enough to effect permanent change, AIFCS has made equity and social justice central to the OYF theory of change, noting the historical and structural barriers that have restricted access to opportunity for generations of poor and low-income people of color. Using an equity and justice lens to focus on both systems change and diverse priority populations (such as youth in foster care or boys and men of color), AIFCS is ensuring the needs of youth who face the most significant barriers to success are met.

This equity focus has influenced collaboratives across the OYF to structure their work to, for example, dismantle the “school-to-prison pipeline” or provide disproportionate resources to neighborhoods of particularly high need. In addition, the composition of the OYF learning community itself, which includes rural and tribal communities and communities in various stages of opportunity youth-focused work, represents AIFCS's commitment to geographic diversity and funding places (including rural and tribal communities) that have historically experienced philanthropic disinvestment.

Collaboratives across the OYF learning community are using a range of strategies to keep a sharp focus on equity in their work to improve outcomes for opportunity youth, including strategies that:

- Create a culture within the backbone organization, collaborative and in some instances, across the community of focusing on equity;
- Use disaggregated data to document and track disparities;
- Focus on particular populations to mitigate the effects of structural inequity; and
- Challenge existing institutionalized barriers.

The following examples illustrate several promising strategies being utilized across the OYF grantee partners. These strategies are not mutually exclusive; in fact, most OYF collaboratives are employing a variety of equity-focused strategies simultaneously.

AIFCS has worked with OYF collaboratives to create a national learning community that is informed by a shared learning agenda. The shared learning agenda accounts for the unique practice needs of individual places, while also organizing lessons that cut across major themes that build on and impact all communities in the national network. The national learning community is designed to allow OYF sites to exchange best practices and lessons learned, with a strong intentional focus on equity.

As part of this national learning community, AIFCS hosts two national convenings a year for communities, national partners, technical assistance providers, institutional, system and youth leaders, and other stakeholders, actors, and organizers across the field. In the spring, the OYF national network convenes in one of the OYF communities, allowing participants to learn more about the local opportunity youth ecology. In the fall, the OYF convenes in Aspen, CO on the campus of the Aspen Institute to support field and movement building that advances the opportunity youth agenda at the national level. Additionally, OYF site leaders participate in monthly learning circles to discuss and share best practices related to topics they identify as important to their work. Across these

aspects of the learning agenda, AIFCS has designed virtual learning circles, in-person site lead meetings, workshops and plenaries that lift up equity as a key strategy to improving outcomes for opportunity youth, while also supporting practices that enable communities to learn from one another's approaches.

All OYF collaboratives report on their efforts to incorporate equity into their work as part of their regular updates to AIFCS. As a result, OYF collaboratives are working to create a culture of equity in their cross system and sector community efforts. Some places are beginning this process by looking internally to focus on embedding equity in to practices at the collaborative backbone level. Here are examples of others that are bringing equity in to community-wide discussions of opportunity youth (or even broader discussions of youth, employment, or education).

### **Engaging in Internal Organizational Conversation on Race Equity in Southern Maine**

Realizing that whatever the collaborative was hoping to do externally in the community, it needed to do internally, the Southern Maine Youth Transition Network used the Race Matters Institute Assessment to examine how they were advancing race equity as a team of collaborative partners.<sup>1,2</sup> Based on the outcomes of the assessment, the network has engaged in small, peer-led conversations and trainings to begin to examine the impact of a history of racism on their work. Through this process, many providers who work with youth have gained a common language for talking about race and racial equity and have shifted from pointing fingers at other systems or providers to thinking about what they can do to make things work better for all youth.

## Generating Community Commitment to Equity in Austin

The Austin Opportunity Youth Collaborative (AOYC) has been very intentional about making the case for a community focus on equity in three key ways. First, the collaborative has made the concept of “no decision about youth, without youth” a central theme for its work, and this has led to a new community focus on youth voice and youth engagement. Through the *100 Youth Voices* initiative, Austin youth are actively engaged in the work of the collaborative, including regularly participating as representatives at convenings, providing testimony to government agencies, and serving on local non-profit boards. The AOYC has partnered with local professional development organization, Leadership Austin, to engage and prepare opportunity youth for involvement in community decision-making. Second, the collaborative engaged national equity practitioners including Arnold Chandler from Forward Change Consulting who presented at several OYF convenings, to facilitate a community-wide forum on “Embracing Equity: A Call to Action to Improve the Lives of Young Men of Color.” This forum, for which youth were central to the organizing and implementation, spurred the City of Austin to announce the creation of the City’s first Chief Equity Officer position. Third, the collaborative was instrumental in helping the City develop an **Austin Metro Area Master Community Workforce Plan (Master Plan)** that provides a vision for equity in education and employment by connecting workforce development and education to ensure opportunities for all Austin residents, including opportunity youth.

