



Building Local: Lessons from Massachusetts Communities on Reengaging Opportunity Youth



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	I
Core Components of the OY-Serving Sector	4
Secondary Education	5
New Approaches to Learning	5
School- and District-Level Practices	5
Dropout Recovery and Reengagement	6
High School Equivalency	7
Higher Education	8
High School to Postsecondary Transition	8
Persistence to a Postsecondary Degree	9
Workforce	11
Employers	12
Government	13
Public Services	13
Child Welfare and Criminal Justice	14
Collaboration Between Government Agencies	15
Community	15
Connectors	17
Benefits and Challenges of Connecting Organizations	18
Recommendations for Strengthening the OY Sector	20
Rethinking an “OY System”	20
Prevention	21
Intervention	23
Retention	26
Increasing Retention by Promoting Stability	27
Building Connections Across the OY Sector	28
Connection with a College or Career Pathway	29
Conclusion	30
A Framework for Analyzing the OY Sector	31
Endnotes	36



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Introduction

Meeting the needs of the opportunity youth population—that is, young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are insufficiently connected to school and employment—is a national challenge that demands a local response. Nationally, the rate of youth disconnection was 11.5% in 2017, representing approximately 4.5 million (or one in nine) young people who are not on track to access an educational or career pathway.¹ Experiencing disconnection at a young age has consequences for both the youth themselves (lower lifetime earnings, a higher likelihood of social isolation) and for society (squandered potential, the direct costs of public services).²

Yet while the scale of the issue is large, the remedies tend to come from individual organizations working in concert with local schools, government offices, and employers. Opportunity youth (OY) are, by definition, disconnected from major public and private institutions, often turning to smaller community providers for assistance with navigating systems and accessing resources. With so many independent components, it can be difficult for local leaders in the OY field and beyond to know how to begin building a more aligned system of supports.

This blueprint intends to serve as a starting point for communities looking to address the needs of opportunity youth (OY). In seeking to move toward a more streamlined and effective model for serving OY, it is helpful to think of three phases:

- **Prevention:** Keeping students on track to achieve postsecondary success, including efforts to encourage high school completion, a smooth transition to college, and a connection to a career offering a family-sustaining wage.
- **Intervention:** Helping young people already disconnected from public systems and the workplace access and participate in education- or career-focused resources and opportunities, which may vary widely.
- **Retention:** Ensuring that youth persist once they forge a connection with an intervening program or institution and are able to confront any obstacles on the way to (and through) a college or career pathway.

Defining the OY Population

The term “opportunity youth” is often used to refer to young people aged 16-24 who are neither in school nor employed. The term may be expanded to include youth who are “insufficiently attached” to school or employment to capture a fuller range of circumstances, such as young people technically enrolled in school but with a poor record of attendance and academic progress.³ For the purposes of this report, we focus on needs and barriers common to a broad range of youth who find themselves insufficiently connected to institutions and support systems necessary to achieve long-term post-secondary and life success.

According to the 2017 American Community Survey, the percentage of OY within the youth population of Massachusetts was 7.1%. Disconnection rates for Black and Latino youth are higher than for White youth, with 11.4% of Black and 13.5% of Latino youth experiencing disconnection compared to 6.4% of White youth.⁴

Opportunity youth are more likely than their peers to have been raised in or near poverty, and they are more likely to be English language learners, high school dropouts, court-involved, and homeless or in foster care.⁵ Additionally, national data indicate that youth with a disability are more than twice as likely to be part of the opportunity youth population than their non-disabled peers.⁶

These three phases occasionally overlap—for instance, a young person who dropped out of high school and reenrolled in an alternative education program as an intervention may benefit from a dual focus on retention (e.g., support with identifying child care during the school day) and prevention from future disconnection (e.g., assistance with college registration and financial aid). This complex and non-linear path mirrors the trajectory that OY often experience as they navigate personal and professional challenges. These challenges are often daunting, as many OY grapple with the effects of poverty, court involvement, homelessness, and inequitable systems that can make it more difficult to access and stay connected with educational and workplace opportunities. See the text box for more information on the definition and composition of the opportunity youth population.

Yet although OY confront an array of life challenges, they also possess significant inherent strengths. Many OY are highly motivated by aspirations to personal, academic, financial, and professional success, often grounded in the desire to serve as a role model and provider for family members.⁷ They are optimistic and goal-oriented: according to a 2011 survey of more than 600 opportunity youth, “73% feel very confident or hopeful about achieving their goals, 85% want a good career and job,” and “65% have a goal to finish high school or college and know they can achieve it.”⁸ Moreover, OY have a strong sense of personal responsibility for their lives, acknowledging any past challenges and understanding that they play a lead role in shaping their future direction.⁹ They are eager to access resources that will help them get and stay connected to college and career pathways, such as a peer network, mentors from the academic and business communities, and job opportunities that will allow them to earn money while they prepare for a degree.¹⁰

These resources are part of a broad set of supports that comprise the OY-serving sector. The following sections present a summary of each of the core components of this sector, including a focus on the connective tissue that holds together these various parts, as well as a number of example programs from local cities. The blueprint then lays out a set of recommendations for bolstering the three phases of the OY service model (prevention, intervention, and retention). It concludes with a framework for analyzing the OY sector that provides city leaders an entry point into evaluating and improving the services they offer to opportunity youth.

