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# Transforming and Strengthening Youth-Serving Ecosystems to Achieve Scale:

Strategies and Lessons From the Building Ecosystems for  
Youth Opportunities Initiative

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# About JFF

**Jobs for the Future (JFF)** is a national nonprofit that drives transformation of the U.S. education and workforce systems to achieve economic success for people, businesses, and communities. We do this by designing solutions, scaling best practices, influencing policy and action, and investing in innovation. We forge deep partnerships with employers, investors, entrepreneurs, policymakers, and education and workforce development providers to break down barriers and reimagine what's possible. JFF's goal is to align education, workforce, and employment changemakers toward a shared North Star: ***By 2033, 75 million Americans facing barriers to economic advancement will have quality jobs.*** JFF has partnered with AFCS for more than a decade to change the narrative about young adults and transform the systems that serve them with the goal to improve youth education and labor market outcomes so that young people can realize their full potential.

## About JFF's Language Choices

JFF is committed to using language that promotes equity and human dignity, rooted in the strengths of the people and communities we serve. We develop our content with the awareness that language can perpetuate privilege but also can educate, empower, and drive positive change to create a more equitable society. We will continually reevaluate our efforts as language usage continues to evolve.

# About AFCS and JFF

The **Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions (Aspen Forum, or AFCS)** promotes 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 determine their own solutions to their most pressing challenges. We envision a future where communities self-determine their own vibrant and lasting solutions to the social and economic problems that they face. We believe that if communities have more power to lead change, they will create a just and equitable society.

The **Opportunity Youth Forum (OYF)** began in 2012 (as the "Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund") to use momentum coming out of the [White House Council for Community Solutions](#).<sup>1</sup> It is comprised of a [network of urban, rural, and Indigenous communities](#) seeking to scale multiple reconnection pathways that achieve better outcomes in education and careers for opportunity youth.<sup>2</sup> Approximately one-quarter of all opportunity youth in the United States live in the areas in and around Opportunity Youth Forum communities.

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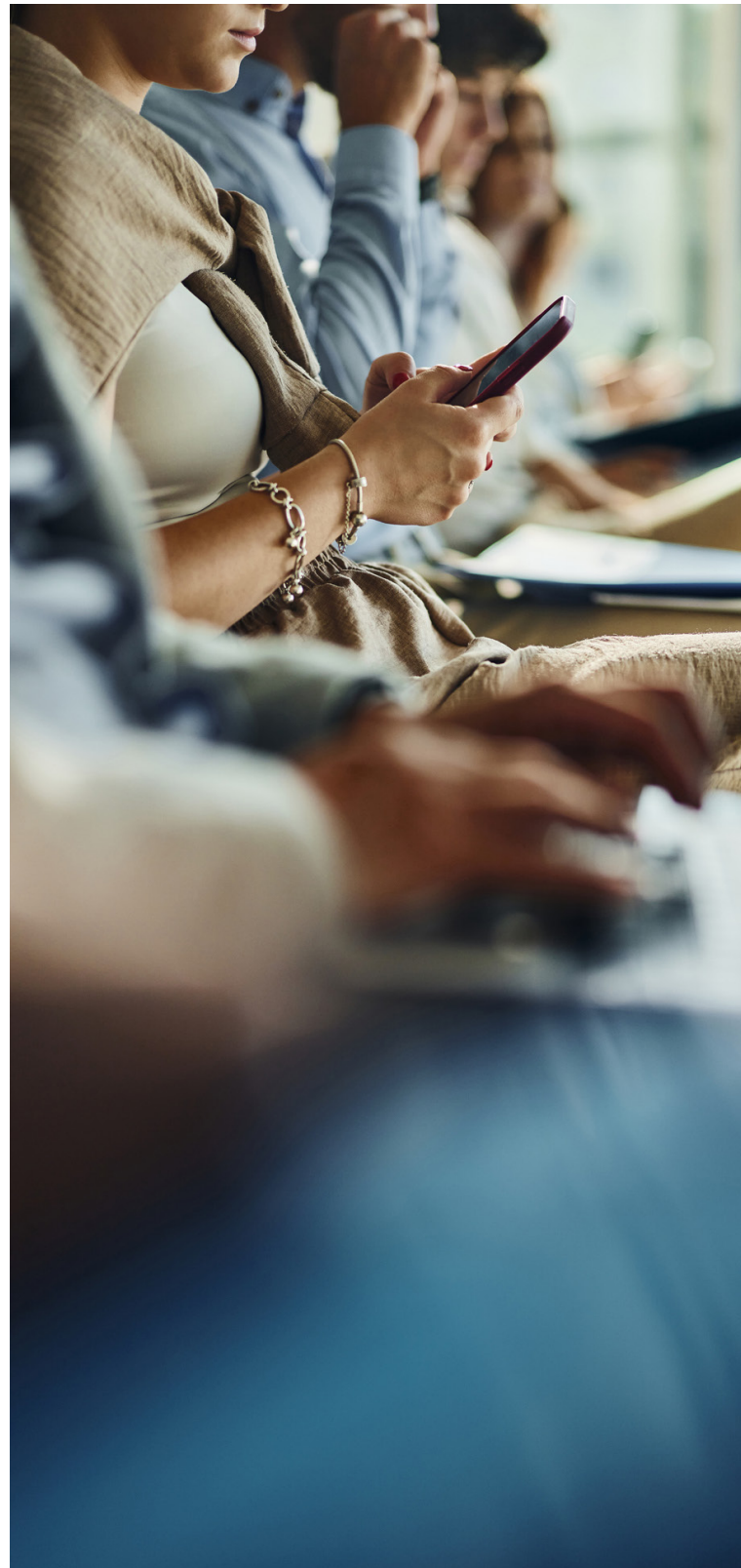
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# Introduction

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, youth and young adults across the country continue to struggle to connect to education, employment, and other opportunities that support economic mobility, pathways to careers with family-sustaining wages, and overall well-being. Before the pandemic, there were 4.5 million “opportunity youth,” or young people between the ages of 16-24 who were neither enrolled in school nor employed.<sup>3</sup>

While national and community leaders and advocates made steady progress in reducing the number of opportunity youth nationwide before the pandemic, the shutdowns of schools, programs, and workplaces associated with the first wave of COVID-19 resulted in a temporary spike in youth disconnection that left as many as 9 million young people out of school and work in May 2020.<sup>4</sup> Although the disconnection rates fell after the initial dramatic increase immediately following the pandemic-related shutdowns, there were 6 million opportunity youth in 2020, erasing an entire decade of progress made before the pandemic. While the national disconnection rate continues to fall—in 2021, 4.7 million young people, or 12.1% of youth and young adults ages 16-24, were opportunity youth—challenges remain, including persistent racial gaps in disconnection rates.<sup>5</sup> Native American youth experience the highest disconnection rate (23.4%), followed by Black youth (18.9%), Latine youth (14%), white youth (9.8%), and Asian youth (6.9%).