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# *Chapter 2*

## Documenting and Monitoring the Disparity: Examining the Right Data



OYF collaborative partners are using data to hold themselves accountable for the community-wide opportunity youth agenda by establishing shared measurement systems to track progress toward goals. This is no small feat, as collaboratives are working across multiple, complex systems, most of which are accustomed to gathering their own data to use for compliance purposes, not sharing with other systems for the continuous improvement of a collaborative effort. However, shared, cross-system data collection is helping OYF communities to identify how their young people are positioned in terms of postsecondary access and completion, in addition to work readiness. This data can be disaggregated (e.g. by race, gender, and other demographic characteristics and indicators) to identify inequitable outcomes and suggest where resources and attention are most needed to achieve greater parity for opportunity youth. Here are collaboratives sharing data:

### **Using Data to Uncover Disparities and Reallocate Resources in San Diego**

When the San Diego Workforce Partnership examined data on 16- to 24-year olds neither in school nor employed, they found over 43,000 such young people in San Diego County. However, when they looked closely, they noticed significantly higher disconnection rates for Black and Latino youth, as well as for young people residing in three neighborhoods—ironically, neighborhoods with the lowest levels of services for opportunity youth. The Partnership decided to take a neighborhood-based approach in an attempt to cut the disconnection rate for the overall county by reducing the outcome gap between areas with the highest rates of disconnection and areas where more affluent youth live. The Partnership set out to focus efforts and resources on three underserved neighborhoods within the county. Noting that the county included neighborhoods with high rates of prosperity, this strategy has helped the Partnership

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counter a common perception of disconnected youth as “well-to-do but goofing off.” The community is coming to understand that there is a sizeable need concentrated in several neighborhoods, and the Partnership has been piloting a reengagement strategy in these areas of the county.

### **Using Disaggregated Data to Identify and Track Opportunity Gaps and Creating System-Wide “Equity Essentials” to Close Those Gaps in Seattle**

In the five years of its publication, the Road Map Project Results Report has documented steady progress in most areas of the regional collective impact initiative focused on dramatically improving student achievement from cradle through college and career in South King County and South Seattle.<sup>3</sup> Yet despite this progress, disaggregated K-12 academic proficiency data clearly document that racial gaps have not been narrowing and poverty remains a significant obstacle for the region’s students. Recognizing that universal, one-size-fits-all strategies had not been working to close opportunity gaps, the collaborative realized if it was going to close opportunity gaps, it would need to be much more intentional about the unique barriers faced by different groups of youth and design targeted interventions necessary to address those barriers. In an effort to place greater emphasis on system-level changes, the collaborative has developed new

structural indicators of equity – five in total – to join the existing student success indicators. These “Equity Essentials” indicators includes: Equitable Funding; Increase Culturally Relevant School Climate and Supports; Strong Family Engagement Practices and Functions; Increase Access and Dismantle Barriers to Opportunity; and Strong Civil Rights Policies. The collaborative is clear that these system levers must be strengthened in order for youth of color in the region to reach their full potential. “We realized it was not kids we wanted to change, but rather systems,” explained Nicole Yohalem of the Community Center for Education Results, the collaborative’s backbone.<sup>4</sup> “Now we are using a new set of system indicators organized around those equity essentials.”

# *Chapter 3*

Understanding Structural Roots of Inequity: Lifting Up Youth Voice and Focusing on Priority Populations of Youth





OYF collaboratives operate with an understanding that youth and young adults are often marginalized in community decision-making processes. Most have made youth and young adult engagement a central pillar of their work with an abiding belief that young people have the right, and are the most qualified, to represent their own interest, identify their challenges, and design their own solutions. In addition, these local examples of OYF collaboratives seek to mitigate the effects of structural inequity by devoting additional resources to programming for those who face the most barriers to achieving education and employment success.

### **Highlighting Youth Voice in Del Norte to Inform Narrative Change**

One of many ways the Del Norte County and Tribal Lands Opportunity Youth Initiative has included youth and young adults in the collaborative is through its Empathy to Impact project, a human-centered design initiative in which former opportunity youth were engaged as part of teams interviewing opportunity youth and their allies. Youth and young adults were involved in all aspects of this project, including being interviewed, interviewing participants and analyzing interview data to develop themes. Having identified lack of public awareness and understanding of the barriers faced by opportunity youth as a significant challenge, the collaborative successfully used the Empathy to Impact project to elevate opportunity youth's stories and build empathy and understanding in the greater community.

