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Roots and Routes:

A Financial Capability Toolkit for Opportunity Youth

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About AIFCS and the OYF

The Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions 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 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 began in 2012 (as the “Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund”) to use momentum coming out of the White House Council for Community Solutions. It is a network of urban, rural, and Indigenous communities seeking to scale multiple reconnection pathways that achieve better outcomes in education, career, and overall well-being for opportunity youth. 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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📍 Introduction

The Opportunity Youth Forum (OYF) is a network of [over 40 local collaborations in urban, rural, and tribal communities](#) working to build and scale pathways that improve outcomes in education, employment, and overall well-being for “[opportunity youth](#)” – young people ages 16 to 24 who are neither enrolled in school nor working.


Over the past five years, the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions has worked to integrate financial capability into the OYF network and the broader youth-serving field.

Progress has been meaningful: In 2025, 75% of OYF collaboratives reported financial capability as a focus of their work, up from 61% in 2022.¹ There are also early signs of greater alignment in practice – one in three collaboratives now report a shared understanding of what quality financial capability looks like, up from just one in five when this work began. At the same time, moving from growing interest to consistent practice and sustained investment remains an ongoing challenge across the field.

By “financial capability,” we mean the knowledge, skills, habits, and confidence to manage day-to-day finances; a belief that financial systems will work for you; and access to products and services designed to support, not undermine, financial well-being. As MyPath describes it, it is about increasing an individual’s ability, opportunity, and motivation to act.²

We focus on financial capability because it shapes how young people navigate income, make decisions, and engage with systems at critical moments in their transitions to adulthood. Yet alone, it is an insufficient lever to drive long-term financial well-being. Young people’s ability to act on financial knowledge, achieve stability, and thrive economically is shaped by income, access to career pathways, supportive relationships, and broader structural conditions. This work therefore sits at the intersection of expanding and documenting effective interventions and addressing the systems that enable, or constrain, financial opportunity.

This toolkit builds on partnerships with [MyPath](#), the [Aspen Institute Financial Security Program](#), and community collaboratives in the OYF network. Extending from our 2022 [report](#), it offers concrete examples, insights, and integration models for how youth-serving organizations, workforce systems, and collaboratives can embed financial capability and wealth-building practices into their programming and partnerships. Across these examples, a consistent pattern emerges: Financial capability is not a standalone service – it is infrastructure for how young people engage with work, income, and opportunity.



These efforts are unfolding in a rapidly changing environment. Cost-of-living pressures remain high. Fraud and digital scams are increasing. Trust in financial systems remains fragile – particularly among young people and communities that have experienced exclusion or harm, including a long history of discriminatory financial policies and practices.³ At the same time, K-12 financial education mandates are expanding,⁴ new financial technologies are reshaping how young people learn about money, and interest in cash transfers and asset-building tools continues to grow, even as shifts in federal policy are reshaping the broader safety net and financial environment.

This toolkit is organized into two parts. First, we highlight four core models for integrating financial capability into workforce pathways, drawing on examples from communities across the OYF network. Second, we examine key conditions that shape implementation and impact. These include staff well-being, income pathways beyond traditional employment, navigating financial learning online, and the economic uncertainty and changes driven by AI. Together, these sections reflect a core design tension in this work: While national models provide scalable infrastructure and shared tools, many of the most effective approaches are locally developed and adapted to community context.

📍 Core Models

The following sections highlight four overall approaches for integrating financial capability into programs for opportunity youth. Each reflects a different entry point – but all are grounded in real moments when young people are earning income, navigating systems, and making financial decisions.

MODEL	PROGRAM CONTEXT	KEY FEATURES	EXAMPLES
Summer Jobs Integration	Youth employment programs, often city-led and seasonal	Integration of banking, payroll, and financial learning, often at first earnings	Chicago Youth Works , formerly One Summer Chicago (IL); Right Track (Saint Paul, MN)
National Workforce Partnership: MyPath and YouthBuild	Within YouthBuild programs serving opportunity youth	Deep, relationship-driven financial capability integrated into program design and delivery	Opportunity Youth Network's LEAD Charter School and YouthBuild Newark (NJ); Mile High Youth Corps YouthBuild (Denver, CO)
Locally Driven Partnerships	Community-based organizations working organically with financial institutions	Flexible, culturally grounded approaches tailored to local context	Café Reconcile , Kinai 'Eha , and Opportunity for Youth Action Hawai'i at Kawailoa (HI); Teach Me How to Bank (Flint, MI)
Cash Transfers and Asset-Building Strategies	Direct cash programs like guaranteed income pilots or cash for housing	Unconditional income and optional supports	BEEM (San Francisco, CA); Homeless Youth Cash Stipend Pilot Project (MN); Freedom Futures (Atlanta, GA)