The legacy of barriers to economic success in our country and in systems that touch opportunity youth, including education and the workforce, continue to persist but are not the only challenges preventing youth and young adults from thriving. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated myriad barriers to successful transition to adulthood, including a lack of access to technology to enable remote work and learning. Additionally, we are witnessing a growing youth mental health crisis that worsened as young people had to contend with grief from losing loved ones, missed in-person interactions with peers and caring adults in schools and programs, and decreased access to mental health services. According to the U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on youth mental health, the rates of mental health symptoms such as anxiety and depression doubled during the pandemic.<sup>6</sup> Adults who support young people in programs and institutions were affected as well, with many program leaders reporting increased rates of staff burnout and difficulty filling open positions during and after the pandemic-induced shift to remote learning and service provision. At the same time, postsecondary enrollment declined 2.5% in the fall of 2020 (almost twice the prior year's rate), with two-year institutions experiencing particularly precipitous declines, with a 10% (or 544,200 students) drop in enrollment.<sup>7</sup> While we are just beginning to learn about the potential impacts of learning loss on young people in school or college during the pandemic, we anticipate that the effects will be long term and felt for many years to come.

Despite the challenges outlined above, bright spots are beginning to emerge as the post-pandemic recovery continues, with low unemployment rates and a rebounding college enrollment rate. According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, undergraduate enrollment has increased for two semesters in a row, especially at community colleges, which gained 14,000 students (an increase of 6.2%) in 2024.<sup>8</sup> In our role as intermediaries and technical assistance providers to the OYF network, Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions and JFF are familiar with examples of high-quality programs, practices, and policies across OYF that have and continue to transform young people's lives every day before, during, and after the pandemic. The opportunity before the OYF and the youth services field is to invest in such strategies, approaches, and programs to serve





many more young people, scaling access to opportunity from only a few young people these programs can serve to most young people in need of support. That's precisely what OYF did in launching the Building Ecosystems for Youth Opportunity (BEYO) initiative, which invested in a subset of OYF communities with the most promising strategies to scale programs and strengthen the local ecosystems of youth-serving providers and pathways, with a focus on postsecondary and workforce system partners.

This paper highlights the various approaches—including policy advocacy, collaborative capacity building, youth leadership, innovative funding models, and others—that BEYO sites used to scale high-quality programming to increase the number and quality of reconnection opportunities. The paper concludes with a set of key lessons learned that are critical to sustaining the momentum achieved by BEYO sites and informing efforts in communities across the country focused on improving outcomes for opportunity youth.



# About the Opportunity Youth Forum

The OYF, launched by the Aspen Forum in 2012, began as a group of 21 community collaboratives each led by a backbone organization, an entity that serves as an anchor and [provides supportive infrastructure](#) for a collective impact initiative.<sup>9</sup> The OYF has since grown to a national network of over 40 urban, rural, and tribal communities seeking to scale multiple reconnection pathways that achieve better outcomes in education and careers for opportunity youth. Across the OYF network, communities are bringing together multiple stakeholders and system leaders—including schools, community-based programs, postsecondary institutions, employers, government agencies, and, importantly, young people themselves—to remove barriers and improve systems that serve opportunity youth.

These collaboratives seek to build the capacity of local youth-serving ecosystems to better support opportunity youth by mobilizing stakeholders, designing community-based solutions with the most vulnerable youth in mind, advocating for effective policy and practice, and catalyzing private and public investment in programs that support opportunity youth. Furthermore, OYF believes that young people have the right to represent their own interests and the expertise to play decision-making roles at collaborative tables. OYF collaboratives are committed to centering the expertise and leadership of youth in designing solutions that affect them.

AFCS operates OYF, mobilizing philanthropy to focus on opportunity youth, regranteeing funding through specific initiatives, and providing technical assistance and organizing a rich and robust learning agenda for the network, which is delivered through in-person convening virtual communities of practice, and other learning opportunities. Since the OYF launch, AFCS has partnered with JFF as the lead implementation, learning, and technical assistance partner for the network.





# About Building Ecosystems for Youth Opportunity

The Aspen Forum launched the BEYO initiative in 2020 with multiyear support from JPMorgan Chase & Company and a goal of investing in a subset of communities ready to scale promising, high-quality pathways for opportunity youth. Specific goals of BEYO included:

- Scaling high-quality pathways to increase postsecondary and career success for opportunity youth, in particular pathways that involve partnerships with postsecondary and workforce systems.
- Investing in collaborative structure to strengthen local ecosystems, that is, a collective of partners that come together to improve the quality of and expand programs and supports available to opportunity youth in the community, including workforce and education programs, supportive services, and government safety net programs.
- Documenting effective scaling strategies to inform the field about approaches that lead to serving more opportunity youth.

Twelve communities in shared priority markets for OYF and JPMorgan Chase & Company received planning grants to participate in a six-month planning period to map existing pathways to better understand their local opportunity youth-serving ecosystem, including steps to take to improve and expand existing programs and services and strengthen partnerships with youth-serving providers. During this planning period, JFF and Aspen Forum provided support and technical assistance to the communities, developing an Ecosystem Mapping Tool and a Pathways Scaling Planning Tool. At the end of the planning period, communities participated in a competitive proposal process to receive implementation and accelerator awards.



Four communities received significant 36-month implementation awards to support scaling specific pathways, including specific target outcomes for serving increased numbers of youth:

- **Boston:** Led by the Boston Private Industry Council (Boston PIC) and the Boston Opportunity Agenda, the [Boston Opportunity Youth Collaborative](#) focused on expanding the evidence-based [Success Boston](#) postsecondary transitions coaching practice at Bunker Hill Community College (BHCC) to improve college persistence rates.<sup>10</sup> In addition to BHCC, partners included Boston Public Schools and the HOPE Initiative at BHCC.
- **Houston:** Led by the Alliance of Community Assistance Ministries (ACAM), the [Greater Houston Opportunity Youth Collaborative](#) (GHOYC) launched and scaled two new pathways: 1) Reconnection Pilot: In partnership with the Houston Independent School District and United for College and Career Success, this pathway implemented an outreach and reconnection strategy for 2020-2022 high school graduates who have not enrolled in postsecondary programs or entered the workforce to support reconnection to college and training; 2) in partnership with United Way Greater Houston, six training providers and health care employers launched and scaled a training and workplace placement pathway to health care careers.<sup>11</sup>

During the initiative, the collaborative added a third pathway, Next Generation of Youth, a partnership of six community-based organizations (CBOs) providing services across the 14 elements outlined under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) [Youth Program](#) for out-of-school youth.<sup>12</sup> Houston was one of the two new collaboratives launched through participation in BEYO, along with San Antonio.





