



The Problem

There are currently 4.5 million opportunity youth – defined as young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are neither enrolled in school nor participating in the labor market – or about one in eight members of this age group in the United States. However, the chances that a young person will be disconnected from school and work at some point between the ages of 16 and 24 are much higher, according to Jobs For The Future: “Nearly 40 percent of our young people between the ages of 16 and 24 are weakly attached or unattached to school and work at some point during that formative stretch of their young lives.”

Moreover, despite young people’s aspirations to advance and secure family wage jobs, once they have experienced disconnection from school and work, it’s very unlikely they’ll be able to meet these aspirations, as only 1% of youth who’ve been disconnected will ever earn an Associate’s degree or higher, compared to 36% of the general population. And the data is clear: a large majority of today’s and the near future’s family-supporting wage jobs will require some kind of training or credential beyond a high school degree.

The question is: can the US afford to write off such a large group of young people? As employers complain about the lack of qualified job applicants, can we also afford the long-term public and social costs of not supporting opportunity youth? One estimate places the personal and public costs of not changing the trajectories of opportunity youth at \$6.3 trillion dollars over the lifetimes of all current opportunity youth.

The successful reconnection of these young people is ultimately a local issue – and requires community collaborations that effectively remove barriers, connect the many systems that touch their lives, and build and deepen education and employment pathways.

The Solution: Opportunity Youth Forum

The Forum for Community Solutions (FCS), a program of the Aspen Institute, launched the Opportunity Youth Forum (OYF) in 2013 as part of its vision to build a future where communities create their own vibrant and lasting solutions to the social and economic problems that they face, rooted in the belief that if communities have more power to lead change, we will create a more just and equitable society. To this end, the mission of FCS is to promote collaborative, community-based efforts that build the power and influence of those with the least access to opportunity. We support communities to come together to expand mobility, eliminate systemic barriers, and create their own solutions to their most pressing challenges.

The Forum for Community Solutions and the OYF were launched to leverage the new visibility and momentum of the opportunity youth movement coming out of the White House Council on Community Solutions and its 2012 report *Community Solutions for Opportunity Youth*, which called for innovative, place-based, collaborative solutions to reconnect opportunity youth. The OYF supports a network of 29 urban, rural, and tribal communities in their efforts to scale reconnection pathways that achieve better outcomes in education and employment for opportunity youth. These communities reach from Seattle to Atlanta, from Mississippi to Philadelphia and from Maine to the Hopi community in Arizona. In total, this network works on creating systems-wide and community level changes with a potential impact on 1.2 million opportunity youth which equates to more than 25% of all opportunity youth in the US. Click [here](#) to view a list of OYF community partners.

The OYF has developed a five-part framework that strengthens the capacity of communities to collaboratively identify and implement solutions to the issue of disconnection among opportunity youth. OYF collaboratives, led by backbone agencies, assess their progress, set goals, identify specific activities, and consider current and needed capacity to deliver in each of the following areas of the framework:

- **Collaborating for Impact:** An organization fulfilling the backbone function acts as a neutral convener and guides the development of the community's vision for opportunity youth. This includes coordinating partner activities, establishing shared measurement, leading the development of effective pathways, identifying and leveraging resources and funding, building political will for improving outcomes for opportunity youth, generating and implementing a policy agenda to support opportunity youth, using data to guide continuous improvement, and building momentum towards collective goals.
- **Building Effective Pathways:** The backbone/collaborative develops and executes a strategic plan for significantly increasing the number of opportunity youth on educational and career pathways leading to credentials with value in the labor market/in-demand jobs. This includes leveraging the successes of existing high-quality schools/programs for opportunity youth as building blocks for pathways to effectively prepare youth for postsecondary success, and deepening partnerships among K-12, CBO's, employers, and community colleges to ensure smooth and accelerated transitions from high school or high school equivalency programs to postsecondary education or training and from developmental education to career credentials.
- **Rigorous Measurement and Impact:** The backbone/collaborative use data to assess both the progress of the collaborative in creating the policy and system changes required to create new pathways for opportunity youth, and the impact of these pathways and opportunities on reconnecting youth to education and the workforce.
- **Leveraging Funding to Support and Sustain Innovation:** The backbone/collaborative engage local private philanthropy to support collaborative impact efforts with a one-to-one match and identify and leverage (or repurpose) public dollars to support system change in creating effective pathways for opportunity youth.
- **Developing Supportive Policies:** The backbone/collaborative identify local and state policies that present barriers to the success of opportunity youth and develop a policy agenda to both mitigate these challenges and support the creation of effective pathways, with the ultimate goal of informing federal policy.