Summer Jobs Integration

Why Youth Jobs Are a High-Leverage Entry Point

Summer and year-round earn-and-learn programs are among the most effective entry points for building financial capability. Young people earn real income at the same moment that they are connected to trusted adults, workforce expectations, and structured learning – a combination that makes financial habits “stick.”

National models such as Cities for Financial Empowerment Fund’s [Summer Jobs Connect](#) demonstrate that embedding financial capability into summer youth employment programs (SYEPs) is not an add-on; rather, it improves payment systems, reduces program friction, builds youth trust, and strengthens the citywide financial empowerment infrastructure. For local collaboratives, integrating banking, savings, and coaching into a summer youth employment program remains one of the clearest, most scalable on-ramps.⁵

Due to the success of the Summer Jobs Connect model, the CFE Fund has begun expanding this initiative to include year-round youth employment programs. It has worked with 55 city and county partners over the past decade to scale this approach, resulting in 600,000 young people getting paid via direct deposit and 1.4 million receiving just-in-time financial education. A key strength of the approach is CFE Fund’s support in partnering with financial institutions, municipal workforce programs and financial empowerment partners, and community organizations.

What It Looks Like in Practice

- **Align workforce onboarding with account onboarding.** Programs help youth meet payroll documentation requirements at the same time they open safe, noncustodial bank accounts.
- **Set shared expectations for account standards.** Local governments partner with vetted financial institutions, often through [Bank On](#) coalitions, to ensure youth receive accounts without overdraft fees, minimum balance requirements, or surprise charges.
- **Automate direct deposit and help youth understand why it matters.** Youth experience faster, safer, and more reliable access to their earnings while learning practical money management skills.
- **Pair earnings with straightforward, reflective financial education.** Programs integrate short activities around goals, saving, and planning, ideally during key moments like orientation, job readiness trainings, first paychecks, and mid-summer check-ins.
- **Embed practice into workforce identity.** Partners treat financial capability as a core program requirement – not optional – signaling its importance to young people’s long-term mobility.
- **Leverage cross-agency partnerships.** SYEP financial capability efforts often catalyze broader municipal infrastructure improvements: updated payroll systems, stronger financial counseling partnerships, or expansion of youth banking initiatives into school-year programs. CFE Fund is particularly well-positioned to support such an approach because as Matt Trombley notes, they “work with cities and mayors to institutionalize financial empowerment, not just in one program, but across their systems.”

- **Customize for local context.** Chicago has a rich ecosystem of publicly funded summer employment and enrichment opportunities for young people, anchored by Chicago Youth Works (formerly One Summer Chicago), which includes the nation’s second-largest SYEP with over 31,000 16- to 24-year-old participants and a stipended work-based learning program for 14- and 15-year-olds.⁶ For young people under the age of 18, the [Chicago Youth Works Banking Coalition](#) of financial institutions offers noncustodial bank accounts. Summer Jobs Connect partners in Saint Paul, Minnesota prioritize culturally rooted approaches with Native youth, while in Jacksonville, Florida, they tailor banking access for young people impacted by the justice system.

“We use the situational moment when youth are getting a job through a trusted workforce program and align workforce documentation requirements with bank or credit union account requirements. This allows us to open accounts while they’re getting set up to be paid. Then we layer in financial education: why open an account, how to use it, protect money, and think about long-term goals. We focus on three core changes: Youth open noncustodial checking accounts in their own names; they enroll in direct deposit and understand why it matters; and they learn to manage earnings – savings, budgeting, and goal-setting. Some partners go further – exploring credit, investing, entrepreneurship – but we prioritize foundational skills.”

– **Matt Trombley**, Cities for Financial Empowerment Fund

Youth-Led Innovation and the Origins of Systems Integration

One early leader in youth-centered financial capability innovation is MyPath, whose work with cross-sector partners in San Francisco over [the past two decades](#) has informed best practices across the field. To develop the [MyPath Savings](#) model, young leaders identified the banking barriers they faced, devised solutions, and tested them with Mission SF Credit Union, now Self-Help Federal Credit Union.