- **Los Angeles:** Led by the Alliance for Children's Rights, the [Los Angeles Opportunity Youth Collaborative](#) initially focused on increasing college access, persistence, and completion for foster youth in Los Angeles County by increasing enrollment of foster youth in the LA College Promise (LACP) and other support programs and advocating for institutional and statewide policy change to support college success of transition age youth (TAY, or young people transitioning out of the foster care system).<sup>13</sup> The collaborative, convened by the Alliance for Children's Rights, John Burton Advocates for Youth (JBAY), and UNITE-LA, conducted extensive research on the experiences of TAY in College Promise programs, utilizing youth-designed focus groups and research protocols and human-centered design strategies. Research results indicated that due to inflexible, state-mandated full-time enrollment requirements for participation, TAY students—who often need to work full time to support themselves while going to school—did not enroll in LACP, preferring other support programs such as NextUp. The collaborative pivoted to supporting an advocacy campaign to increase funding for NextUp in the state budget. The campaign, led by JBAY, was ultimately successful, and JBAY provided robust technical assistance to current and new NextUp programs to support implementation efforts. Additional partners included the California Community College Extended Opportunity Program and Services Association and the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office.
- **Newark:** Led by YouthBuild Newark, the [Newark Opportunity Youth Network](#) (NOYN) focused on replicating YouthBuild Newark's LEAD Charter School model by building capacity of youth-serving providers to replicate the LEAD model and serve as LEAD sites, as well as expanding YouthBuild's LEAD sites to additional cities in New Jersey.<sup>14</sup>





Three communities received 36-month accelerator awards to support collaborative strategies to strengthen local youth-serving ecosystems to prepare to scale pathways in the future. These accelerator communities were not required to scale specific pathways. Accelerator communities included:

- **Austin:** At the outset of BEYO, the [Austin Opportunity Youth Collaborative](#) was led by Workforce Solutions Capital Area.<sup>15</sup> It has since expanded its reach, transitioning the backbone role to Lone Star Justice Alliance and changing the name of the initiative to the Central Texas Opportunity Youth Initiative.
- **Chicago:** At the outset of BEYO, the collaborative was led by Thrive Chicago and focused on strengthening and expanding neighborhood hubs that provided workforce, training, and postsecondary reengagement services and wraparound supports to opportunity youth. Thrive Chicago closed its doors in 2023, one of the many community-based organizations that did not recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. A group of dedicated partners in Chicago is working to revive the collaborative in the near future.
- **San Antonio:** Co-led by the City of San Antonio and United Way of San Antonio and Bexar County, the San Antonio Opportunity Youth Collaborative (SAYOC) was a new OYF site launched through participation in BEYO. This collaborative focused on preparing to scale the NXT Level Youth Opportunity Center (a reengagement center operated by the City of San Antonio in partnership with education and youth services providers) and its GED-to-AlamoPromise pathway. This pathway supports students attaining GEDs at NXT Level and enrolling in Alamo Colleges and AlamoPromise, a last-dollar scholarship program.

Additionally, with support from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation and W.K. Kellogg Foundation, **New Orleans** joined the BEYO community of practice as a learning partner. The New Orleans Opportunity Youth Collaborative, led by the New Orleans Youth Alliance (NOYA) and New Orleans Children & Youth Planning Board, has focused on data sharing and common metrics across 18 partner organizations, as well as a shared policy platform and narrative tools to drive public investment. The collaborative operates a reengagement center (REC) that connects youth with postsecondary and career opportunities. The collaborative also set a goal to reduce the number of opportunity youth in the region by 7% by 2026.

**Table 1. Disconnection Rates in BEYO Communities<sup>16</sup>**

	<b>2022 Common Measures Overall Community Disconnection Rate</b>	<b>Number of Opportunity Youth</b>
Austin	9.1%	30,788
Boston	5.7%	6,158
Chicago	13.4%	43,182
Greater Houston Gulf Coast Region	13.4%	127,453
Los Angeles	12.3%	139,516
Newark	14.2%	12,266
New Orleans	12.2%	5,122
San Antonio	12.2%	33,671
<b>BEYO TOTAL</b>	<b>N/A</b>	<b>398,156</b>
<b>OYF Full Network (44 communities)</b>	<b>11.4%</b>	<b>924,513</b>

## OYF Common Measures: Overall Disconnection Rates in BEYO Communities

OYF Common Measures are how the Aspen Forum tracks youth outcomes across OYF communities. This includes four measures:

- 1) overall community disconnection rate (the rate of young people disconnected from work and school);
- 2) high school disconnection rate (the rate of young people without a high school diploma/GED and not working who are disconnected from high school);
- 3) postsecondary disconnection rate (the rate of young people with a high school diploma/GED but without a postsecondary credential who are disconnected from postsecondary education and not working); and
- 4) workforce disconnection rate (rate of young people with a postsecondary credential but not enrolled in postsecondary programs who are disconnected from the workforce). The Common Measures utilize the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, which is the source of the most accurate estimates available, consistent across communities and time, and reliably available annually.



# BEYO Approach and Impact

Launched during the COVID-19 pandemic, BEYO had to contend with the challenges described in the introductory section of this report. Many of the strategies implemented by participating communities had to be adapted to respond to the pandemic and the increased and more urgent needs reported by young adults. Ultimately, the outcomes of this initiative depended largely on the ingenuity, persistence, and commitment of participating sites.

Two key characteristics of BEYO make it stand apart from other initiatives. As a funder, JPMorgan Chase & Company demonstrated authentic engagement in thought partnership and a commitment to supporting all necessary pivots the Aspen Forum and BEYO communities performed to ensure the initiative's success during the immediate disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent recovery. JPMorgan Chase & Company also committed to a multiyear investment (four years total) that included a planning period when communities mapped their local youth-serving ecosystems to identify pathways ripe for scaling. And second, JFF and the Aspen Forum offered significant technical assistance, including tools for mapping pathways and designing scaling plans, light coaching, and a monthly community of practice focused on peer-to-peer learning and problem solving.

The following section of the paper outlines specific strategies for success that communities engaged in to achieve important milestones and wins, including launching new pathways and replicating and expanding existing pathways, securing state funding streams for postsecondary support programs, and advancing statewide legislature aimed at preventing disconnection from school.



# BEYO Strategies for Success

Scaling promising programs and practices to improve outcomes for opportunity youth was a key priority when the Aspen Forum launched BEYO in 2020. BEYO grant recipients were selected precisely because they already had conditions they could build on to achieve scale, including a committed collaborative with a set of willing partners—that is, CBOs, youth leaders, postsecondary institutions, and employers—as well as opportunities to influence other systems to drive broader policy and practice change.

BEYO sites had to make a set of strategic choices about which levers seemed most promising that could be pulled to drive toward their desired impact. Building up collaborative capacity, policy/advocacy, youth leadership, and belonging, meaning, wellbeing, and purpose (BMWP) approaches are just a few examples of the critical levers that BEYO sites decided would create the greatest impact and lead to scale.



[Belonging, meaning, wellbeing, and purpose](#) (BMWP) is a new framework OYF is developing in the belief that prioritizing these aspects of youth programs will result in a society in which all youth and young adults and their families can thrive.<sup>17</sup> Each of the four constructs that make up BMWP (and their respective practices) are associated with a variety of positive outcomes, including social inclusion, greater life satisfaction, increased high school graduation rates, college enrollment and persistence, civic engagement, and greater health and happiness (and many more benefits). As a framework, BMWP also helps providers and collaboratives within the OYF to focus their work with young people on evidence-based interventions with long-term impacts. At the same time, BMWP intends to identify systems-change strategies that set “big goals” for all young people, and, most importantly, involve the very youth OYC communities aim to support these systems-change efforts.