Methodology

To complete this blueprint, Rennie Center researchers first undertook a thorough review of existing resources and reports on serving opportunity youth. Having gained understanding of effective practices for addressing the needs of OY, we conducted a preliminary landscape scan of local cities to identify a few candidates for deeper study. Our analysis looked at indicators including academic achievement, mobility, retention, postsecondary plans, and student demographics, along with the current number and variety of OY-serving programs.

Based on this analysis, we selected five cities for closer examination: Boston, Brockton, Chelsea, Lawrence, and Lynn. Our researchers reached out to contacts in each of these cities to gain a better understanding of the different organizations and institutions that are working with youth populations (particularly OY) in each city. In these interviews, researchers used a snowball sampling method, asking each interviewee to recommend (and in some cases, make referrals to) other potential interviewees. Through these conversations with local leaders, we were able to see how various cities operationalize the practices we had read about and develop recommendations for how cities in the region can build a more effective OY sector. The charts below show selected demographic information on students enrolled in the public school district in each of the five cities.

	Enrollment	Student Demographics			
		African American	Asian	Hispanic	White
Boston	51,433	30.9%	8.9%	42.1%	14.6%
Brockton	16,349	59.4%	2.0%	15.8%	17.7%
Chelsea	6,088	5.0%	1.0%	86.6%	6.5%
Lawrence	13,658	1.3%	1.2%	93.4%	3.7%
Lynn	15,751	9.2%	8.5%	63%	15.4%

	Out-of-School Suspension Rate	Postsecondary Plans			
		2-Year College	4-Year College	Work	Other/Unknown
Boston	2.1%	17.2%	35.4%	6.4%	18.2%
Brockton	7.1%	29.9%	24.7%	5.6%	25.7%
Chelsea	3.5%	38.2%	21.3%	11.6%	13.3%
Lawrence	4.9%	42.0%	16.1%	7.3%	22.2%
Lynn	6.9%	40.1%	23.6%	14.4%	6.6%

Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. 2018-2019 School and District Profiles.



Photo from LEAP for Education

Core Components of the OY-Serving Sector

Serving opportunity youth requires a mix of discrete systems or institutions as well as “connective tissue” to bring them together. The sections below examine each of these components focusing on six different parts of the OY-serving sector:

- Secondary education
- Higher education
- Government
- Workforce
- Community
- Connectors

Each section highlights effective practices that can help prevent disconnection, offer interventions once young people are disconnected, and promote retention up to and through the process of completing a college or career pathway. They also offer examples of local programs or institutions that are applying these practices to meet the needs of OY.

Across all six components, a few cross-cutting themes emerge from the research literature. First, it is critical to build young people’s resilience in the face of obstacles, in part by managing their expectations about how long it may take to reach their goals.¹¹ Service providers can help equip OY with the self-confidence and practical skills to approach obstacles as problems to be solved rather than reasons to disengage. Working with OY also requires an explicit and continual focus on building supportive relationships. And because OY come from diverse backgrounds and have frequently experienced trauma, relationship-building must be grounded in culturally responsive and healing-centered practices.¹² These attributes of effective programming apply whether the service provider is working within a school system, college, government agency, employer, or elsewhere in the community, benefiting anyone working with and alongside opportunity youth.

Before examining the OY-serving sector, a note on terminology: While we refer in this report to an “opportunity youth” population, not all service providers see themselves as serving this specific population, or even recognize this as a discrete subsector of the youth population. The service providers we spoke to frequently described themselves as working with youth

or young adults, but this term could encompass teenagers as young as thirteen. On the other hand, services for OY sometimes overlapped with services for adults, for example in high school equivalency programs^A and emergency shelters for homeless individuals. In place of “opportunity youth,” providers occasionally used other terms and definitions to describe their target populations, such as “transition-age youth,” and they did not always specify that services are available specifically to youth seeking to connect with college or career pathways.

Therefore, while we will refer throughout this blueprint to opportunity youth (OY), the actual population that benefits from the services described below may be broader and less targeted than this definition would imply. Furthermore, when discussing services available to youth in college or career settings, we will describe young people as OY who have experienced disconnection in the past, even though the young people using those services are currently connected to education and/or employment.

➤ Secondary Education

Preventing disconnection from college and career pathways begins with keeping students in school through high school graduation. While reasons for dropping out differ from student to student, they tend to fall into three categories: academics (e.g., missed too much work, didn’t find content relevant); lack of connection with others in the building (both adults and other students); and external challenges (e.g., family pressure to get a job, pregnancy).¹³ Schools can use a variety of strategies to help address these challenges and keep students in school, including new approaches to learning as well as changes to school- and district-level practice.