Early pilots integrated these banking solutions, [noncustodial accounts](#), financial education, and goal-setting practices in youth employment programs across San Francisco.⁷ Building on this work, young advocates engaged the city’s Department of Children, Youth, and Their Families (DCYF), calling for access to banking and opportunities to develop money management skills within publicly funded programs. DCYF and the San Francisco Treasurer’s Office responded, supporting broader adoption.

A quasi-experimental study of the program demonstrated gains in banking participation, savings behavior, and financial confidence.⁸ Later, funding from Summer Jobs Connect (SJC) supported the citywide delivery of MyPath Savings, as well as engagement with the initial cohort of SJC cities, enabling best practices and lesson sharing. MyPath’s pioneering emphasis on using the first paycheck as a key moment for engagement – alongside its continued [commitment to youth leadership and co-design](#) – helped shape broader efforts to integrate financial capability into youth workforce programs nationally.

National Workforce Partnership: MyPath and YouthBuild

Municipally supported summer jobs programs are an important part of the field, but just one element of the ecosystem. Because these are typically tailored to students currently between semesters in secondary school, they are not an ideal fit for all opportunity youth. This section highlights a complementary model: a national partnership between [MyPath](#) – a leading technical assistance provider focused on financial capability solutions in youth-serving systems – and [YouthBuild Global](#). As headquarters for the YouthBuild movement, YouthBuild Global unifies and partners with an expansive network of YouthBuild programs around the world, championing opportunity youth as they reclaim their education, gain job skills and credentials, and become leaders in their communities. The over 200 YouthBuild programs across the United States play a vital and leading role in the national ecosystem of career and education pathways for opportunity youth. While summer jobs programs offer a high-volume, systems-integrated entry point, the MyPath × YouthBuild model demonstrates what a more intensive, relationship-driven approach can look like for young people who need deeper and more sustained support.

With seed support from [Prudential](#), beginning in 2018, MyPath trained 44 staff across 12 YouthBuild programs on savings, credit, and financial mentoring models, who in turn reached 420 participants.⁹ Results included increased understanding of credit among 81% of participants and gains in overall financial knowledge and confidence among 63%.

What Makes This Model Distinct

While YouthBuild programs share core design elements, they are more intensive and more heterogeneous than summer youth employment programs. Program elements include a range of settings – from alternative high schools to pre-apprenticeships – and serve older young people who are overwhelmingly low-income, including many young parents and individuals who have experienced or are experiencing homelessness.

As a result, financial capability strategies must be flexible, intensive, and deeply relationship-driven – aligning with YouthBuild’s longstanding emphasis on leadership development and community contribution.

Across sites, a common approach emerged:

- **Blended learning and reflection.** Participants engaged in a mix of MyPath’s online modules and group-based activities, grounding financial learning in reflection on their relationships with money.
- **Focus on core financial milestones.** Youth set savings goals, built budgets, and worked on establishing or repairing credit.
- **Peer facilitation as a core strategy.** MyPath trained peer facilitators – often YouthBuild alumni under age 30 – to co-facilitate sessions, provide individualized support, and serve as “youth banking ambassadors.” This approach builds on YouthBuild’s strong culture of leadership development, service, and alumni engagement, and MyPath’s tested peer delivery approach.

- **Integration with financial institutions.** Programs partnered with financial institutions to support account access and enrollment, deliver workshops, and connect financial capability to career exposure opportunities. They often used MyPath’s [National Youth Banking Standards](#) and technical assistance sessions to prepare for these conversations and better understand the kinds of requests they could make regarding youth-friendly enrollment and account features.

Over eight years, this partnership has evolved into a robust national learning community with shared data, continuous improvement, and expanding reach.

Further details can be found in this April 2023 joint [report](#).

Locally Driven Partnerships

Beyond national models like MyPath, YouthBuild Global, or CFE Fund’s Summer Jobs Connect initiative, many programs build financial capability through local, relationship-based partnerships. These efforts often begin not with a comprehensive curriculum or dedicated financial coach, but with trust, incentives, cultural grounding and small, practical steps that meet young people where they are. At the same time, practitioners navigate real tensions – including how to pace financial education for justice-involved youth, and whether or when direct cash supports are appropriate.