# Policy and Advocacy

A key highlight of BEYO in California is that the [Los Angeles Opportunity Youth Collaborative \(LAOYC\)](#), convened by the Alliance for Children's Rights, joined in this project by John Burton Advocates for Youth (JBAY) to expand NextUp, a college support program targeting TAY, in all 115 California Community Colleges. NextUp is specifically designed for foster youth, which provides a range of services, including help with books and supplies, transportation, tutoring, food, and emergency housing. JBAY led an advocacy campaign to increase funding for NextUp in the state budget. NextUp received an additional \$30 million (for a total of \$50 million) to institutionalize and expand the program at community colleges. For the first time, state funding will also fund the program at four-year colleges with an additional \$18 million earmarked.



Advocates successfully encouraged NextUp to relax attendance requirements, so that students can enroll part time if they meet with an advisor. This was an important win, as LA OYC's research with students in Los Angeles community colleges has shown that the full-time attendance requirement is a major barrier to foster youth enrolling in other on-campus support programs such as LA College Promise. In total, 115 colleges received funding, including 69 community colleges that previously did not have a NextUp office on campus. As a result, each college has programming in place to ensure young people transitioning from the foster care system and enrolled in college have the supports needed to reach their goals.

To get to this level of adoption and reach across the California Community Colleges system, JBAY implemented a strategy with three critical pillars: First, it said, it provided robust technical assistance, including one-on-one technical assistance, to 42 of the 59 newly funded campuses. Second, it set up a community of practice (COP) for the colleges lacking prior experience serving youth, allowing participants to hear from experts in the field and share what they learned with one another. Third and perhaps most critically, it recruited and trained young people with lived experiences to take the lead in advocating for funding, contributing to trainings and providing peer-to-peer supports. A vital piece of this strategy is the JBAY-led work to [support implementation](#), including the development of a foster youth toolkit and a trauma-



informed training series for NextUp staff members in colleges.<sup>18</sup> Also, JBAY targeted social workers and caregivers by working with partners at the Los Angeles County Office of Child Protection and Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). They obtained a release of information form approved by DCFS to refer high school seniors in foster care to NextUp and other campus-based support programs at four-year institutions to increase referrals. LA's BEYO youth leaders helped create these materials to make them relevant and compelling for a youth audience. According to JBAY, due to NextUp program expansion, 9,485 new students were served in the 2023-2024 academic year, for a total of 11,494 students served that year.<sup>19</sup>

NOYN launched a statewide “Back to School for Who” campaign in September 2022 in support of A398/S3080, a bill designed to establish the Youth Disconnection Prevention and Recovery Ombudsperson in the New Jersey Department of Education as well as the School Disconnection Prevention Task Force. Through “Back to School for Who,” NOYN’s community advocates targeted both Democrats and Republicans in the state legislature through emails, tweets, and phone calls over an extended period of time. The campaign eventually led to bipartisan support and unanimous passage of the bill through all committees, including the Senate Education Committee, the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee, the Assembly Education Committee, and the Assembly Appropriations Committee. Governor Phil Murphy signed the bill into state law in January 2024. The passage of the bill will affect at least 100,000 young people throughout New Jersey who have recently disconnected from school and employment and set the stage for targeted interventions to shield young people from the well-documented and detrimental impacts of disconnection, including lower earnings and lack of social mobility.

Another Newark policy win during the period of BEYO investment was the New Jersey YouthBuild Act, which was introduced into the State Senate and Assembly and passed unanimously. The legislation creates an appropriation in the state budget for YouthBuild programs for at least the next five years, establishing for the first time a public revenue stream for these programs outside of the federal Department of Labor. According to NOYN, just like the Youth Disconnection Prevention bill, the New Jersey YouthBuild Act garnered bipartisan support, with 25% of sponsors Republicans and 75% Democrats. It was signed into New



Jersey law by Governor Murphy on January 16, 2024. One of the key lessons learned from OYF in general and BEYO in particular is that braiding philanthropic, state, and federal funding is a critical strategy that supports the sustainability of youth services and ensures public systems and programs are responsive to the needs of the young people they serve.

Taken together, we anticipate that the impact of these bills will be far-reaching in New Jersey (where 9.4% of young people are opportunity youth) and especially in Newark, which is experiencing significantly higher levels of disconnection compared to the state overall and similar Northeast cities: the rate of disconnection in Newark is 18.4%, above pre-pandemic levels and accounting for one in five youth and young adults ages 16–24.<sup>20</sup> Statewide commitment to advancing prevention strategies for those who drop out and creating local public funding streams for high-quality programs represents an important opportunity to weave together public and private funding sources to support reconnection to education and employment.

Additionally, NOYN partners spent a lot of time over the past few years building the foundational pillars for an effective policy/advocacy agenda. They focused first on putting in place a robust referral system, a common data infrastructure, and technical assistance support for collaborative members. This enabled them to understand how young people move between services and programs and where investment is most needed to support successful reconnection to education and the workforce. While working on establishing those pillars, NOYN partners set their eyes on policy, which was critical to achieving larger-scale systems change and better outcomes for young people throughout the state. BEYO investment enabled NOYN partners to set policy as a priority by using the staff members and board of each member organization to develop a large-scale systems change agenda.

New Orleans was also successful in advancing city and state policy change, including a successful effort to divest from youth criminalization. According to NOYA, the collaborative, in partnership with Youth Justice Advocates, successfully blocked the proposed transfer of \$2 million of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds from a community-assessment center to an ankle-monitoring program for juveniles. NOYA's strategy included using positive youth outcomes data, engaging city council members in discussions, and organizing a coordinated press release with 40 national organizations to ensure the ARPA funding was allocated for its original purpose. As a Big Easy Deal Coalition member and part of its long-term advocacy efforts, NOYA also played a key role in securing \$400,000 in public workforce development funding in the 2024 New Orleans city budget. This funding aims to expand employment pathways and workforce programming for opportunity youth. Finally, NOYA played a pivotal role in creating Louisiana's first Opportunity Youth Task Force through the passage of the [bill SR47](#), providing technical assistance and contributing to drafting an asset-framed policy platform focusing on housing, workforce development, and support systems for youth.<sup>21</sup>

# Centering Youth Voice and Leadership in Designing and Scaling Effective Solutions

Youth leadership and engagement are key aspects of the OYF framework, based on a deeply held belief that young people have the right to represent their own interests and the expertise to play decision-making roles at the collaborative table. Authentically engaging youth and young adults in designing solutions to their challenges can lead to youth-serving systems that are better informed, more effective, and fairer while at the same time providing young people with critical opportunities to build advocacy, community organizing, program design, and other professional and personal leadership skills. OYF asks that all partner collaboratives implement strategies for centering the expertise and leadership of youth in designing solutions that affect them. Furthermore, all OYF grantmaking initiatives, including BEYO, require participating communities to engage youth and young adults meaningfully in initiative design and implementation. OYF supports collaboratives in identifying what this could look like given local youth leadership development infrastructure and capacity, as well as the unique context and needs of each initiative. BEYO applicants were asked to define a vision and an approach for partnering with young leaders on a range of activities—including systems change, policy/advocacy, and pathway design and implementation—that could strengthen local youth-serving ecosystems by incorporating youth-designed solutions.