NEW APPROACHES TO LEARNING

- **Applied learning:** Not all young people learn best within a traditional academic classroom. Schools can use a variety of strategies to promote relevant, applied learning, such as expanded learning opportunities that blend in-school experiences with community-based activities; project-based learning within the classroom; vocational-technical courses; and internships or job shadowing experiences.
- **Real-world skills:** Opportunity youth often have to take on adult roles and responsibilities for themselves and/or within their families at a young age.¹⁴ They benefit from opportunities to build their financial literacy and learn about skills such as budgeting and building credit.
- **Career preparation:** Youth from low-income backgrounds often have limited opportunities to explore career options, as they are less likely to come in contact with individuals from a variety of careers. According to a YouthTruth survey, only 36% of high school students report that they have received counseling on future career possibilities;¹⁵ which makes it difficult to identify a useful postsecondary pathway. Schools should build in more opportunities for students to engage in career exploration, starting even before high school—and ideally integrate more comprehensive methods of preparing for the future, such as individualized learning plans^B or required post-graduation planning.¹⁶

SCHOOL- AND DISTRICT-LEVEL PRACTICES

- **Early warning indicator system:** Schools should develop data systems that allow them to identify students at risk of dropping out, set goals for reaching these students, and monitor progress to improve student outcomes.¹⁷ In particular, data systems and protocols for using data should focus on promoting a successful transition from 8th to 9th grade, as research indicates that earning passing grades in 9th grade is critical to staying on-track for graduation.¹⁸

A “High school equivalency” is the general term for an alternative to a high school diploma. In Massachusetts, individuals can earn a high school equivalency by taking one of two exams, the GED or the HiSET.

B Individualized Learning Plans (ILPs) are a long-term and comprehensive approach to education and career planning. An ILP is both a document, which records students’ academic and career plans to better assess their readiness for college and careers, and a process, which helps youth self-define their career and life goals. For more, see the Rennie Center’s report “Charting a Path to the Future through Individualized Learning Plans,” available at www.renniecenter.org/sites/default/files/2017-01/ILPs.pdf.

- **Alternatives to exclusionary discipline:** Suspended or expelled students are more likely to disengage from school, be held back, or drop out, and they are more likely to be involved in the juvenile justice system.¹⁹ Schools should actively involve themselves in dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline by putting in place alternatives to exclusionary discipline, including substance abuse recovery services for students suspended for drug-related offenses,²⁰ and avoiding court referrals for youth with poor attendance records.
- **Additional options for overage, under-credited students:** Public schools often have limited options available to serve overage and under-credited youth, such as young people who move to the United States at age 17 or 18 (often with limited English and interrupted formal education). These students age out of the system at 21 and have limited educational options beyond that age. Schools may consider in-district or regional alternative schools targeted to this population and work with adult education providers to promote a smooth connection between schools and community-based options.

A number of the strategies described above can be implemented in any educational setting, but alternative education programming—which frequently offers flexible scheduling, multiple means to earn credit, differentiated instruction, and personalized learning—can offer more customized options for students at risk of dropping out.²¹ However, when schools refer students to alternative education programs, they must ensure that there are enough program seats for students to make a smooth and immediate transition into the new learning setting—or risk that students will disengage while they wait for an appropriate placement to become available.

Making school more personalized, relevant, and welcoming can help address many of the main reasons why students disengage. However, students may also drop out because of life challenges that have little to do with what goes on within the school building. To prevent disconnection, schools can play a more active role in connecting students and families to services, such as by making referrals to outside agencies (food banks, homeless shelters, mental health providers, etc.). As exemplified by the City Connects model of integrated student support, having a single point of contact within a school to help coordinate these supports and maintain relationships with community organizations is one method that has proven effective at raising academic achievement, promoting higher attendance, and reducing dropout.²² Schools may also consider locating supports on-site wherever possible, as with community health centers located within high schools or behavioral health supports offered during in- or after- school programs.

DROPOUT RECOVERY AND REENGAGEMENT

If students disengage in school despite these preventative strategies, schools and districts can intervene to reconnect youth with educational pathways through dropout recovery and reengagement. This process has four main stages:

1. **Outreach:** Using data from schools, reengagement staff identify students who have stopped attending school and reach out to them through letters, phone calls, and door-knocking.
2. **Intake:** For students who show interest in reengagement, staff focus on building a personal connection and understanding those students' interests and goals. Staff often include coaches from the community who share similar backgrounds and experiences to the youth they engage, allowing them to have a different relationship with the young people than a school principal or teacher would have.
3. **Placement:** Based on the students' aspirations and personal circumstances, staff work with them to identify an appropriate placement. This could be a placement in a traditional high school, an alternative educational setting, or a high school equivalency program, where students can work toward earning a high school credential in preparation for taking the next steps toward college or career.
4. **Transition and persistence support:** Staff follow up with students over time to ensure that they are satisfied with their placement and making adequate progress toward a high school credential.²³

While these steps can take place in any school or educational setting, it is helpful to offer a centralized location where youth can seek opportunities to reengage, such as the Re-Engagement Center in Boston or the Pathways Center in Brockton. Regardless of where they are located, it is helpful for reengagement staff to make referrals not just to an academic program but also to wraparound service providers who can help address students' out-of-school needs.