What This Looks Like in Practice

Café Reconcile – New Orleans, Louisiana

[Café Reconcile](#), a leading training provider in the [New Orleans Opportunity Youth Collaborative](#) and part of the [Louisiana Opportunity Youth Alliance](#), embeds financial goal-setting and coaching into its hospitality workforce training model for young people ages 16-24.

Through a partnership with United Way of Southeastern Louisiana, participants are co-enrolled in an Individual Development Account program, allowing them to access matched savings while participating in workforce training. This braided approach leverages funding across organizations to expand access and support asset-building. Participation in MyPath’s 2024 learning cohort further helped Reconcile refine and strengthen its model.

Opportunity for Youth Action Hawai’i (OYAH)

The OYAH hui (a Hawaiian-language term for a collaborative group) is a deeply place-based partnership at the [Kawailoa Youth and Family Wellness Center](#), where financial capability strategies are grounded in Native Hawaiian culture and community context.

Collaborating organizations including [Partners in Development Foundation \(PIDF\)](#) and [Kinai ‘Eha](#) work with young people returning from incarceration or experiencing houselessness. For these youth, financial well-being cannot begin with abstract goals like homeownership or investing. Instead, programs start

with immediate needs and trust-building: participation incentives, securing identification documents, and gradual introduction to banking through relationships with institutions like the Bank of Hawai'i.

Financial education is ongoing and experience-based:

“Financial education needs to be ongoing, not just a one-time class. They need reinforcement and mentoring through real experiences.”

– **Naomi Rose Caywood**, Kinai 'Eha Program Manager

Programming draws on multiple community-aligned curricula, including [Money SMARTS](#) (via ALU LIKE, Inc.) and [Ho'oulu Waiwai](#) (via INPEACE), often extending to family members as part of broader stabilization efforts.

Leaders emphasize culturally grounded framing. As Kinai 'Eha Executive Director Josiah Akau often shares, money is “fuel” – a framing that resonates with young leaders. At the same time, staff underscore that financial well-being must be understood in context:

“Culturally speaking, money doesn't make you rich. We focus on the value of family, land, and water. But it's so expensive to live here – everyone is struggling for stability.”

– **Melissa Waiters**, Kinai 'Eha Case Manager


Program leaders also navigate complex strategic choices. While financial partners bring aligned values and expertise, available curricula are not always tailored to the lived realities of justice-impacted youth. Staff must address financial trauma, survival-based economic behaviors, and the influence of social media narratives around quick wealth (e.g., cryptocurrency).

Kinai 'Eha, for example, often chooses not to prioritize enrollment in long-term public benefits or permanent supportive housing, instead emphasizing self-efficacy and gradual independence – while still supporting access to temporary housing. At the same time, other Kawaiiloa partners such as RYSE are [piloting direct cash transfers](#), reflecting ongoing experimentation and diverse approaches within the field.

Teach Me How to Bank – Flint, Michigan

Erika Davis, a Flint native and former bank teller and business banker, founded Teach Me How to Bank to bridge the gap between financial institutions and communities that often lack accessible, practical guidance – particularly, young people, returning citizens, and international students.

Her experience in banking – where she was pushed away from relationship-building toward transactional volume – shaped her approach: centering trust, accessibility, and real-time problem solving.



She developed a four-part curriculum initially piloted through Job Corps, and later expanded through [GearUp2Lead](#), which supports high school students transitioning to postsecondary pathways and serves as the Opportunity Youth Forum site lead in Flint.

In recent summers, Davis has led an eight-week transition series integrating financial literacy, career navigation, and life skills. She joined GearUp2Lead as a success navigator, expanding her reach within an alternative high school that embeds skill development across its curriculum.

Her work has gained local traction, including [support from Flint SOUP and the United Way of Genesee County](#). Partnerships with Elga Credit Union bring in practitioners to co-facilitate sessions on credit, secured cards, and credit-building loans – reinforcing the connection between education and real financial products.

Together, these examples show that financial capability is not only built through scaled models, but also through adaptive, locally rooted partnerships that respond to the realities of young people’s lives.

Cash Transfers and Asset-Building Strategies

Financial stability – defined as consistent, positive cash flow – is a foundation of financial security. This is especially critical for young adults, who must invest time in education, training, and skill development in order to access upwardly mobile career pathways. Without stable income, these investments are difficult to sustain.