Examples of specific youth voice and leadership strategies implemented by BEYO sites include:

- In New Orleans, the collaborative operates a [Reengagement Center](#) (REC) that serves opportunity youth seeking to reengage in their education and move forward with their life and career goals.<sup>22</sup> NOYA designed the REC and its outreach strategy in collaboration with paid young adult consultants. In 2023, NOYA convened a Youth Advisory Board of young people with lived experience of issues affecting REC participants (including GED students, parents, and system-impacted youth) in order to provide input on REC design. Council participants receive an hourly wage (based on a five-hours-per-month commitment), transportation, and other supports, as well as critical social analysis training to build skills in identifying issues. The body continues as an ongoing advisory board with new cohorts. In addition to engaging youth and young adults as partners in improving programmatic offerings, the collaborative also partnered with young people on policy change through its fellowship program, with NOYA Fellows developing the [Rebuild our Village NOLA](#) policy platform that set citywide policy goals around improving health and well-being, increasing economic stability, and increasing restorative justice programs in New Orleans schools.<sup>23</sup> In addition to these initiatives, as the backbone for the New Orleans collaborative, NOYA is also committed to sharing youth development expertise with collaborative partners through trainings and serving as a model of authentic youth engagement for the collaborative to institutionalize these strategies with collaborative partners.



“I think for me, a key lesson was really the importance of continuous engagement of young people and staff, so those on the ground doing the work, so just regularly involving foster youth and staff in these decision-making processes or the design of those processes. And I feel like that ensured that the solutions that we developed were truly reflective of their needs and experiences. You know, that's the secret sauce right there, it just leads to more sustainable and effective outcomes.”

- Young leader in the Los Angeles Opportunity Youth Collaborative

- In Boston, the collaborative has a long history of engaging young people through the Boston Youth Voice Project, which provides youth representation at the collaborative table, supports young people in advancing projects within the collaborative's framework, and offers leadership development to participants. For its BEYO project, the collaborative partnered with the HOPE Initiative at BHCC, an asset-based, student-centered initiative operated by BHCC faculty and students that seeks to examine and eliminate the social, institutional, and academic barriers that often prevent students engaged with the HOPE Initiative from achieving their full potential at BHCC and beyond. HOPE Ambassadors are student participants paid by the program and trained in outreach and assistance to help those with incomplete progress grades, placement of students in cohort-based courses for HOPE Scholars, and tutoring for challenging classes. They serve as credible peer-to-peer mentors and messengers as students themselves who have had a firsthand experience with college and can share tips and tricks for navigating college based on personal experience. HOPE staff members and ambassadors conduct an orientation to meet students in person through "low-stakes" activities such as open gyms, breaking bread, one-on-one check-ins, etc. A more detailed description of HOPE is provided in a section below.
- In Los Angeles, the collaborative has a long history of engaging young people who have experienced foster care in its work, including policy and systems change advocacy. The BEYO implementation approach in Los Angeles incorporated youth participation and research that young people lead with their college-going peers in order to understand the experience of current and former foster youth in college and college support programs. This research and the resulting recommendations ultimately informed the evolution of the BEYO strategy in Los Angeles.

Initially, the collaborative focused on improving college access, persistence, and completion of foster youth in Los Angeles County by increasing enrollment in the Los Angeles College Promise (LACP) program. This waives tuition for full-time, first-time students for the first two years of college and offers priority enrollment, financial support, and a dedicated support team providing academic and student support services. LACP has been historically underutilized by foster youth, and the collaborative set out to understand why by researching the experience of young people in LACP.

The collaborative hired a BEYO intern, a young woman with experience in foster care who was enrolled in a Los Angeles community college and participated in LACP. She served on the research design team, including designing three focus groups with students, compiling recommendations from students, and creating and participating in presentations for stakeholders. As a result of this research, the collaborative [released a report](#) with specific recommendations for LACP program improvement and trained over 300 foster youth-serving professionals on these recommendations.<sup>24</sup> One key finding was that a key barrier to LACP participation for foster youth was a statutory requirement that program participants be enrolled full time; research with foster youth indicated that they often needed to work to support themselves and were thus unable to go to school full time. The BEYO intern and other students recommended pivoting to expanding NextUP, the previously described campus-based support program for TAY. This key victory for students with foster care involvement was made possible by the collaborative



partnering with young adults with lived experience of these systems over the long term. It invested mentorship time and provided personal and professional development opportunities, engaged young people in all aspects of the project (from designing research to sharing research results with stakeholders to taking part in advocacy), listened to the needs of students, and was willing to pivot when feedback from young people necessitated changes.

Our conversations with program leaders and their young adult partners identified several lessons for strengthening collaboratives' youth engagement approaches, integrating youth feedback and solutions into the program, and supporting youth and young adults' personal and professional development. This includes:

- Youth advisory or lived experience councils are a common strategy for including youth in the work of the collaborative, which is also utilized in San Antonio and Houston. These approaches require investment of staff time into mentoring, meeting, and facilitating these groups, working with adult partners to overcome adultism (assuming adults know better than younger people) in order to embrace youth feedback and solutions, and financial investment to provide young people with wages, incentives, and supports such as transportation to meetings and food. Youth councils are particularly useful for creating space for young people to work as a cohort on projects they are passionate about.

“Another thing I would add is adultism, like, “Oh, like you’re a youth, and you can’t tell me anything, because, you know, I’ve had a degree, and I’ve been doing this job for 30 years.” But it’s like, “Bro, you was not in the shelter of the car with me last week. I was like, you do not, you know, I’m actually living it.” My experience is valid, and what I have to say is bad, like, yeah, cool. You went to school. I’m going to school, too. I’m getting the degrees. So just like not discounting the youth. Because, you know, you are in higher power, and you do have power, like actually sharing the power authentically.”

- Young leader in the Los Angeles Opportunity Youth Collaborative





- Several BEYO collaboratives, most notably New Orleans and Los Angeles, hired youth as consultants, interns, and staff members. LA OYC and HOPE Initiative are particularly adept at creating a pathway for young leaders into full-time positions; young people in Los Angeles noted that the LA OYC upholds a culture of power-sharing, mentoring, and support in guiding the professional development of its young staff members. All collaboratives that engaged youth in these positions provided a range of professional development opportunities. Young people in Los Angeles report they gained facilitation, leadership, advocacy, project management, strategic storytelling, and design thinking skills.
- Several of these collaboratives and partners reported that their projects benefited greatly from staff members who reflected the population they served. For example, several HOPE staff members talked about their own journeys to and through college (including as HOPE Scholars) and how those experiences drove their sense of purpose and passion in doing this work with students.
- Collaborative leaders must nurture a sense of humility when working with young people. Understanding that adults do not always have the answers and that young people have a deep understanding of what works for them enabled Los Angeles partners to pivot their focus on NextUP and achieve significant statewide wins for foster youth college success—in partnership with young leaders.

## Strengthening College Pathways for Opportunity Youth: The HOPE Initiative Model

The HOPE Initiative is designed to examine and eliminate the social, institutional, and academic barriers that often prevent HOPE Scholars—many of whom are first-generation college students—from achieving success in college and beyond. HOPE is an “asset-based, student-centered initiative” run by faculty, staff members, and students to empower students to navigate their college journey.