HIGH SCHOOL EQUIVALENCY

A final element of the secondary school landscape for OY is high school equivalency (HSE) programs that prepare students to take an equivalency exam such as the GED or HiSET. Youth without a high school credential have limited options to earn a living wage. Earning a high school credential opens up many potential job opportunities, making HSE programs a critical piece of the pathway for OY without a high school diploma. And while earning a high school credential is of value in itself, some HSE programs (referred to as HSE-plus programs) also support students to look beyond the equivalency exam at college and career options. Successful HSE-plus programs offer four key types of support: academic development, wraparound support, career preparation, and postsecondary transitions. Though these support systems are not equally well-developed (in particular, postsecondary transitions are often a challenge for programs), together they help young people gain the skills and confidence they need to pursue their next steps.²⁴



Reconnect and Thrive: Brockton Public Schools' Pathways Center

For students in Brockton Public Schools seeking an alternative to a traditional high school experience—or for those who have already dropped out of school—the Pathways Center at Edison Academy offers the chance to connect with a range of options inside and outside the school district. The Pathways Center reaches out to young people who have disengaged from school, then works with them to figure out the best fit, which could include independent study and small group tutoring at the center, placement at one of several alternative high schools within the district, or online credit recovery. Referrals can be made to other agencies for students looking for a high school equivalency program or career training. The Pathways Center works closely with a MassHire Career Center and maintains strong connections to a number of local community organizations, offering a variety of choices for young people seeking their next step.

➤ Higher Education

Accessing higher education can be a challenge for opportunity youth who are navigating the enrollment and application process, especially since many OY are the first in their families to attend college. Even for students who are successful in this process, staying connected to higher education can be difficult. Researchers have identified a number of factors that put students at greater risk of leaving postsecondary programs without a degree—delayed entry into college, part-time enrollment, balancing school with full-time employment, lack of family financial support, having children of one's own—many of which apply to individual opportunity youth. OY might also face difficult psychological barriers, including pressure from family members who do not see higher education as a worthwhile endeavor and their own lack of self-confidence in their ability to succeed. This section highlights some of the strategies that can help OY during the transition from high school to postsecondary and support their persistence toward a degree.

HIGH SCHOOL TO POSTSECONDARY TRANSITION

Laying the groundwork for a smooth transition into higher education needs to start early, so that youth are equipped with the tools and supports they need to bridge from high school or a HSE program directly into a postsecondary program. The following strategies can help students at this critical transition point:

- **Prepare youth (and their families) about what to expect from college:** In a conversation about OY college success, one college advisor from a Boston-based nonprofit described four main “pillars” to support college preparation: academic readiness; college knowledge readiness (understanding how a campus operates and how to access needed supports); career readiness (recognizing one's reasons for attending college and selecting particular courses/extracurricular activities); and personal readiness (identifying both potential obstacles, such as child care, and supports, such as a network of friends or family). Counselors and advisors—from inside or outside the school system—can work with youth to ensure that they have sufficient background knowledge and/or self-knowledge in each of these areas to thrive once on campus.
- **Bring the admissions and enrollment process to students (or vice versa):** Rather than expecting students to complete admissions and enrollment processes on their own, high schools and HSE preparation programs can work through the process with students, helping them complete application forms and apply for financial aid. Colleges can arrange completion workshops for local high school students, bringing them to campus by bus and moving them through all stages of the process over the course of a single school day, so that students are registered for classes by the time they leave.
- **Consider early college models to build students' awareness and confidence:** Early college models, which allow students to take college courses while still in high school and earn both high school and college credit simultaneously, can substantially ease the transition from high school to college. Early college participants are exposed to college-level work—allowing them to envision themselves succeeding in higher education²⁵—and early college programs located on a college campus are useful for familiarizing students with college-going routines. Early college programming is particularly beneficial for first-generation college students and others who receive limited support from friends and family when setting college expectations.²⁶ Dual enrollment programs for students in HSE preparation programs provide similar benefits for OY seeking a high school equivalency.
- **Offer expert assistance with financial aid planning:** For aspiring college students, the cost of college is one of the biggest hurdles to accessing higher education. Schools, HSE preparation programs, and community-based college bridging programs can help ease concerns about this process by offering workshops and individual consultations with financial aid experts. Such actions can direct students to resources and help them understand both initial and ongoing expectations related to financial aid and ensure that young people are prepared to get the most value from their investment (e.g., by selecting courses that lead to a degree with labor-market value).



Given their ease of access, flexible scheduling, and relatively low cost, community colleges are often ideal postsecondary providers for OY who must balance college with work and family obligations. These institutions can be strong partners to high schools and HSE preparation programs as they carry out the strategies listed above—although schools and community-based organizations preparing students for higher education may need to work on overcoming lingering stigmas about community college. As one community college admissions officer put it, “We’re not the back-up option, we’re the more affordable option.”