In response, there is growing momentum around direct cash transfer strategies, including guaranteed income programs that provide unconditional cash at regular intervals.¹⁰ A substantial body of global and U.S. evidence demonstrates that these approaches reduce poverty and improve well-being. Beyond economic stability, these approaches also reduce financial stress, increase young people’s sense of agency, and create the conditions for longer-term goal-setting and future orientation.

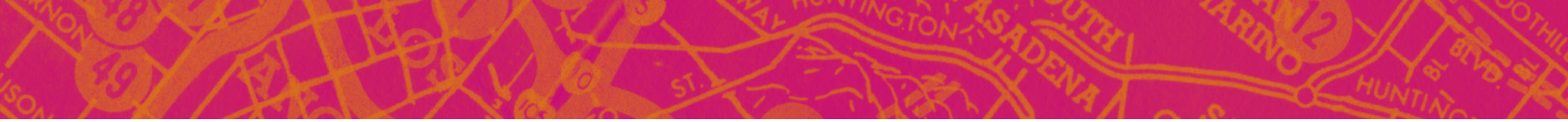
While many programs focus on low-income families and mothers, young adults have been a priority population in more than 20 guaranteed income pilots that proliferated particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹¹ However, few initiatives focus specifically on opportunity youth.

Emerging Models and Approaches

Several place-based and national efforts illustrate how cash transfer strategies are being adapted for young adults:

Hyperlocal guaranteed income pilots

The [New Orleans Guaranteed Income Program](#), run through the Mayor’s Office, provided \$350 per month to 125 young people ages 16-24 who were out of school and work between April 2022 and March 2023. Separately, the city’s Rooted School has [experimented](#) with cash to increase high school attendance through [The \\$50 Study](#).



[Metro United Way Louisville’s YALift!](#) program in Louisville, Kentucky, provided \$500 per month to 151 young people ages 18-24 in neighborhoods with concentrated poverty, pairing income support with community-based engagement.

MyPath-supported guaranteed income pilots

MyPath has supported six San Francisco Bay Area guaranteed income initiatives [since 2020](#) across Alameda, San Francisco, Santa Clara, and San Mateo counties.¹² The largest, [BEEM](#) (launched in 2022), serves Black young adults in low-income communities in San Francisco and Oakland.

The model combines guaranteed income with optional financial mentoring. Early results – with a National Institutes of Health-funded [evaluation](#) conducted by the University of California, San Francisco underway – suggest improvements in participants’ financial capability and confidence, as well as their physical and mental health.

Youth homelessness-focused cash strategies

Many pilots center young people experiencing homelessness or housing instability, as well as transition-age foster youth. These approaches recognize that while all young people need opportunities to build skills and assets, some face a much steeper climb toward stability.

Minnesota’s Homeless Youth Cash Stipend Pilot Project is a leading example. Authorized through 2023 legislation ([HF2008](#)), the state partnered with Youthprise, a Twin Cities-based intermediary and backbone convener to the Twin Cities Opportunity Youth Collaborative, to implement a youth-designed pilot serving 135 young people ages 18-24 for 24 months.


Participants receive:

- Monthly stipends aligned with local housing costs
- One-time housing support payments
- Optional supports such as financial coaching, housing navigation, education and employment services, and trauma-informed mentoring

Youthprise engaged community partners in 2024 to [provide](#) direct cash and optional youth-designed supports to young people in Hennepin County and the St. Louis County/Duluth area, as well as to members of the Bois Forte Band of Chippewa statewide¹³

The pilot is being evaluated through a randomized, controlled trial led by [Chapin Hall](#) at the University of Chicago, a national leader in research on youth homelessness and direct cash interventions. Youthprise and partners in the [Minnesota Financial Opportunity Coalition](#) are working with state lawmakers to expand the program in the future.

[Point Source Youth](#) is another national organization working to prevent and end youth homelessness, increasingly focused on direct cash strategies. Working in partnership with communities and young



leaders, they support locally adapted models that combine direct cash assistance with optional, youth-driven supports. Point Source Youth’s work emphasizes co-design with young people and has reached communities across the country, including several in the OYF network.

Blending income support with asset-building: Freedom Futures

In 2025, the [Georgia Resilience and Opportunity \(GRO Fund\)](#) launched *Freedom Futures*, a four-year pilot that pairs \$500 per month in guaranteed income with \$20,000 in investable capital.

