

Opportunity Youth Forum Spring Convening Report

Introduction

As part of our leadership team at Fresh Tracks and the Aspen Institute's Forum for Community Solutions, I am fortunate to get a first-hand look at our team and communities' extraordinary expertise and dedication on a daily basis. This is amplified by the tremendous support of our organizational partners, youth leaders, and funders. We can accomplish a lot—but, we never have, and never will, achieve the systems change we all seek through the healing power of culture and the outdoors by acting alone.

This report shares lines of connections through an ecosystem rooted in love, courage, and action. When we bring our efforts together with the energy and action of the rising generation of leaders, our wins honor the legacies we each carry and ripple out to those who we hold dear. They extend deeper, too—like the roots of an Aspen grove—ensuring that we are building a world where everyone belongs, that encourages all of us to find meaning in our days, to stay grounded in our purpose, and ultimately to establish a future full of opportunity to find wellbeing for generations to come.

This year, we saw the benefits of tireless organizing, coalition-building, and community-led research come together at the 2023 Opportunity Youth Forum Spring Convening, where the Forum for Community Solutions celebrated 10 years of existence! Much of what you will read about in this report is rooted in the Fresh Tracks vision:

A world where our network of movement youth leaders is working to advance social and environmental justice and overcome hate and racism. To provide young Indigenous, rural, and urban leaders with cross-cultural community building skills, leadership development training, civic engagement opportunities, and resources for innovative youth and community-led action. Our movement is grounded in the healing power of the outdoors and culture. Fresh Tracks is a lifelong journey of leadership, growth, and community action. Elevating youth narratives, power, and vision is at the core of our work.

Fresh Tracks is rooted in action. Together we can continue to rapidly advance youth and community-led solutions that center the healing power of the outdoors, culture, and Indigenous practice. Thank you!

— Juan D. Martinez Pineda

Leadership in Action

Youth narratives, youth power, and the vision young adult leaders have for the healing power of the outdoors, culture, and their future sit at the core of Fresh Tracks. Youth and young adult leaders in the network are central to our work and enable us to advance community and youth-led solutions, and the following pages highlight their initiatives and influence at OYF. The Leadership Council is a youth and young adult council that helps shape the focus and outcomes of the Opportunity Youth Forum (OYF). Youth meet to make meaning of the themes of Belonging, Meaning, Wellbeing and Purpose to create and advise strategies for OYF. The Leadership Council played a large role in planning the OYF Spring Convening. Two Fresh Tracks leaders, Kimberly Pikok and Devin Edwards, serve on the leadership council and took part in advocating for youth leadership on panels, for youth voices to be centered in rooms, and to push for more healing-centered discussions. The opening plenary of the Opportunity Youth Forum Convening featured a keynote address by Dr. Shawn Ginwright, a leader on the transformative power of healing-centered frameworks and author of *The Four Pivots*, a book that has led to increased awareness, connection, vision, and presence in youth-centered work. Following the keynote, Dr. Ginwright was joined by other leaders, including Aria Florant, co-founder and managing director of Liberation Ventures; Josh Norris, director of the Klamath River Promise Neighborhoods, Byron Sanders, president and chief executive officer of Big Thought; and Israel Juarez, a Fresh Tracks young adult leader and researcher in the Youth and Young Adult Wellbeing Project. Together, these leaders shared a vision for centering healing in efforts to improve intergenerational outcomes for youth and young adults of color. Israel also had the opportunity to close out the OYF plenary by sharing his latest song, "Mental Health," which was a product of The Youth and Young Adult Wellbeing Project. This performance centered the connection of music, art, and self-expression to wellbeing and healing.



Leadership in Action



“As I walk forward to these next seven generations, I want to walk forward to a place of healing instead of trauma that we as people of color carry with us, within our hearts.” – Zenetta Zepeda

The quote above is from Zenetta Zepeda, a Fresh Tracks young adult leader during the OYF panel, 'Building a Future of Belonging: Transforming Systems and Narratives with Opportunity Youth.'