### **Providing Intensive Postsecondary Preparation and Completion Supports to Those Facing the Greatest Barriers in the South Bronx**

The Bronx Opportunity Network (BON) is a neighborhood-based collaborative of seven Bronx-based organizations working with Jobs First NYC, an

intermediary focused on improving employment and educational opportunities for out-of-work and out-of-school young adults in New York City. The BON collaborative developed by talking with community members in the South Bronx – ranked as the nation's poorest Congressional District in 2010 – about what type of community they wanted to live in and the economic development necessary to achieve their vision. Launched in 2011, BON's mission is to enable underprepared Bronx students to improve their academic skills, overcome personal barriers, and enroll in and complete college. Much of the BON's early work was articulating how racial and socioeconomic drivers have ignored certain communities in NYC, in order to make the case for increased resources and attention to forgotten neighborhoods.

More recently, BON serves students in the South Bronx who are graduates of GED programs, transfer schools, and other alternatives to the K-12 system. BON partners (a mix of education, social service, and employment training organizations) provide participants with a six-week, intensive summer bridge program of academic coaching and individualized mentoring to prepare them for college. BON students also receive cash stipends to use for school-related expenses. Students who enroll in Bronx Community College and Hostos Community College are supported by BON staff. BON partners have a presence on both college campuses to make sure they are accessible to students for assistance with academic and life issues. Through intensive preparation and ongoing supports aimed at students in a historically disinvested neighborhood, the BON works on an equity agenda that seeks to “level the playing field” to increase postsecondary access and completion for young people who face some of the greatest barriers to postsecondary success.

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### **Pushing to Make Youth Programming More Equitable for Philadelphia’s Opportunity Youth**

The Project U-Turn collaborative is working to ensure quality education and employment preparation programming are available to Philadelphia’s opportunity youth, including those who face the greatest barriers to success. As the collaborative backbone and an intermediary through which numerous funds flow to area youth and workforce development programs, the Philadelphia Youth Network (PYN) is working with collaborative partners to ensure more equitable programming is available to opportunity youth in several key ways:

- **Instituting a policy of random assignment for the Philadelphia Summer Youth Employment program (SYEP)**

The SYEP in Philadelphia generally places about 8,000 young people (of 16,000 applicants) in summer jobs. In 2017, in order to access summer employment funding, PYN partner organizations were required to accept 20% of SYEP participants from a general pool of applicants. This meant that providers had to take on young people with whom they had not previously worked with. At the same time, these organizations were required to provide opportunities to youth who otherwise would have been kept from accessing an important

opportunity that historically places many young people on their professional paths. According to the research institute Child Trends, a summer employment experience can increase graduation rates, reduce involvement in the justice system and also increase the likelihood of enrolling in college.

- **Ensuring opportunity youth with the most significant barriers to success have access to education and employment training programming**  
PYN is working to ensure postsecondary opportunities are available to youth in its E3 Power Centers. The Centers provide drop-in GED preparation to young people 18-21 who have had juvenile justice or child welfare involvement. The Centers also pilot a postsecondary bridge program for young people who have not previously considered the possibility of a college education. Additionally, collaborative partners are working to offer apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship opportunities to opportunity youth. At the same time, the School District of Philadelphia’s Opportunity Network is developing career and technical education programming for youth in the city’s juvenile justice settings.

Through each of these initiatives the Project U-Turn collaborative is trying to develop resources to support, pilot, and learn about effective interventions for the most marginalized and vulnerable opportunity youth in their community.

# *Chapter 4*

## Eliminating Barriers: Examining and Challenging Systems and Institutions



**A**cross the initiative, OYF collaboratives are working to change systems and institutions that create barriers to young people's education and employment success. Communities do this by focusing on systems that are creating disparities and devising strategies to change those systems, including and especially prioritizing supports and resources for youth with the highest barriers to achievement.

### **Disrupting the School-to-Prison Pipeline in Boston**

The Boston Opportunity Youth Collaborative (OYC) has been successful in generating new interest in disrupting inequitable practices and improving education and employment pathways for the city's opportunity youth. After a Boston Public Schools (BPS) Deputy Superintendent attended an Aspen OYF convening, the district embarked on a major effort to end the school-to-prison pipeline in Boston. The *Dismantling the School to Prison Pipeline* initiative includes efforts to decrease the use of disciplinary suspension, increase social emotional learning and trauma-sensitive practices, and decrease chronic absenteeism in BPS. In its effort to understand and change its own inequitable practices, the district has begun to disaggregate attendance data by race and has also created a management level Opportunity Youth Coordinator position that supervises the district's attendance team and oversees the Mayor's homelessness initiative. Thus, enabling the district and city to align efforts and resources with a strategic focus on increasing equitable outcomes.