Participants can use these funds for wealth-building goals such as homeownership, entrepreneurship, postsecondary education, or retirement savings. As GRO Fund’s Director of Programs Amit Khanduri describes it: “cash for today, with capital for tomorrow.”

The pilot is designed both to support participants’ economic mobility and to inform emerging policy [conversations](#) around [baby bonds](#) and early asset-building strategies.

Looking Ahead

These models signal a broader shift in the field: from focusing solely on financial knowledge and behavior toward addressing the underlying income and asset constraints that shape young people’s financial lives.

As policymakers explore large-scale strategies – including federally supported child savings accounts such as 530A “Trump Accounts,”¹⁴ which provide a \$1,000 seed investment at birth – there is growing opportunity to connect cash support today with long-term asset-building pathways.

📍 Beyond Models: Conditions That Shape This Work

In addition to the models above, financial capability efforts are shaped by broader conditions and shifts in the environments where young people live and work. Some factors, such as staff capacity, directly affect implementation. Others, including how young people learn about money and how work itself is changing, are trends to navigate. The following sections highlight several of these dynamics, which together shape the conditions in which financial capability efforts succeed and the ways they must continue to evolve.

Staff Supports

Across learning activities, one theme surfaced consistently: Staff financial well-being and capacity are foundational to effective implementation.

Programs that invest in staff through training, coaching, and supports for their own financial well-being see more consistent delivery, lower burnout rates, and sustained participant engagement.

Emerging practices include:

- Training staff as financial coaches, not just instructors
- Providing stipends or benefits that support staff financial stability
- Embedding trauma-informed approaches into staff development
- Creating peer learning spaces for practitioners

Leaders from organizations such as the [New Orleans Youth Alliance](#), [Workforce Professionals Training Institute](#), and [Rural LISC](#) emphasize that staff must be equipped to model healthy financial behaviors and navigate sensitive financial conversations with young people. This challenge is compounded by the reality that youth-serving professionals – particularly those with proximate lived experience – are often undercompensated in systems shaped by limited public and philanthropic investment. This reflects the broader experience of the social-sector workforce.¹⁵

Strengthening financial capability for young people ultimately depends on strengthening the conditions in which direct-service staff operate. Without attention to compensation, stability, and ongoing support for the workforce delivering these services, even well-designed models are unlikely to sustain impact over time. These dynamics point to a broader challenge: Financial capability efforts are embedded within wider systems of funding, policy, and workforce norms that shape how this work is valued and sustained.

Shifting Income Pathways and Financial Capability

Many young people, especially opportunity youth, navigate a range of income pathways beyond traditional employment, including platform-based gig work, creative and cultural production, and short-term contract roles. While these pathways differ, they often share common features: irregular income, unclear expectations, and limited access to benefits or protections.

[Research](#) on young gig workers highlights the prevalence of income volatility, lack of transparency in pay and work allocation, and limited access to traditional worker protections. Learnings from the [Youth Entrepreneurship Fund](#) emphasize the importance of structured support, mentorship, and experiential learning grounded in real economic activity.¹⁶ These pathways differ in important ways, but each requires young people to navigate financial decisions with less predictability and institutional support.

In these contexts, financial capability extends beyond budgeting or saving. It includes managing irregular income, understanding contracts, documenting earnings, and navigating power dynamics in work relationships. The [Trombone Shorty Foundation](#) in New Orleans, for example, connects young musicians to career pathways in performance, education, and the broader creative economy, pairing artistic development with financial capability and mentorship.

“Our intellectual property is such an integral part of our work in the creative economy. We help our young people understand how to negotiate opportunities. The specifics matter. For example, is a project adding a young artist as a collaborator where they can eventually get paid royalties? Or is it simply a work-for-hire gig?”

– **Ashley Shabankareh**, Director of Operations and Programs,
Trombone Shorty Foundation

These approaches reflect a broader shift toward helping young people understand not only how to manage money, but also how to define and retain the value of their work over time. As the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions launches a new partnership with the Trombone Shorty Foundation around scaling creative youth development, we are exploring future strategies to support the financial well-being of young creatives.

FinTok and the Digital Frontier

Young people are increasingly learning about money through social media, digital platforms, and emerging AI tools like chatbots. This creates both new opportunities and new risks.