PERSISTENCE TO A POSTSECONDARY DEGREE

Of course, the application and enrollment processes are just the start of the college experience. All students—but opportunity youth in particular—benefit from support systems that can help make higher education easier to navigate, thereby improving rates of college persistence and degree attainment. Some of the highest-leverage strategies include the following:

- **College coaches:** Coaching, whether offered through the college or local community-based organizations (CBOs), represents one of the most significant forms of support to help OY succeed in college. Many CBO-based coaches begin working with students while in high school and move with them into college, meeting monthly or more to offer assistance and encouragement. For OY who take a less linear path into higher education, coaching may be provided by a community-based college bridging program or by the college itself. In all cases, a strong relationship is key, as it leads to a deeper understanding of student needs and interests. Coaches can help students navigate new situations, build their networks, and address any personal or academic challenges that may arise—although they also need to know when to step back and let students make their own decisions about the future.
- **Easier access to information:** Whether or not students have access to a college coach, postsecondary institutions should streamline the process of accessing information and assistance on campus. In particular, there should be more transparency (or, ideally, a set of reminders and check-ins) around financial aid requirements and deadlines. Students should be able to get clear guidance about financial or academic requirements online and have the ability to complete simple functions without visiting multiple offices.

- **Learning communities:** Students benefit from peer support systems that extend beyond the classroom. Some schools group students into learning communities, which meet during students' first year to learn about topics such as college navigation, career planning, and time management. In this way, colleges can not only communicate key information to incoming students but also ensure that they have a useful peer network.²⁷ Similarly, near-peer mentors can offer guidance to students who are just beginning to navigate a particular institution or academic program.
- **Course progressions that lead to degree attainment:** Guiding students through the process of course selection must strike a delicate balance: students need to access a series of courses that ultimately leads to a degree, but without locking them into a rigid series of classes that precludes other alternatives should they change their mind or encounter obstacles. Colleges can take steps in this direction by providing sample course pathways, thinking about how to build sets of core classes that can branch off into multiple areas, and articulating/monitoring student progress toward intermediate outcomes on the path to postsecondary completion.²⁸ They must also continue to offer innovative solutions for students to build developmental skills without paying for non-credit-bearing developmental coursework (such as courses that blend remedial and non-remedial content).
- **Outreach to students regarding career resources and experiences:** While many colleges offer a range of career services, such as job fairs and career advisors, OY may not take full advantage of these opportunities. Research indicates that first-generation college students are less likely than their peers to attend career-related events.²⁹ Postsecondary institutions should think critically about how to make students more aware of these services, including by offering opportunities for career exploration during courses. Institutions should offer more credit-bearing or paid work experiences (such as internships and work-study programs) that link with defined career tracks.

This list only scratches the surface of what can be done to support OY and other first-generation students as they seek a postsecondary degree. Other ideas include encouraging students to become more involved with on-campus activities to build their connectivity to the institution; offering more flexible and accessible coursework (such as summer, online, and self-paced classes); and adapting the K-12 model of dropout reengagement to better track and reengage with students who have stopped attending courses.

Finally, students' personal and non-academic needs can be a significant barrier to completing a postsecondary degree. A 2018 survey of college students found that 43% of 2-year college students had experienced food insecurity in the 30 days prior to survey completion, and 46% had experienced housing insecurity, with 12% experiencing homelessness during that time.³⁰ Previous studies confirmed that nearly one-third of students facing these conditions were both employed and receiving financial aid, indicating that these sources of income alone are insufficient to prevent hunger and homelessness.³¹ To address these and other significant life challenges that disproportionately affect OY, institutions offer a range of resources, often housed in one-stop shops that can assist with referrals and guidance:

- Campus food pantries
- On-campus shower and laundry facilities
- Support with tax filings and health insurance waivers
- Cheap or free passes for public transportation
- Improved access to benefit programs such as SNAP
- Low-cost child care (sometimes provided by early education students)

Supporting Students, On and Off Campus: Bunker Hill Community College

The largest community college in Massachusetts, Bunker Hill Community College (BHCC) is highly attuned to the academic and non-academic needs of its diverse student population. BHCC meets the needs of OY through multiple strategies, including transition and acceleration efforts to integrate OYs into college life academically, a social and academic support structure that includes intrusive advising, and intensive efforts to ensure basic needs are met through the Single Stop Office. Single Stop USA is an initiative that connects students with government programs such as SNAP, provides access to a mobile food pantry, and offers financial counseling as well as support with taxes, legal issues, and health insurance questions.

Although higher education, unlike K-12 education, is not subject to a federal mandate that all institutions have an identified homeless liaison, Massachusetts is in the final stages of planning an initiative that will name a single point of contact (SPOC) at each public college and university. Starting this fall, the aim will be to ensure a warm hand-off between high school and college, with K-12 homeless liaisons reaching out directly to college-based SPOCs to streamline the transition process for individual students.³² Finally, institutions of higher education should maintain a pool of flexible funding that can be provided to students facing unexpected expenses that would otherwise derail their progress toward a degree.

Workforce

Opportunity youth participating in the workforce are primarily interacting directly with employers. To get a fuller picture of how OY engage with this sector, it is useful to include another key component that technically falls within the “Government” category: MassHire. MassHire brings together all elements of the Massachusetts Workforce Development System, including 29 MassHire Career Centers that serve as a “front door for jobseekers, career-changers, and businesses.”³³ For opportunity youth who may struggle to gain access to employment opportunities given limited professional networks, MassHire can be a major source of support and referrals. Because MassHire Career Centers serve two audiences—jobseekers and employers—they also play an important role in identifying and translating the needs of each constituency.