The OYF communities meet biannually at OYF convenings to strengthen pathway design, strategies to leverage funding, policy development, and the use of data to improve decision-making and assessing the impact of our work on youth and communities. While every convening serves to build momentum for national efforts to support opportunity youth, engage philanthropy and highlight local youth leaders on

the national stage, the fall OYF convenings take place in Aspen, Colorado and focus on national movement-building, while the spring OYF convenings take place in local OYF communities that are demonstrating progress in implementing a community-wide shared vision for opportunity youth. The spring convenings provide a deep dive into how local contexts, needs, and assets drive collaborative strategies and pathway design. To date, the OYF convened in place in Los Angeles, California; New Orleans, Louisiana; Chicago, Illinois; Boston, Massachusetts; South King County, Washington; and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In 2020, the OYF network will convene in the Bay Area, co-hosted by OYF collaboratives in San Francisco, Oakland, and Santa Clara County.

The OYF convenings are a foundational part of the OYF learning agenda and bring together a range of locally and nationally recognized experts. These include our implementation partner Jobs for the Future; evaluation, data, and learning partner Equal Measure; Collective Impact partners FSG and the Collective Impact Forum; and other leaders in the opportunity youth movement including CLASP, the National League of Cities Dropout Reengagement Network, Forum for Youth Investment, Opportunity Youth United and nationally recognized pathways providers such as YouthBuild. In addition, OYF convenings provide critical opportunities for peer-to-peer learning across communities and bring together an in-person Community of Practice of OYF site leads, facilitated by the Aspen Forum and Jobs for the Future.

Impact

Since our launch in 2013, the Aspen Forum and OYF regranting over \$16 million to community collaboratives to improve education and career outcomes for opportunity youth. While the OYF is primarily a systems change initiative, by piloting new programs and scaling others the 21 collaboratives that are participating in the evaluation of OYF conducted by Equal Measure have directly served over 38,000 youth and partnered with systems that, conservatively, directly impact over 90,000 youth in these communities. Critically, according to Equal Measure, these communities have demonstrated statistically significant accelerated change across three key areas of system change: building and strengthening robust collaborative infrastructure; engaging diverse groups of key stakeholders and building their commitment to the local opportunity youth agenda; and activating and sustaining collective action among stakeholders to advance this agenda.

Recently, the Aspen Forum has been responding to a growing demand for inclusion in the OYF network due, in part, to a set of solutions and learnings that have been lifted up by the Aspen Forum and partners as key to identifying what works in designing collaborative strategies that lead to more effective pathways and improved outcomes for opportunity youth. As these solutions are largely based on our learnings in large and mid-size urban areas, the OYF is prioritizing the addition of a significant number of new rural and tribal communities, in order to balance representation within the network and to recognize that rural and tribal youth and communities often require different strategies and approaches than those being implemented in an urban context. At the same time, new urban communities are also entering the OYF network.

Costs & ROI Associated with OYF Participation

While specific costs associated with entry into the OYF network vary depending on specific geographic context of each community (urban vs. rural or tribal), the average cost of participation in the OYF is \$50,000 per community. This includes:

- Costs associated with the intermediary role fulfilled by the Aspen Forum:
 - Design and implementation of the OYF learning agenda: \$10,000
 - Staffing costs: \$10,000
 - Convening costs: \$5,000

- Learning partner regrant to new communities: \$25,000

These costs are covered by philanthropic partners who are sponsoring the entry of new communities into OYF through a grant to the Aspen Forum.

Participating communities and their philanthropic partners receive access to our twice annual Opportunity Youth Forum convenings which present an opportunity to connect with national speakers and experts and learn from other communities in our network; are invited to participate in multiple communities of practice; and become eligible for additional funds raised by the Aspen Forum for specific projects that support design and implementation of innovative pilot pathways to education and careers for opportunity youth in these communities. Additionally, OYF communities have access to the communications platform and capacity of the Aspen Forum and the Aspen Institute, which provides [unique opportunities](#) to share local work with the broader field on the national stage.

OYF Process for Including New Communities

There are two pathways for inclusion in the OYF network: 1) funder-led and 2) collaborative/community led. In the first instance, philanthropic partners initiate the inclusion of a new community in the OYF, by awarding Aspen Forum resources to support the OYF learning network and a subgrant (or subgrants) to local collaboratives. These subgrants are awarded to specific existing community collaboratives identified by the funder, or through a competitive RFP process (with RFPs designed by AFCS in collaboration with the philanthropic partner or partners). At the same time, several community collaboratives requested inclusion in the OYF; in these cases, the Aspen Forum partners with the backbone to identify potential funders and conducts fundraising activities to secure resources for the inclusion of the collaborative in the network. In addition, Aspen is partnering with existing OYF rural and tribal communities and the Center for Native American Youth at the Aspen Institute to identify rural and tribal communities to invite to join the network (again, with support from philanthropic partners).