These platforms can make financial content more accessible and relatable, but they also expose young people to misinformation, predatory products, and high-risk financial behaviors – including speculative investments such as cryptocurrency, which has seen higher levels of engagement among young adults compared to other age groups.¹⁷ Financial capability efforts must expand to emphasize digital discernment and critical evaluation of financial information.

In addition to peer-driven content, a growing number of independent educators are translating complex financial and economic concepts into accessible formats across platforms – from newsletters and social media to podcasts and short-form video.¹⁸

For practitioners, this raises new priorities:

- Supporting critical thinking and digital discernment in how young people engage with financial information online
- Vetting tools, platforms, and content used in programming
- Engaging young people and trusted community partners in creating quality, relevant financial content
- Potentially exploring responsible uses of AI that might expand access to coaching and support

These dynamics are not entirely new – but they are intensified in digital environments where young people are exposed to a wide range of conflicting financial advice.

As one leader noted:

“Dave Ramsey, Tori Dunlap (Financial Feminist), Suze Orman, Ramit Sethi... There’s just no shortage of voices in the world of personal finance, and sometimes they conflict or don’t seem like a good fit in the communities we work in. As a coach, there’s no expectation to adopt one approach over the others. You need to understand the options and figure out what works for the person in front of you. For example, youth respond much better when financial coaching incorporates their lived experiences and uses a trauma-informed, culturally relevant approach.

Our best partners aren’t just teaching budgeting. They’re working with people to deconstruct what they’ve been told to do to become financially successful and then build a plan together that’s both achievable and personally meaningful.”

– **Julianne Dunn**, Senior Program Officer –
Workforce & Financial Prosperity, Rural LISC

AI and Uncertainty in Work and Decision-Making

Advances in artificial intelligence are introducing new uncertainty into how young people navigate education, career pathways, and financial decision-making. While the long-term impacts remain unclear, there is growing recognition that AI may reshape entry-level work, skill demands, and the relationship between education and employment.

For young people – particularly those already navigating complex transitions – this uncertainty reinforces the importance of adaptable decision-making and access to trusted guidance. Multiple practitioners and young leaders emphasized that career navigation decisions are inherently financial decisions.

While these shifts extend beyond financial capability alone, they underscore the need for systems that can support young people in making informed economic decisions in rapidly changing environments.



Conclusion

On one level, financial education resources for young adults in the U.S. have never been more accessible. The expansion of K-12 financial education requirements and the growth of digital tools have increased exposure to financial concepts across the country.

At the same time, young people are navigating a more complex and uncertain financial landscape – marked by rising costs of living, increasing fraud and scams, rapid changes in technology, and growing skepticism about long-term economic stability.

This tension underscores a central insight of this work: financial capability cannot be built through information alone. It is developed through real-world experiences with income, relationships with trusted older adults and peers, and access to systems that are designed to support – rather than undermine – financial well-being. From summer jobs to YouthBuild programs, and from local partnerships to cash transfer strategies, financial education is most effective when it is embedded in the systems where young people live, work, and make decisions about their futures.

For practitioners, systems leaders, and funders, the opportunity is clear: invest in approaches that integrate financial capability into workforce pathways, strengthen enabling conditions like staff support, and expand access to the resources young people need to build stability and pursue long-term goals.

Done well, this work positions young people not only to navigate financial systems, but to shape their own economic futures – and contribute to stronger families, communities, and a more equitable economy.