### **Changing the Juvenile Justice System in Oakland-Alameda County**

In Oakland, the Oakland-Alameda County Opportunity Youth Initiative is seeking systems change for youth involved with the justice system. The collaborative is pushing for what they term "justice reinvestment," in which savings from reducing incarceration rates are redirected to community

intervention and prevention, rather than back to law enforcement. In addition, the collaborative has successfully advocated for a public-sector jobs initiative in which the county is creating 1,400 civil service jobs for young people returning from incarceration. At the same time, the collaborative has pushed to change policies that allow young people to be tried as adults in the criminal justice system and also prevents employers from asking about past offenses on hiring applications. "We are not about demonizing the one who's been oppressed, but really examining the systems that caused that," says David Harris of the Urban Strategies Council, the collaborative's backbone.<sup>5</sup> "It's not a problem with the young people. It's a problem with the systems and policies."

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**"One of the greatest challenges in doing this work is addressing the fact that collaboratives are charged with an equally complex dual mission. AIFCS's OYF initiative has asked community collaboratives to achieve metric impact by improving individual youth and young adult outcomes, while also aligning systems to better and more effectively serve opportunity youth."**

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One of the greatest challenges in doing this work is addressing the fact that collaboratives are charged with an equally complex dual mission. AIFCS's OYF initiative has asked community collaboratives to achieve metric impact by improving individual youth and young adult outcomes, while also aligning systems to better and more effectively serve opportunity youth. Given that many of the systems mandated to serve opportunity youth have inequity baked into them, it

is necessary that OYF collaboratives adopt an equity-centered approach in order to move the needle and improve outcomes for opportunity youth.

According to OYF evaluation partner Equal Measure, year two evaluation findings reveal that collaboratives are successfully achieving accelerated system change, in spite of operating within imperfect systems and institutions. At the same time, collaboratives continue to work toward greater levels of impact, while also aiming to promote broader adoption of an equity frame. Across all of these efforts collaboratives have faced the following challenges:

- Education system policies designed to perpetuate inequity (such as tracking, inequitable funding for poor students and students of color, inequitable discipline practices, inadequate resources for reengagement efforts, and persistent achievement gaps);
- Criminal justice policies and practices that perpetuate inequality (such as racial bias in sentencing, poor education in juvenile justice facilities, inadequate reentry resources);
- Data collected by separate systems, often without adequate ability to disaggregate by priority populations;
- Lack of public resources to support a reengagement facility and recovery function to serve youth who have been pushed out of the K-12 system and connect them to postsecondary education;
- Lack of public understanding of the barriers faced by opportunity youth and the supports necessary to achieve success (such as restorative justice practices, social emotional learning and trauma informed approaches)
- Lack of opportunity to participate in summer youth employment program(s) and/or other early pathways to careers and education, including resistance to the notion that

opportunity youth are capable of succeeding in postsecondary or careers;

- Invisibility of opportunity youth, especially in generally prosperous communities; and
- Reluctance to serve the youth facing the most significant barriers.

The efforts of OYF collaboratives described above seek to address these challenges with an equity lens in order to ensure that systems are prepared to support the most vulnerable and marginalized youth, noting that when this happens, when our systems function for our most vulnerable youth, all young people are able to achieve better outcomes



# Conclusion

A focus on equity is crucial to collective impact efforts to improve outcomes for opportunity youth. Just and fair inclusion for all young people, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, ethnicity, or religion, does not inevitably occur in such efforts. The absence of an equity lens used to examine every aspect of a collaborative's work may cause a collective impact effort to be ineffective or irrelevant, with unsustainable improvements.<sup>6</sup> This happens because the collaborative may fail to address the root cause of the problem, specifically the ways in which inequity is baked into youth serving systems. In fact, without close attention to equity, work to align and coordinate systems may actually reinforce institutional patterns of inequity, either leading to fewer resources for those in the community<sup>7</sup> or an unequal allocation of resources that are not aligned with the specific, unique and prioritized needs of the people most impacted by the issue.

We recognize that while some progress has been made, there is still work to be done. The challenges ahead of us are great and disparities persist across priority populations, neighborhoods and communities. However, OYF collaboratives demonstrate a variety of ways to seek a more equitable society that includes holding youth at the center of problem identification and solution design. These communities offer data-informed strategies that target the unequal needs and conditions of young people created by racial, social and economic disparities and promote greater opportunity for all young people.

Community collaboratives seeking to increase their focus on equity should begin wherever they are able as there is not one "best" way to start the work of striving for greater social, racial and economic equity. Across OYF collaboratives there is shared consensus that getting started is more important than being ready and the progress made by these collaboratives to date may be helpful to other communities as they begin their journeys.

# Endnotes

- 1 Race Matters Institute. Racial Equity Organizational Assessment. Retrieved November 2, 2017 from <http://viablefuturescenter.org/racemattersinstitute/assessment-2/>
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