This is especially true in the North Shore Youth Career Center in Lynn, which is specifically focused on serving young people. This site aims to better serve youth by offering a welcoming, relaxed environment that tones down the bureaucratic aspects of the process. For instance, when youth come in to the Career Center and go through the intake process, staff try to avoid intimidating them or pushing them out by asking too many questions up front.

All MassHire Career Centers provide comprehensive support to jobseekers, inclusive of OY, including assistance with searching for open positions, writing resumes and cover letters, making referrals to local employers or educational institutions, and offering financial guidance. They also administer summer jobs programs for youth that offer a supportive environment for young people to pick up job training and workplace skills they might not access elsewhere. MassHire Career Centers receive federal funding through the Workforce Innovation & Opportunity Act (WIOA) to provide programming to disconnected youth through provider partners from around the region. Under the law, three-quarters of all youth-focused WIOA funds must be used to work with out-of-school youth, with at least 20% set aside for “work experience activities such as summer jobs, pre-apprenticeship, on-the-job training, and internships.”³⁴ Another requirement of WIOA funding is that MassHire Career Centers offer on-site workshops and training activities from the Department of Transitional Services, helping bring together multiple government agencies in one place to better meet the comprehensive needs of jobseekers.

EMPLOYERS

Although MassHire Career Centers help make connections between OY and the workforce, employers are truly at the core of the workforce opportunities available to youth. Employers play multiple roles within the OY-serving sector:

- **Offering exposure to workplace practices and norms:** Because many OY have limited opportunities for career exploration in their school careers, they benefit greatly from chances to experience a structured employment experience (such as internships and job shadows), or from events that let them learn more about the workplace (such as tours and employer panels).
- **Refining career programming that prepares youth for work:** Employers can speak to the technical and “soft” skills that youth need in order to succeed in the workplace, helping to inform and improve the training models that service providers deliver to youth.
- **Offering paid employment to opportunity youth:** Perhaps most importantly, employers can make jobs available to youth, ideally helping them earn a wage that promotes family stability and offering opportunities for upward advancement and skill development.

Yet despite the many benefits, engaging employers in conversations on opportunity youth is a constant challenge for those working in the field. Employers are often less focused on youth development than they are on business development, seeking to hire employees who will meet their needs without substantial investment in onboarding and support. OY may struggle to compete against jobseekers with more (or more recent) credentials and work experiences, who represent more of a “sure bet” for employers.

The difficulty of engaging employers holds true in cities of all sizes, though for somewhat different reasons. A large city like Boston, which boasts massive corporate headquarters and emerging enterprises, also attracts a deep pool of talent from all around the country. This can cause employers to overlook the homegrown talent within the city. In smaller cities like Brockton, Chelsea, Lawrence, and Lynn, the scale of local businesses tends to be smaller. Therefore, service providers often focus on convincing employers to hire just one or two individual OY at a time. This requires both a substantial investment in time and a deep personal network within the local business community; it also makes it more difficult to generate long-term or systemic involvement by employers in the OY sector.

To promote deeper engagement by employers, it is useful to refocus the conversation on OY from one primarily centered on human services and education to one grounded in the labor market and economic development, areas where businesses are more likely to play a leading role. OY-serving organizations can also seek to partner with business and trade organizations, government leaders, and the philanthropic community, which may be able to use their connections within the business community to promote greater employer engagement. One starting point for both of these strategies is to survey local employers to gain insight into their hiring needs. These results, when shared with business leaders and others, can lead to a broader conversation about developing a workforce that aligns with employer demand.

Beyond the broader conversation about employer involvement in the OY-serving sector, a few key strategies can help opportunity youth access and thrive in employment opportunities:

- **Rethink barriers to hiring that exclude OY:** Employers should examine job descriptions to ensure that they are not including unnecessary requirements for particular credentials (e.g., bachelor’s degrees). When possible, they should eliminate explicit or implicit barriers to employment for youth with criminal records, especially for minor offenses.
- **Train in-office mentors to support OY:** Just as a college coach can help OY navigate an unfamiliar campus, office mentors can offer guidance and encouragement with understanding workplace norms. They can also help young people build their professional networks.

Building Pathways: East Boston Neighborhood Health Center

The Education and Training Institute at the East Boston Neighborhood Health Center (EBNHC) hosts career-focused programming for current and future health center employees, including a program that trains youth to become Certified Nursing Assistants (CNAs). In 2011, EBNHC received a grant from the Mayor’s Office of Jobs and Community Services and partnered with Maverick Landing Community Services and Bunker Hill Community College to provide both instruction and training opportunities to young people in East Boston and surrounding areas. The opportunity to become a CNA is open to any young person between the ages 17 and 21, who has earned a high school diploma or GED, lives in East Boston or any other neighborhood of the city, and has an interest in health care. Young people participating in the program have access to college-credit coursework and other preparatory courses to learn about the CNA role and prepare for the state exam. Program participants also have access to tutoring, a monthly stipend, a T-pass for the spring semester, case-management support and additional training opportunities within the health center. This type of program can provide a seamless transition from training to certification and employment, ensure that participants are able to apply their skills, and offer a deeper understanding of what it means to work in healthcare.