This panel featured a keynote on the power of belonging, including its transformative connection to meaning, wellbeing, and purpose from John Powell. Leaders from a range of organizations, institutions, and perspectives joined John Powell for this important discussion, including Tania Chavez, executive director of LUPE, an organization committed to immigrant rights and voter registration; Jocelyn Gama, an Elevate Youth fellow with Urban Strategies Council in Oakland; Marvin Pierre, executive director of Eight Million Stories, a Houston-based non-profit working to improve education outcomes for former opportunity youth; Nichole Prescott, assistant vice chancellor of academic affairs within the University of Texas System; and Zenetta Zepeda, peer mentor with the Youth and Young Adult Wellbeing Project.

Zenetta emphasized that knowledge comes from our ancestors, and the opportunity to heal is a connection between ancestral knowledge and one's present self. With that connection and knowledge, together we have the power to turn trauma into healing.



Outdoor Equity Network

The Outdoor Equity Network (OEN) is a joint endeavor with Native Americans in Philanthropy, Fresh Tracks, and the Forum for Community Solutions. The Outdoor Equity Network's present goal is to form a coalition that can build a movement for equity, policy, and ultimately systems change rooted in the healing power of the outdoors, culture, and Indigenous leadership and practice.

The Outdoor Equity Network hosted the first planning session of 2023 in Austin, Texas with funders, partners, and organizations to build community and expand the network to include additional partners and funders. Fundamental objectives included increasing understanding of the vision and reaching a consensus on a set of action items, primarily to create and define priorities for a landscape scan in the summer and fall of 2023.

Important themes and priorities emerged from the focus group around key goals:

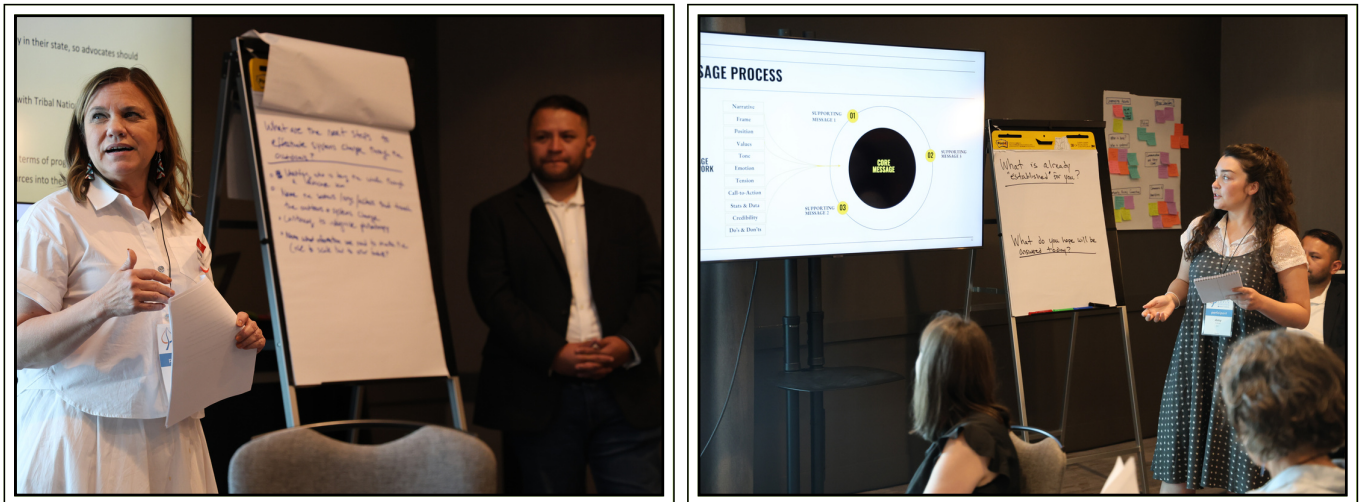
- **Centering Indigenous leadership and culture in the pursuit of a more equitable future.**
- **Integrating the outdoors into cross-cultural youth organizing experiences, leadership development, and educational programming.**
- **Providing partners with the tools to invest in inclusive solutions and challenging them to make racial equity and civic engagement true priorities.**