Boston's OYC, through BEYO and in partnership with BHCC, set a goal to integrate HOPE into the college experience for a greater number of students. The initiative built on Success Boston persistence coaching, an intervention focused on supporting Boston Public Schools seniors in their transition into college and through the first two years of college. All Success Boston-coached students at BHCC were eligible to become HOPE Success Scholars. In addition to embedding two Success Boston coaches in HOPE offices at BHCC, the collaborative also partnered with HOPE Ambassadors, a group of student leaders who provide students with mentorship, guidance, and nonacademic assistance to support students in successfully transitioning and persisting in postsecondary education. In our conversations with HOPE leadership and staff members, many of whom come from backgrounds similar to their students and/or have been students and HOPE Ambassadors at BHCC, they highlighted several specific student-centered success practices, including:

- Creating a welcoming space, making students feel they belong on campus.
- HOPE is an opt-out program—all students who fit within the mission of the program are considered HOPE Scholars and receive outreach to participate in HOPE activities.
- Prioritizing the power of language and using affirming, asset-based language (for example, calling students “scholars”) that highlights their students’ talents and successes.
- Implementing activities as a direct result of student feedback (for example, open gym, cohort-based classes, “breaking bread” lunches).



Program leadership also emphasized the importance of listening to students and centering student voice in program design, sharing this advice for program leaders: “Two eyes, two ears, one mouth. Listen and observe twice as much as you talk, especially with student-based programs. Because, I mean, that’s our job. Our job is to hear what they are saying. They are the future. And making sure we’re doing something for them that is created by them and us just being in our positions to ensure that we are vehicles for the creations that they’re intending to have present in the process.”

Internal data collected about HOPE has demonstrated promising results that staff members are keen to build on to continue to improve and scale the model. In fact, in a survey of 130 HOPE participants in spring 2024, respondents said that they engaged with HOPE to get support in a wide range of academic and career planning activities, including 60% for course registration, 39% for financial aid, 34% for creating an academic plan, and 27% for setting career goals. Seventy-eight percent of all respondents indicated they planned to continue studying at BHCC the following semester.



# Strengthening Collaboratives in Houston and San Antonio

The ongoing multiyear [evaluation of OYF by Equal Measure](#) demonstrates a consistent relationship between strong collaborative capacity and the ability to advance meaningful and lasting systems change to better reengage and support opportunity youth.<sup>25</sup> That is why OYF funded sites early on to support capacity building and identified it as a priority under BEYO. Capacity-building activities included, for example, naming a backbone organization with a solid reputation and credibility to drive a collective agenda, developing a set of core values to anchor their work, hiring experienced staff members, and embedding youth voice in all steps of the decision-making process. Two new collaboratives—GHOYC and SAYOC, which joined the OYF through participation in BEYO—were able to make early gains and accelerate progress on strengthening local youth-serving ecosystems by using BEYO as seed funding to build out local collaborative efforts.

GHOYC used BEYO to apply for additional funding, which enabled it to significantly increase the capacity of the backbone by hiring three key staff members: its first managing director to lead the collaborative and advance policy changes with key institutional partners, including school districts, postsecondary institutions, and the workforce, aimed at improving service accessibility and delivery; a project manager who supports partners to ensure a successful implementation, documentation, and scaling of its two reconnection strategies; and an AmeriCorps VISTA member to lead and expand GHOYC's Young Adult Action Advisory Council (YAAAC), a critical entity within the collaborative designed to not only embed and amplify youth voice in all aspects of their strategies and activities but also influence other collaborative members' views and practices on youth voice.





GHOYC also secured significant financial backing from area foundations, notably a \$1 million grant from the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation, which it used in part to expand its work into new communities, including Brazoria County, and bring new funders to the table, including Trellis Foundation and Powell Foundations. These additional funding commitments have also allowed GHOYC to invest in enhancing its pathways work specifically to increase recruitment, training, and placement of young people in a health care pathway as well as fostering and nurturing employer relationships within the health care sector. Finally, GHOYC used the funds to develop a data collection tool to drive toward using data as a strategic asset and, more broadly, creating a data-driven culture among collaborative members.

Meanwhile, in San Antonio, what began as an effort by a group of 26 community partners launched by the city's Department of Human Services to build shared outcomes for organizations supporting opportunity youth is now SAOYC. It comprises 48 community partners committed to improving outcomes for opportunity youth through working collectively to create seamless education and workforce pathways for youth. SAOYC continues to be led by the City of San Antonio Department of Human Services and the United Way of San Antonio and Bexar County, the community's largest funders of opportunity youth programming, and together serve as the collaborative's conveners and backbone leads. Staff members of the two organizations coordinate key backbone functions, including data collection/management, funding alignment, and development of a common community goal



around reducing youth disconnection. BEYO has helped the SAOYC collaborative catalyze resources to achieve success in a few critical areas outlined below, which has set the stage for improved data sharing and tracking resource allocation, program replication, significant city investment in youth programming, and the inclusion of youth-informed solutions in the collaborative's strategies to reduce youth disconnection in the community:

- The development of common metrics with definitions that all nonprofits funded by the City and United Way measure success for opportunity youth work and aligned with Aspen's Common Measures indicators.
- Participation in a longitudinal study measuring the outcomes of opportunity youth by the Ray Marshall Center (RMC) at the University of Texas at Austin. Seven nonprofits have agreed to participate in the study and have entered into data-sharing agreements with RMC.
- The development of a replicable Youth Leadership Model: The NXTLevel Youth Opportunity Youth Advisory Board (Path Builders), which serves as a successful model for youth leadership development and how youth voice can be incorporated into program improvements.
- According to the collaborative, the City of San Antonio also made significant investments in services for all youth during the period of BEYO investment, allocating \$20 million in ARPA funding to programs to address COVID-19 impact on youth, including an investment of over \$5.3 million in services for opportunity youth, unhoused youth, and systems-involved youth. The collaborative credits the BEYO investment for building nonprofits' capacity and increasing community awareness of opportunity youth—both were instrumental in securing the City of San Antonio's federal stimulus funds to support opportunity youth programs.
- [NXT Level Youth Opportunity Center](#), the city's comprehensive reengagement center, was replicated with funding from the Northside Independent School District (NISD), the fourth-largest school district in Texas.<sup>26</sup> According to the local backbone organization, the GED to AlamoPROMISE developed by the BEYO investment allowed the city to articulate the value add clearly and helped secure a \$1.5 million investment from the school district to support opportunity youth residing in their school district boundaries.



# Lessons Learned

In this section, we outline some of the most important lessons that contributed to BEYO's success after four years of implementation. We believe these lessons critical for further scaling of promising pathways to postsecondary and career success that are still elusive for millions of young adults nationwide.