- **Train all staff in cultural responsiveness and avoiding implicit bias:** Particularly when OY have different cultural backgrounds and lived experiences from the majority of their colleagues, it is important for all employees to help promote a safe and welcoming office environment. This may require explicit training in topics such as cultural responsiveness and implicit bias.
- **Consider cohort models whenever possible:** In a cohort model, multiple OY are hired at the same time. This offers a built-in support network for the youth and maximizes the efficiency of employer investments in training and support.
- **Collect data to evaluate the success of OY hiring initiatives:** By evaluating the impact of hiring OY across multiple measures (employee satisfaction, productivity, etc.), staff can make a stronger argument to leadership about the need to extend (or expand) an OY hiring model.³⁵

Finally, it is important to note that any of the other players in the OY-serving sector can also be employers of OY. This primarily applies to community organizations, but government agencies, institutions of higher education, and HSE preparation programs should also consider how their hiring practices can support OY employment.

Government

Unlike the three components of the OY sector described above (secondary education, higher education, and workforce), government is not necessarily part of a comprehensive college or career pathway for a young person. However, it plays a major role in the sector as a convener, funder, and employer, frequently working with service providers to support and improve their operations. When it comes to engaging opportunity youth directly, interactions with government agencies outside the education system can either be voluntary—seeking public services—or involuntary—involvement with the child welfare or criminal justice systems.

PUBLIC SERVICES

Accessing public services not only helps OY meet basic needs such as food and housing, it can also serve as a connection with a young person who is currently disconnected from education and employment. For instance, service providers who partner with public housing offices can target their services to the youth living within subsidized units; these individuals are likely to be less mobile and easier to reach than youth facing housing instability, who may move frequently.

Because public housing tenants are required to contribute a portion of their rent each month, service providers can also incentivize participation in programming by offering to cover part or all of the cost of rent. For instance, the federally funded Family Self-Sufficiency (FSS) program allows public housing residents to save part of their rent increase if they work with a financial coach to set goals and establish an FSS savings account.³⁶ The Launch initiative run by the United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley provides vouchers to cover tenants' rental costs in exchange for signing up to be part of the program. Launch participants have access to education, training, and career opportunities. Because its recruitment efforts are focused on a discrete and easily identifiable group of public housing residents, Launch is able to maintain a list of qualified candidates and reach out to those candidates with targeted letters and door-knocking.

Beyond public housing, other state departments and agencies offer a range of services specifically intended for low-income individuals and available for use by opportunity youth. The Department of Transitional Assistance administers SNAP benefits (formerly known as food stamps) and cash benefits, and also offers employment and training resources such as the Young Parents Program (YPP). The YPP, which serves youth aged 14 to 24, is run through local community-based organizations such as the North Shore Community Development Coalition. Participants can get connected to educational, career-focused, and family support services.³⁷ Meanwhile, the Department of Early Education and Care distributes about \$500 million annually in financial subsidies to qualified low-income families, aimed at ensuring that children have access to high-quality early education and child care.³⁸ With so many programs being run simultaneously by different agencies, one of the biggest challenges is coordinating eligibility requirements and ensuring efficient referrals between services.

More than a Place to Live: Lynn Housing Authority & Neighborhood Development

Although the mission of the Lynn Housing Authority & Neighborhood Development (LHAND) is to help individuals and families access safe, affordable housing, its services go well beyond finding a place to live. The LHAND Family Success Center opened in 2014 to serve as a “one-stop shop” for those who are Housing Unstable (homeless or at risk of becoming homeless). LHAND offers case management, referrals to wraparound services, and on-site connections with a financial literacy coach and the MassHire North Shore Youth and Adult Career Centers. LHAND also maintains a close partnership with Lynn Public Schools (LPS) and their Project RISE partnership hosts a LPS social worker in its offices, allowing families and individuals easier access to both housing and educational services. This model has proven so effective that the State Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has sought to replicate it in other cities across the state, offering three-year grant funding to school districts that maintain an MOU with a community partner offering housing assistance and advocacy.

CHILD WELFARE AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Youth aging out of the foster care system, administered statewide by the Department of Children and Families (DCF), are among the most vulnerable populations of young people. A 2011 analysis found that 25% of foster youth who transition out of the system are incarcerated within two years, and only half were employed by age 24.³⁹ DCF administers several programs to support transition-age youth, such as a Discharge Support Program that offers financial support with upfront housing costs. The agency is also a major source of referrals for behavioral health providers, who help coordinate the necessary mental health care and support for children and youth within the DCF system.