A key outcome and signal of progress can be seen through the growing relationship being fostered in OEN between federal partners, outdoor partners, and youth-centered partners. Joan Mooney (Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy Management and Budget), George McDonald (Department of the Interior, Office of the Assistant Secretary, Policy, Management and Budget, Youth Programs Coordinator), and Rachel Brown (Senior Advisor to the Assistant Secretary for Policy Management and Budget) joined the session to share related areas of focus for the Department of the Interior, specifically around equity, diversity, and youth engagement. These federal partners also participated in the convening, sharing the opportunity in President Biden's and U.S. Department of Interior's commitment to and historic investment in youth leadership.

Outdoor Equity Network

Organizations attending the Outdoor Equity Network included the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Campfire USA, The California Endowment, Corporation for National and Community Service, Hello Insight, LBC Action, Native Americans in Philanthropy, National Caucus of Environmental Legislators, Pisces Foundation, Rally, Resource Legacy Fund, Schmidt Family Foundation, U.S. Department of the Interior, Wilderness Inquiry, The Y BOLD & GOLD, and The Forum for Community Solutions, Fresh Tracks, and Opportunity Youth Forum.



Youth & Young Adult Wellbeing Measure Project: The Panel Remix

The Youth & Young Adult Wellbeing Measure Project supports the development of innovative wellbeing and healing measures by youth and young adults (Y/YA) of color that incorporate their lived experiences through a participatory action research process. The Youth and Young Adult Wellbeing Measure Project is made up of three affinity groups: American Indian/Alaskan Native (AIAN), Latine Bienestar, and Black Expressions of Wellbeing. Each group included youth and young adults, research allies, adult research navigators, and peer research mentors. These design teams conducted Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) projects that helped identify key areas of wellbeing within and across cultural contexts. In February 2023, the project participants convened in Washington, DC to close Phase One of the project (determining key themes and measures of wellbeing in their community) and are now in Phase Two, where they are developing toolkits youth and communities can use to foster and promote Y/YA wellbeing. Learn more [HERE](#).

Youth & Young Adult-led Wellbeing Measure Project: The Panel Remix



“Our panel showed that young people are capable of defining the world around them and they are capable of defining themselves in relation to that. Our project is a space that’s grounded in collaboration, diversity, and healing.” – Niara Frankson

From the main stage at the OYF Spring Convening 2023, three core team members of the Wellbeing Project co-designed and spoke on the Wellbeing panel, with each cultural affinity group represented. Desiree Armas (Peer Mentor, Latine Bienestar), Niara Frankson (Peer Mentor, Black Expressions of Wellbeing), and Zenetta Zepeda (Peer Mentor, American Indian/Alaskan Native (AIAN) design team) shared their expertise and findings from the Youth & Young Adult Wellbeing Measure Project on a re-envisioned panel entitled 'The Panel Remix.' 'The Panel Remix' was created as an informal, youth-friendly, podcast-style panel that discussed Phase One key themes and findings and Phase Two updates, and served as a space for young adults to discuss wellbeing personally and in their communities.

Key messages shared included:

- The importance of young people being advocates for themselves and their communities
- Letting young people lead the discussion and be leaders in decision making
- Understanding that wellbeing is intergenerational and interconnected
- The awareness that wellbeing is multifaceted



“Wellbeing is multifaceted; it's colorful and artistic, and involves a lot of different people supporting each other.” – Desiree Armas

Native Indigenous and Tribal Community of Practice

The Native, Indigenous, and Tribal Community of Practice (NIT CoP) is made up of backbone organizations that are members of the Opportunity Youth Forum (OYF) and is in partnership with Native Americans in Philanthropy. The Native, Indigenous, and Tribal Community of Practice supports community-driven levers of change at the intersection of the community's need for meaningful knowledge sharing and the capacity to generate positive, culturally relevant outcomes. The Community of Practice is coordinated by the Fresh Tracks team and was created to strengthen the collective impact and community collaboration and, moreover, to share what is learned.