- **Youth Voice Requires Patience, Training, and Commitment.** All the youth we interviewed are in leadership positions in BEYO, but they did not start that way. Many did not set out to work in a collaborative doing policy advocacy. They had experienced firsthand the consequences of being “disconnected,” which meant their paths from high school to college were rife with obstacles, including experiencing homelessness and lack of money and social connections. But they were also determined to not just change their personal lives but also change the systems that undergird the policies and practices that get in the way of young people's progress toward success. BEYO youth highlighted the importance of continuous engagement from collaborative leaders to show their support, whether they were at their best or going through hard times. One of the youth shared that going through homelessness, for example, while advocating for policies against homelessness is exhausting and invigorating because, “You are experiencing something you want to go away right away but need to work through the slow nature of policy/advocacy work.” However, the BEYO collaborative's support was critical in terms of showing care about “how we are doing as human beings, including mentally, spiritually, in a community, and family context.” Perhaps one



of the most important messages from BEYO youth to adult allies is, as one youth leader put it, “not to give up on us and to keep in mind that we, too, are humans and therefore make mistakes.”

Youth voice and leadership in BEYO sites also meant that collaborative leaders intentionally worked with youth to provide professional development opportunities, whether in policy/advocacy, public speaking, and deliberate coaching to develop self-confidence. In fact, several of the young people we interviewed highlighted self-confidence as a key leadership trait that they did not necessarily have early on. Their involvement with the collaborative and the encouragement, mentoring, and coaching—whether formal or informal—they received from collaborative leaders helped them start viewing themselves as “experts” and gain the confidence to, for example, speak in high-stakes meetings in front of policymakers about homelessness. As one youth leader put it: “Yes, I was nervous at first because it is hard to sit in front of strangers and speak for over half an hour about your life story. But I have done that not by myself but with the support of my peers and the entire collaborative.”



Youth voice is arguably the glue that ties the OYF network together. It has evolved over the last decade but has remained one of the guiding principles that undergird the very foundation of the network. BEYO sites across the board talk about how they get inspired to want to do more around youth voice and leadership when they attend OYF convenings. They are inspired by the consistent presence of youth on the mainstage and their prominent roles in facilitating panels, leading sessions, and making their voices heard. It is, therefore, no accident that BEYO sites not only put youth voice and leadership front and center but also made significant strides in operationalizing it into their everyday practices and promoting its adoption with key systems partners.

- **Consultative and Trust-Based Philanthropy Creates Conditions for Success.** In designing BEYO, AFCS reinforced and built on a set of existing “nonnegotiables” that have been established within OYF from the beginning: communities had to attend the biannual national OYF meeting, embed youth voice, participate in technical assistance, and engage in learning, evaluation, and data collection efforts led by AFCS across the OYF network. BEYO funds had to be allocated to support participation in those activities, but to a large extent, communities held decision-making ability over how programmatic funds were allocated (for example, funds could be allocated to staff time, and some funds could be





sub-granted to local youth-serving partners to enable them to serve more youth). Ultimately, communities were free to use the funds to design a project that fit their local needs and would advance their goals as long as they could articulate how the project would accelerate their ability to scale promising local pathways and programs and design a realistic implementation plan to do so. This approach made a huge difference to sites' ability to braid funds to supplement BEYO activities, including, for example, using the funds to hire dedicated staff members to manage the project.

AFCS credits its national philanthropic partner, JP Morgan Chase & Company, as an early investor from the beginning of OYF and a co-designer of BEYO. When COVID hit, JPMorgan expressed even greater openness and support for OYF and BEYO sites by making sure funding continued to flow and staying engaged during challenging times for the entire opportunity youth-serving field. This resulted in AFCS taking a similar approach with sites by giving them

more time if they needed it for reporting and more discretion to pivot from the initial project designs as needed to serve their local needs during the pandemic. (Most sites were able to proceed with projects as planned or even enhance and expand some aspects, as Houston did by adding the NextGen pathway.) It is clear from the BEYO experience that success in reducing youth disconnection is unattainable without this type of long-term commitment and flexibility from philanthropy during hard times. Likewise, dedicated funding for cross-sector collaboratives is critical to building a local infrastructure capable of setting and driving an agenda around opportunity youth reconnection.

- **Collecting Baseline Data and Developing Centralized Data Systems Allows Communities to Track Progress and Drive Stakeholder Commitment.** Data was a critical element in the design and success of BEYO. From the outset, OYF has developed a data use framework and designed common measures to track and report outcomes across the network. OYF also provided technical assistance and capacity-building activities to all network members to use data for impact and improvement. BEYO approached the data work similarly by building on OYF's national strategy, which was essentially to start with understanding the baseline, setting goals, designing solutions, and tracking progress, all to address historical racial disparities in youth disconnection.



In the process of understanding the baseline, Houston and Newark partnered with Measure of America to commission reports about youth disconnection in their communities, which were used to raise awareness of the issue among policymakers and the public in general. [“A Portrait of Newark”](#) is an extensive study of well-being and youth disconnection across race, place, and gender throughout Newark’s five wards.<sup>27</sup> The Houston metro area, which encompasses the Greater Houston area, comprises 13 counties with 124,500 opportunity youth.<sup>28</sup> New Orleans also partnered with Measure of America to commission [“Building Brighter Futures for Youth in New Orleans,”](#) an in-depth look at local youth disconnection in the community.<sup>29</sup>

All three communities are relying on these reports in multiple ways, both on the community-wide level (as a call to action to rally the local stakeholders around the scale of youth disconnection in these communities or to drive public will to put in place supportive policies) and on the collaborative level to deepen the use of data and promote a culture of learning and data-sharing across collaborative partners.

Newark purchased Efforts to Outcomes (ETO) case management software licenses for a subset of youth-serving collaborative partners and created a shared participant intake form that allows partners to track how young people are accessing and completing programming across multiple partners. New Orleans created data-sharing agreements and asked prospective collaborative members to provide data as part of their participation in the collaborative. The collaborative then created a shared data dashboard, which allowed members to see how many young people they were serving, and track the general impact they collectively had on youth outcomes. Sharing data finally allowed them to see the unduplicated number of young people, who were being served by multiple programs, and the outcomes (including connection to careers) they were producing. As a result, New Orleans collectively set a goal to reduce youth disconnection rates by 7% in 2025. Finally, Houston launched an [interactive map](#) that displays disconnection rates by neighborhood, overlaid with locations of youth-serving organizations and the type of services they offer.<sup>30</sup> This map allows stakeholders to understand the scale of youth disconnection in their communities, what services exist to support opportunity youth, and where gaps in services exist, necessitating more investment into local youth-serving organizations.





- **Policy Advocacy Work Takes Time but Is Essential to Scale.** BEYO sites are unanimous in their view that policy change is ultimately one of the most critical ways to fundamentally change the systems that create the conditions to achieve impact at scale for opportunity youth. To succeed at policy change, BEYO sites needed time, resources, and sustained focus on youth disconnection despite the shifting news cycle and sometimes despite navigating a hostile political environment. In Los Angeles, for example, the LA OYC partners shared that it took 10 years of incremental change for JBAY to get ongoing state funding for NextUp across all California Community Colleges.