The sequencing of activities in both processes for inclusion is flexible, depending on local context and variables, such as whether there is already collaborative infrastructure – including a backbone organization – and collective action/momentum in place, or if a new collaborative is being established. If there is not an existing collaborative in place, the Aspen Forum will partner with local stakeholders and philanthropy to assist in designing a process for backbone selection.

New Community Onboarding and TA

The Aspen Forum, in collaboration with our implementation partners Jobs for the Future, has designed a process through which new communities are onboarded and connected to TA providers and opportunities as they join the OYF. While the sequence of these activities may vary based on local context and conditions, a typical sequence of events includes the following;

Preliminary Activities

For all prospective new communities, several activities will take place before the formal inclusion in the network. These may include:

- mapping/scan of existing potential collaborative backbones and other resources and assets (in communities where a collaborative is not already in place);
- site visits and planning meetings in the community;
- invitation to local funders or other stakeholder organizations to identify a delegation of partners to attend the OYF convening;
- follow-up planning discussions with partners convened by the Aspen Forum; and

- dissemination of an RFP or a formal invitation to apply for inclusion and funding to a specific backbone organization

Grantmaking

Once the backbone is identified, either through a competitive RFP process, funder selection, or community self-nomination, the following steps will take place:

- Aspen Forum will conduct a call or a series of calls with the backbone to walk through the grantmaking process, including the amount and timeline of the award, and specific Aspen Institute requirements and steps for grantmaking;
- Aspen Forum will work with the backbone to secure required documentation, including a budget and a strategic plan outlining specific goals, deliverables, outcomes and impacts identified by the backbone and collaborative partners (ideally, this includes an interim and a long-term set of goals over at least three years);
- Aspen Forum will make the award to the community.

Identification of TA and Learning Needs

While several of the activities described in the previous sections allow the Aspen Forum and partners to begin to identify specific learning and technical assistance needs of incoming community collaboratives, the Aspen Forum and Jobs for the Future also conduct formal asset mapping site visits to all new communities.

During the site visit, the Aspen Forum and JFF will conduct conversations with backbone staff and key stakeholders and partners and will facilitate a meeting of key partners to begin to identify the emerging community-wide agenda for opportunity youth. The Aspen Forum and JFF then create a memo to share learnings from the site visit – including assets and potential gaps in pathways and collaborative infrastructure – and provide recommendations for learning and TA. The design of the site visit and the subsequent memo utilizes the strategic plan provided by the collaborative in the Grantmaking stage as a guide.

Integration into the OYF Network

After identifying the TA and learning needs – and, for mature collaboratives, learnings and areas of expertise that the collaborative might be able to share with the OYF network – the Aspen Forum will engage the new backbone and partners in a range of activities aimed at integrating the collaborative into the network. The sequence and timing of activities are again flexible in order to respond to the needs of the collaborative in real-time, and may include:

- Connecting the collaborative to other networks, partners, and conferences. This is particularly relevant to early-stage collaboratives that might benefit from building capacity around Collective Impact, specific pathways strategies, or supporting especially vulnerable populations such as system-involved youth. Examples of these activities might include recommendations to attend the Ready by 21 meeting, the Champions of Change or the Collective Impact Forum Convening (led by the Collective Impact Forum, an initiative of FSG and the Aspen Forum), or invitations to join specific networks such as the National League of Cities Dropout Reengagement Network.
- Integrating the collaborative into the OYF Site Leads COP, designed to provide backbone leaders with opportunities for peer-to-peer learning and problem-solving in-person at OYF convenings and virtually throughout the year.

- Connecting the collaborative to a “peer mentor” – a current mature collaborative that focuses on similar strategies, pathways, or populations and operates in a similar or comparable context (e.g. a rural community).
- Connecting the collaborative to an affinity group: the OYF communities self-organized several affinity groups, including the Rural & Tribal Cohort and the California Opportunity Youth Network (COYN) that new collaboratives can join. These groups have co-created specific learning and advocacy agendas; in addition, Aspen Forum is working with partners such as the Center for Native American Youth and the Community Strategies Group at the Aspen Institute to design targeted learning agendas for the Rural & Tribal Cohort.
- Working with the collaborative to identify a learning agenda for attending the upcoming OYF convening, including identifying critical partners that should attend the convening, learning needs and questions, and connections to national networks and partners.
 - Aspen Forum has created several opportunities for new communities to familiarize themselves with the network during the convening, including an orientation for all new participants, an orientation for all young leaders, and an orientation designed specifically for new collaborative backbone leaders and partners.
 - After the convening, the Aspen Forum will conduct a follow-up conversation with backbone leaders to debrief the convening and identify learning goals for subsequent convenings.