Eight organizations make up this community of practice: Wild Rivers Community Foundation (Del Norte & Tribal Lands), The Hopi Foundation (Hopi), Taos Pueblo Division of Health and Community Services (Taos Pueblo), Laguna Community Foundation (Laguna Pueblo), Jemez Department of Education (Jemez Pueblo), Opportunity Youth Action Hawai'i at Kawaiiloa (Hawaii), Cheyenne River Youth Project (Lakota), and Hoopa Tribal Education Association (Hoopa).

At this year's first in-person community of practice, we heard a briefing from Native Americans in Philanthropy on the opportunity to respond to historic federal support and organize to ensure it reaches Tribal communities directly. We also welcomed the Hoopa Tribal Education Association as the newest member of the community of practice. Jemez Department of Education and the California Center for Rural Policy each, respectively, shared an overview of efforts to accelerate postsecondary pathways and opportunities in rural Tribal communities.

Healing Session

Responding to feedback from young adult leaders after last year's OYF Spring Convening, the Forum for Community Solutions supported those leaders in the creation of the first ever in-person OYF Youth-Led Change Summit. Held the day after the Opportunity Youth Forum Spring Convening in Austin, the goal of the Youth Summit was to bring together young leaders from across the OYF communities to strengthen their network of peer support and learning, identify issues important to young leaders, provide a platform for sharing youth-led solutions, and create opportunities to develop practical skills and share concrete tools for action.

Participants in the Summit heard from young leaders and adult allies from organizations including Bridgemakers, LUPE, NextGen America, Opportunity Youth United, Young Invincibles, and Forum for Community Solutions, Fresh Tracks, and Global Opportunity Youth Network. During the summit, youth participated in youth-led workshops on community engagement, wellbeing, busting adultism, growing and aging gracefully as a young movement leader, and more.

Healing Session

As one of the breakout sessions for the Summit, members of the Fresh Tracks Trainers Team from the Native Youth Climate Adaptation and Leadership Congress (NYCALC) led a healing workshop, which included Indigenous practices of healing, a talking circle highlighting the power of the outdoors for healing, and sharing best practices for healing and self-care.

Stemming from the Fresh Tracks Training Toolkit, this served as an opportunity for the team to practice facilitation and update material before NYCALC in June 2023. This also served as the first facilitation of the young adult led Fresh Tracks Training Toolkit outside of NYCALC.

The NYCALC Trainers team is facilitated by Fresh Tracks and is a youth leadership development and organizing learning track for college-aged mentors of the NYCALC program. NYCALC is a federal and non-governmental collaborative that invites high school seniors from Native communities to work together to address conservation/climate challenges in a changing environment.



Acknowledgements

Since time immemorial, Native communities across the Americas have demonstrated resilience and resistance in the face of violent efforts to separate them from their land, culture, and each other. Indigenous people remain at the forefront of movements for justice, equity, the protection of nature and the life it sustains. Fresh Tracks is aware that we walk, support, and work on Native land. Native American communities continue to thrive and lead the movements for human rights today. The Fresh Tracks team acknowledges the critical and necessary step to honor Native communities and their leadership to build an equitable future for all. Fresh Tracks encourages all to uncover truths of the original inhabitants of the land we all walk on.

This work is made possible by a collaboration between the Forum for Community Solutions, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Center for Indigenous Health at Johns Hopkins University, the Centers for American Indian and Alaska Native Health at Colorado School of Public Health, CUNY School of Professional Studies Youth Studies Programs, Fresh Tracks, Hello Insight, Intergenerational Change Initiative, LBC Action, National Recreation Foundation, Native Americans in Philanthropy, Network for the Development of Children of African Descent, REI Cooperative Action Fund, Treeline Foundation, The Tides Foundation, Andrus Family Fund, the Schmidt Family Foundation and the leadership of young diverse leaders rooted in community action and the healing power of the outdoors.