The goal was to create a long-term, sustainable model that was embedded in the public system. Before NextUp, campus-based foster youth support programs existed at some colleges, using private funding and institutional dollars. However, this funding was neither sustainable nor sufficient to meet the program's needs. To scale these efforts, a series of critical activities were conducted: 1) Identifying and documenting core features and elements of the model and sharing them with colleges, 2) Tracking and reporting data on college enrollment, persistence, and graduation, 3) Enlisting key internal champions in the colleges, 4) Providing technical assistance to ensure fidelity to the model, and 5) Bringing funders together to seek funding for piloting the model. JBAY shared that in 20014, it successfully secured a \$15 million allocation to fund NextUp across 45 campuses. In 2021, legislation expanded eligibility for the program, and ultimately, in 2022, ongoing funding was included in the state budget to expand NextUp to all 116 community colleges and establish campus-based foster youth support programs across all public four-year institutions.



- **Inclusive and Flexible Technical Assistance and Coaching.** As national intermediaries and managing partners of BEYO, AFCS and JFF worked with communities at the outset to build technical assistance and coaching activities into the initiative. They ensured the sites shared their most critical learning goals, used AFCS's and JFF's subject matter experts to support the site's learning agenda, and, importantly, created a community of practice among sites through a monthly meeting bringing together site leads and sometimes specific program leads to learn about each other's progress and challenges. By creating a dedicated space for learning and sharing, the monthly COP meetings also served as opportunities to build community and trust among sites where each site felt safe to openly share challenges that they faced and counted on their peers, AFCS, and JFF to provide constructive feedback. AFCS and JFF also used the COP meetings to dig into common topical areas of interest. Some of the topics covered during the COP meetings included work-based learning strategies, employer engagement, BMWP, youth voice and leadership, etc. BEYO and site leads worked together to make sure the content of the COP meetings was relevant and responsive to the sites' work and used subject matter expertise from JFF as well as from the sites to design and deliver the COP sessions.

The TA was inclusive for two reasons: first, because it was directed at site leads as well as program staff members, such as those working on outreach and recruitment, career advising, and partnership development; and second, the content was not set in advance. JFF and AFCS consulted with the sites in real time, used sites' reports to ask for feedback on TA session format and content, and often invited sites to lead TA sessions. JFF and AFCS took this approach to not only ensure that the sites' lessons learned and insights were elevated but also to give local staff members the opportunity to contribute expertise to critical youth reconnection topics in a highly visible national initiative.





- **Having an “Opportunistic” Mindset Allows Collaboratives to Use New Funding Opportunities and Influence Emergent Policy.** Several BEYO sites talked about being opportunistic by using BEYO as catalytic funding and seizing the political moment to advance their goals. Case in point, Boston’s OYC using the SUCCESS Fund to expand Boston’s evidence-based coaching model. The SUCCESS Fund is a state fund that allows community colleges to provide extra support for struggling students to complete their degrees. BHCC funds the HOPE initiative to provide campus-based supports for students who need extra assistance. The BEYO funds allowed Boston PIC and the OYC to add coaching by an external agency to HOPE’s campus-based supports.

Many HOPE students had the added support of financial assistance from the city’s Tuition-Free Community College, which has now been superseded by a new statewide policy that provides for tuition-free and additional funding support to all eligible students at community colleges in Massachusetts. The recent passage of two laws in Massachusetts, MassReconnect and MassEducate, made community college free first for students 25 years and older and then for in-state students of any age and income. The laws also give students an allowance of up to \$1,200 to cover books and supplies based on income and an additional \$1,200 to help with other costs of attending college. This development provides students with easier access to college, and programs like HOPE complement it by providing them the assistance they need to complete college and earn a degree.

For Houston, having a robust organizational capacity allowed the collaborative to be entrepreneurial in taking advantage of opportunities to expand the number of pathways offerings available to opportunity youth in Houston. ACAM used BEYO to secure additional private philanthropic and public resources to ensure the sustainability of the reconnection pathways implemented by the collaborative. For example, ACAM shared that it secured \$4.5 million in WIOA funds in 2022-2024 to launch a new pathway called Next Generation of Youth, which brought together a group of six CBO partners to provide WIOA services to opportunity youth. The collaborative also secured additional philanthropic investment to support expansion of its health care pathway. As a result, according to ACAM, the collaborative served over 6,300 youth across three pathways during the lifetime of the BEYO investment, up from the original target of almost 2,300 youth served.

# Conclusion

BEYO is an initiative that can serve as a case study for philanthropy, national intermediary organizations, and local collaboratives on how to stay the course to focus on the endgame and also leave room to pivot and adapt to unforeseen circumstances, such as a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic. BEYO has also demonstrated that achieving impact at scale for opportunity youth necessitates not only a unified theory of action with young people at the center but also the flexibility to use funding, policy, and other opportunities to support opportunity youth to realize their education and career aspirations.

Although BEYO has wrapped, the Aspen Forum is building on lessons learned from it to inform new initiatives while continuing to invest in OYF communities to go deeper on scale and impact. Two such initiatives are currently underway with participation from several BEYO sites:

- **BMWP:** In the early stages of development, BMWP was introduced and tested with the BEYO sites, which were enthusiastic about partnering with JFF and Aspen to help us test what the framework could look like in practice. The framework resonated with the BEYO sites because the OYF community, led by the young people in our network, has talked about the importance of centering well-being and healing-centered practices in OYF work since 2018, with these conversations intensifying during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, many of the BEYO sites felt like they were already implementing BMWP practices in their work with young people. For example, creating a sense of belonging in college has always been seen by providers as critical to their ability to effectively reengage young people in their education and career pathways, while developing a sense of purpose has been core to helping young people see themselves as agents of change in their communities. These practices are at the heart of what the HOPE Initiative has done



so well by creating spaces for students of color to feel welcome on campus. Many of the BEYO sites are participating in the BMWP practitioner community of practice, as they see enormous potential in finally having a research-based framework coupled with standards and tools they can use to embed BMWP principles in their systems change efforts and in all programs that serve young people.

- **Scaling Youth Outcomes Cohort (SYOC):** A new three-year, \$6 million investment in four communities—Boston, Denver, Houston, and Los Angeles—launched by the Aspen Forum in 2024 as part of a larger investment by Ballmer Group.<sup>31</sup> The four SYOC sites seek to:
  - » Increase the number of all youth served by all of the youth service partners in their local collaboratives and increase the number of youth outcomes (K-12 and/or postsecondary reengagement and completion, as well as workforce attachment) produced by all youth service partners.
  - » Partner with two or more high-performing direct youth service partners to demonstrate clear proof that increased investment in scaling programs can result in rapid expansion of opportunity youth services, leading to more youth in services and more youth attaining specific outcomes with a focus on K-12 and/or postsecondary reengagement and completion, as well as workforce attachment.

Despite the tremendous progress achieved through BEYO and the ongoing work of the broader Opportunity Youth Forum network, we still have a lot of work to do to create a society where young people and the most vulnerable among them develop the skills, earn the credentials, and have the connections to realize their full potential. The Aspen Forum set an ambitious goal to reduce the number of opportunity youth in the OYF communities by half—meaning 500,000 fewer young people who are disconnected from opportunity—by 2033. We hope that the lessons from BEYO can continue to inform the work of the Aspen Forum, JFF, and community partners as we collectively advance this goal.



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