The overall goal of these activities is to ensure that each incoming collaborative is provided with multiple connection points to TA and learning opportunities and can seamlessly integrate into the OYF network. Additionally, the Aspen Forum periodically launches new network initiatives such as Equity Counts (which focuses on rigorous data and assessment of impact), Youth Entrepreneurship Fund (which supports communities in designing pathways into entrepreneurship), or Pathways to Careers Fund (which supports CBOs to partner with employers to create training programs leading to employment and careers). Participation in these initiatives is open only to current OYF communities, with selection conducted through a competitive RFP process.

Community Expectations

The Aspen Forum has established a set of expectations for communities participating in the OYF, with two primary goals: 1) establishing consistent lines of communication so that a learning and TA agenda can be continuously iterated in partnership with each community; 2) capture learnings from each site for infusion into the overall OYF learning agenda and the ongoing evaluation of OYF by Equal Measure. These expectations are as follows:

- Each OYF collaborative backbone will identify one primary point of contact (in cases of communities with two organizations operating as co-backbones, two individuals) who is fulfilling the “Site Lead” function. The site lead will receive all communications from the Aspen Forum, including information about new initiatives, TA/learning opportunities, and invitations to OYF convenings.
- Each collaborative backbone will identify and organize a delegation of key partners to attend OYF convenings. Typically, the size of the delegation for the spring convening is limited to five individuals and the size of the delegation for the fall convening can be up to eight individuals. Suggested roles include: site lead, CBO and systems leaders (e.g. workforce, K-12, higher education, justice system, etc.), youth leaders, local funders, and other backbone staff responsible for programmatic and data functions.

- Site leads across OYF are asked to participate in the Site Leads Community of Practice, which convenes in-person during the OYF convenings and periodically online throughout the year.
- Each collaborative backbone will participate in a range of activities aimed at capturing local data to inform OYF learning and evaluation. These activities may include, but not be limited to:
 - Agreeing to have Aspen Forum and partners collect and publish local census data related to opportunity youth annually;
 - Site leads will complete the annual OYF evaluation survey conducted by Equal Measure. This may include collecting data from partners on opportunity youth-related program services;
 - Site leads (and, occasionally, key collaborative partners as identified by site leads) agree to be interviewed by Equal Measure or other Aspen Forum partners, for the purposes of informing evaluation reports or white papers published by the Aspen Forum.

For additional information about joining the OYF, please contact Monique Miles, Managing Director of the Aspen Forum and Director of OYF at monique.miles@aspeninstitute.org.

Supplementary Information: OYF TA Partners

The Aspen Forum partners with a range of experts in the opportunity youth field to provide technical assistance and learning to the OYF network. These partners include:

Organization	Role in OYF	Additional Information/Contact
Jobs for the Future (JFF)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementation partner • Area of expertise: pathways design and implementation; Back on Track reconnection model • Facilitate OYF Site Leads COP 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • https://www.jff.org/what-we-do/impact-stories/talent-for-the-future/ • Lili Allen
Equal Measure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation partner, OYF • Data TA partner, Equity Counts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • http://www.equalmeasure.org/ • Justin Piff
FSG/Collective Impact Forum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collective Impact expertise 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • https://www.fsg.org • https://www.collectiveimpactforum.org
Forum for Youth Investment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy expertise • Co-convener, Opportunity Youth Network • Co-convener, Reconnecting Youth Campaign 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • https://forumfyi.org • https://forumfyi.org/work/oyf/ • https://sparkaction.org/reconnect-youth • Thaddeus Ferber
Opportunity Youth United	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth organizing partner • Implements Community Action Teams 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • https://www.oyunited.org • Lashon Amado
CLASP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy expertise • Co-convener, Reconnecting Youth Campaign 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • https://www.clasp.org • https://sparkaction.org/reconnect-youth • Kisha Bird
National League of Cities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dropout reengagement expertise • Coordinates the Dropout Reengagement Network 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • https://www.nlc.org/reengagement • Andy Moore
Center for Native American Youth at the Aspen Institute (CNAY)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • TA provider for the Tribal Cohort • Houses FreshTracks, youth development/wellness and nature stewardship program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • http://www.cnay.org • Nikki Pitre
Community Strategies Group at the Aspen Institute	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • TA provider for the Rural Cohort 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • https://www.aspeninstitute.org/programs/community-strategies-group/ • Katharine Ferguson