



Shaping the Narrative

Community Stories of Effective Practice and Impact
Across the OYF Network

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Executive Summary
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The **Forum for Community Solutions** (FCS), a program of the Aspen Institute established in 2012, seeks to highlight and support communities successfully engaging leaders and advocates across multiple sectors —government, non-profit, business, and philanthropy— to collectively solve our society’s toughest social and economic challenges. Believing that when communities have more power to lead change we will be able to create a more just and equitable society, the FCS supports community collaboratives and backbone organizations to build the power and influence of those with the least access to opportunity using a collective impact or community collaboration approach to come together to expand mobility, eliminate systemic barriers, and create their own solutions to their most pressing challenges.

The Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solution’s Opportunity Youth Forum (OYF) is a network of more than two-dozen urban, rural, and tribal community collaboratives focused on building and deepening education and employment pathways for opportunity youth, defined as young people between the ages of 16 and 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. Roughly one-quarter (about 1.2 million) of all opportunity youth in the United States reside in or near OYF communities.

Opportunity Youth Forum communities have made great strides in making systemic shifts, including organizational and public policy and practice improvements resulting in increased numbers of high-quality career pathways for opportunity youth. In addition, OYF collaboratives have strengthened partnerships and community commitment to

opportunity youth and have instigated and sustained collective action among stakeholders. A recent evaluation report documents this progress and highlights five key findings:

1. Collaboratives have developed strong partnerships, characterized by high partner engagement and shared accountability toward a common agenda.
2. The majority of collaboratives have made progress changing two narratives in their communities: 1) creating an asset-based frame of “opportunity youth” and 2) elevating recognition of the systemic, rather than individual, nature of challenges these youth face.
3. Collaborative partners have made a range of organizational policy and practice changes that demonstrate significant promise and progress in changing pathways to support opportunity youth.
4. Collaboratives are authentically engaging youth as partners in their work.
5. Although collaboratives have made headway leveraging public resources for this work, sustained funding for the collaborative infrastructure remains a challenge.

Because of the FCS’ commitment to community members leading change and in learning together across communities, we offer this paper as an opportunity to learn about these well-documented evaluation findings through glimpses of OYF network efforts. Taken as a whole, these stories demonstrate the variety of strategies being employed across the network and provide ideas for those interested in improving programs and policies to support opportunity youth in their communities.

Stories about work across the OYF network illustrate the five key findings of the Year 3 Equal Measure evaluation report:

Key Finding 1: Collaboratives have developed strong partnerships, characterized by high partner engagement and shared accountability toward a common agenda.

Collaboratives are developing strong partnerships, including participation of senior-level partners with the power to change policies and practices and to make financial support available for the work of the collaborative. Examples include fostering partnerships between community-based organizations, K-12 education, postsecondary education, and government agencies to develop strong education and career pathways for opportunity youth, building a comprehensive, cross-sector coalition to address the challenge of youth disconnection, and empowering communities by focusing on locally-driven reform.

Key Finding 2: The majority of collaboratives have made progress changing two narratives in their communities: 1) creating an asset-based frame of “opportunity youth” and 2) elevating recognition of the systemic, rather than individual, nature of challenges these youth face.

OYF network members are working to change stories about the value of opportunity youth and the systemic challenges to their success. And they are seeing their efforts pay off, with most finding that their partners are focusing on opportunity youth and young adults’ contributions and addressing the systemic challenges they face. Examples include taking control of narratives by creating a new media outlet and using data to demonstrate structural barriers faced by opportunity youth, including disparities within one community.

Key Finding 3: Collaborative partners have made a range of organizational policy and practice changes that demonstrate significant promise and progress in changing pathways to support opportunity youth.

OYF collaboratives report a wide range of policy and practice changes to improve outcomes for opportunity youth in their communities. While in general less progress has been made in changing public policy through legislation, collaboratives are laying the groundwork for such changes through new relationships and focused advocacy agendas. In addition, organizational policy and practice changes, often formalized through MOUs between youth-serving organizations and agencies at the local and state levels, can have a very large impact, as several of the examples below demonstrate. Where there have been public policy changes, these changes often lead to adjustments in policy and practice at the organizational level. Examples include focusing on policies and practices of local youth-serving organizations and systems to identify and remove barriers, building on existing local efforts, including youth service providers in identifying needed changes in policy and practice, creating a framework to align services and language community wide, and demonstrating effective policy through small-scale pilots.

Key Finding 4: Collaboratives are authentically engaging youth as partners in their work.

Many collaboratives have deepened their youth engagement during the OYF and have seen youth play prominent roles, including informing strategy, assessing the work of the collaboratives, and influencing policy and funding decisions in their communities. Examples

include consulting youth and young adults on every decision that affects them and always moving towards deeper, more authentic engagement of opportunity youth in local efforts.

Key Finding 5: Fundraising, particularly multi-year funding and support for the backbone, remains a challenge, although collaboratives have made some headway in leveraging public resources to expand opportunities and pathways for youth.

While the majority of OYF members report some financial support for opportunity youth-related work in their community, in most communities, partners are more likely to provide financial support for broader efforts than for the collaborative backbone. Sustaining the collaborative is an on-going challenge for all OYF member communities. Examples include directing existing, funded efforts to focus on opportunity youth and leveraging philanthropic support to begin or pilot efforts that ultimately might be funded publicly.

Considered together, the strategies described in this paper provide a portfolio of effective practices to improve outcomes for opportunity youth worthy of consideration as part of any local effort.

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