Contributors

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- 1 Data are drawn from comparable survey items in the (forthcoming) 2025 OYF Evaluation and a 2022 standalone survey on financial well-being. See Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions, [Financial Well-Being and Wealth-Building for Opportunity Youth](#) (2022).
- 2 MyPath and YouthBuild USA, [Advancing Financial Capability for Opportunity Youth Through a National Youth Workforce System](#) (2023).
- 3 See, for example: Urban Institute, [Building Trust in the Financial System is Key to Closing the Racial Wealth Gap](#) (2023); and Urban Institute, [Consumers With Low Incomes Often Distrust Mainstream Financial Services: New Data Shed Light on the Reasons](#) (2025).
- 4 The National Endowment for Financial Education tracks K-12 financial legislation, providing analysis and maintaining an [interactive state legislative policy map](#). Next Gen Personal Finance maintains a similar [dashboard](#). As of June 10, 2026, 30 states guaranteed a standalone personal finance course for all high schoolers, with 10 designated by NGPF as “fully implemented” and 20 “in progress.”
- 5 CFE Fund supports Summer Jobs Connect programs in over 55 cities and counties across the United States, including the following communities that are also part of the OYF network: [Atlanta](#), [Boston](#), [Chicago](#), [Denver](#), [Detroit](#), [Hartford](#), [Houston](#), [Los Angeles](#), [Minneapolis](#), [Newark](#), [New York](#), [Philadelphia](#), [Saint Paul](#), [San Jose](#), and [San Francisco](#).
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- 6 Chicago Department of Family and Support Services, [Power in Partnership: Summer Youth Impact Report](#) (2025).
- 7 San Francisco Office of the Treasurer & Tax Collector and MyPath, [The Next Generation of Banking Starts Here: A Guide to Expanding Noncustodial Accounts for Youth Financial Inclusion](#) (2025).
- 8 Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco, [Boosting the Power of Youth Paychecks: Integrating Financial Capability Into Youth Employment Programs](#) (2016). Building on an initial pilot of MyPath Savings in 2011-2012, the 2013-2015 MyPath Savings study included 375 low-income young people ages 16-21 participating in youth workforce and employment programs operated by 10 nonprofits in partnership with San Francisco’s Department of Children, Youth, and Their Families. A quasi-experimental design found increases in banking, saving, and confidence to carry out financial tasks, as well as slightly stronger outcomes among young people whose program sites utilized peer facilitators.
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- 9 Prudential, [Unlocking Opportunity Around the World: Insights and Lessons from the Largest Private Sector Commitment to Opportunity Youth](#) (2026).
- 10 Results for America, [Guaranteed Income](#) (2025). This section of the Economic Mobility Catalog, updated in August 2025, provides a current synthesis of approaches and evidence.

- 11 The Guaranteed Income Community of Practice convened by Economic Security Project tracks this through a [dashboard of pilots](#) (accessed February 27, 2026).
- 12 MyPath, [2024 Annual Report](#) (2025).
- 13 Minnesota Department of Human Services, [Homeless Youth Cash Stipend Pilot Project – Annual Report](#) (2025).
- 14 For more on baby bonds as an early wealth-building strategy and on the implementation of 530A accounts, see this December 2025 [blog post](#) and other resources from the [Aspen Institute Financial Security Program](#).
- 15 The National Council on Nonprofits' [2023 Nonprofit Workforce Survey](#) found that two-thirds of nonprofits report that budget constraints and insufficient funds affect their ability to recruit and retain employees, with salary competition the most frequently cited factor limiting the nonprofit workforce.
See also: Financial Health Network, [The Financial Health of Nonprofit Workers: Understanding Their Financial Lives and Workplace Benefits](#) (2025).
- 16 Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions and Business Ownership Program at the Aspen Institute, [Creating Entrepreneurship Pathways for Opportunity Youth: Early Experiences from the Youth Opportunity Fund Grantees](#) (2019).
- 17 Northwestern Mutual's 2026 [Planning and Progress Study](#) found that 80% of Gen Z are investing in or considering investing in high-risk/speculative assets like cryptocurrencies, prediction markets, or sports betting, compared to 73% of adults generally.
Additionally, a 2023 study found that while 56% of Gen Z Americans ages 18-25 report owning some investments, 19% are invested only in cryptocurrency and/or non-fungible tokens (NFTs). See FINRA Investor Education Foundation, [Gen Z and Investing: Social Media, Crypto, FOMO, and Family](#) (2023).
- 18 Examples of financial educators leveraging these channels to produce and distribute high-quality resources with relevance for young adults include [Kyla Scanlon](#) (author of *In This Economy?: How Money and Markets Really Work*); [Paco de Leon](#) (author of *Finance for the People: Getting a Grip on Your Finances*); and [Yanelly Espinal](#) (author of *Mind Your Money* and director of educational outreach at Next Gen Personal Finance).
More broadly, however, much "influencer" content poses serious consumer risks including hidden marketing, exaggerated expertise, inappropriate or poor-quality information, misinformation, and scams.
See: CFA Institute, [The Finfluencer Appeal: Investing in the Age of Social Media](#) (2024), and FINRA Investor Education Foundation, [Finfluencer Followers and Social Media Scrollers: The Profile, Pattern, and Pitfalls of Social-Media-Informed Retail Investors](#) (2026).