When it comes to the criminal justice system, the three phases outlined above for working with OY (prevention, intervention, and retention) look somewhat different. It is more fitting to think of the three phases as follows:

1. **Prevention:** Preventing involvement in the criminal justice system usually involves school- and community-based programming to ensure that youth have access to job training and employment opportunities, behavioral health services, and safe spaces to interact with other youth and adults. Schools can also play a part by dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline by avoiding referrals to the court system for minor offenses such as truancy and disobedience.⁴⁰
2. **Diversion:** Young people found responsible for minor, non-violent offenses may have the opportunity to avoid the court system by participating in diversion programming. In such programs, juvenile offenders (under age 18) do not go before a judge. Instead, a group that includes the young person’s probation officer, attorney, family, community partners, and other key stakeholders will meet to determine appropriate next steps to best support the youth’s needs and avoid future involvement with the justice system. In Massachusetts, juvenile diversion is never a requirement, but is offered at the discretion of the District Attorney’s office.⁴¹ While diversion programming is largely confined to juvenile offenders (and a few youth aged 18-22 charged with minor misdemeanors),⁴² some local districts also offer drug diversion for adults of any age charged with violations related to substance abuse.
3. **Reentry:** Juvenile and young adult offenders reentering society following incarceration benefit from coordinated social, vocational, and community supports, such as assistance with housing, access to mental health and recovery services, educational and workforce training opportunities, and safe environments where they can interact with peers. In many ways, these methods of preventing recidivism mirror the general preventative strategies described above, with an added focus on promoting emotional wellbeing and physical safety for young people.⁴³

Within each of these stages, the most effective programs for addressing troubling youth behavior are multi-systemic in nature (meaning they aim to involve stakeholders from all of the systems that affect a young person) and seek to build up the natural support system of a young person. This often involves outreach to individuals who enjoy positive relationships with the youth, whether at home, in school, or in the community.⁴⁴ Essentially, anyone who is part of the young person’s community who can

help prevent offending (or reoffending) is a candidate to participate in the process. Additionally, as noted above, offering opportunities for young people to engage in safe and productive leisure activities is also critical across all three stages: young people who are at risk for involvement in the criminal justice system, like all youth, need creative and recreational outlets and opportunities to stay active rather than idling.⁴⁵

COLLABORATION BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

Examples from outside Massachusetts indicate the strong potential of inter-governmental collaboration to improve how opportunity youth are identified and served. For instance, other states have piloted models involving better referral systems across agencies, priority access to public housing for youth aging out of the foster care system, and comprehensive service teams for incarcerated youth.⁴⁶ In California, the San Diego Association of Governments and the Health and Human Services Agency worked together to create a “‘heat map’ to display the concentration of various distress factors, including youth unemployment, teen births, probation, foster care, and dropout rates.”⁴⁷ These, together with information on existing programming, “help partners determine which neighborhoods should be focused on first.”⁴⁸ These types of government initiatives can strengthen the broader OY-serving sector by easing access to services and shining a light on current conditions.

➤ Community

Unlike the other components of the OY-serving sector, community organizations do not play one role, or a handful of roles. They perform any and all tasks that need to be done to meet the varied needs of young people, often stepping in to fulfill some of the functions described above when particular opportunities or supports are not available. Community organizations aim to reach out and connect with disconnected youth, meet them where they are, and understand their aspirations and areas for growth; then, they work with young people to access the skills and resources they need and shepherd them along to their next steps. Of course, this process isn’t smooth or easy, and it rarely happens in a tidy sequence or within a defined timeline. But even when the process is messy, the work of community organizations is absolutely vital to the OY sector.

Sector-wide, community organizations offer a tremendous variety of functions and focus areas:

- **Extension and enrichment:** Offering opportunities to practice and refine new skills in both academic and creative fields, such as STEM subjects, visual art, and music.
- **Workforce training:** Assisting with general skill-building related to the job search process (including skills assessments/career inventories, resume and interview preparation, network development, and post-placement support) and/or more targeted training focused on specific careers, such as culinary arts, construction, and healthcare.

Raising Consciousness, Lifting Voices: The Food Project and Elevated Thought

Community organizations can play a critical role to help raise young people’s awareness of systemic inequities and offer youth opportunities to advocate for themselves and for a more just society. Two organizations that are carrying out this mission, albeit through different channels, are The Food Project in Lynn and Elevated Thought in Lawrence. The Food Project brings together young people from suburban and urban communities to work together on farms across eastern Massachusetts. Young people also focus on “dialoguing across difference,” discussing the meaning and manifestations of privilege, power, and prejudice within society, and engage the community around the need for a more sustainable and equitable food system. At Elevated Thought, a youth-driven art and social justice enterprise, art is viewed as a form of liberation. Through youth engagement in discussion, debate, and visual and performance art, young people develop a sense of self and a critical consciousness about their present social, political, and economic realities. Elevated Thought maintains an active presence within the community by carrying out public beautification projects and coordinating the Lawrence Youth Council.

- **Mentoring:** Forging bonds with adults, either volunteers or trained staff, who can help navigate new systems, build personal and professional networks, and offer encouragement in the face of obstacles.

- **Basic needs:** Addressing the need for housing (including both emergency shelter and long-term, stable housing); food (food pantries, soup kitchens); and clothing and other supplies (such as school supplies for younger OY and professional attire for jobseekers).

- **Health care and recovery services:** Diagnosing and addressing health issues through dental and eye care, medical and mental health treatment, and recovery services for individuals facing addiction.

- **Advocacy and civic engagement:** Building the capacity of participants to advocate on behalf of themselves and their communities on issues of interest.



Photo from LEAP for Education

These categories are not comprehensive, leaving out topics such as financial literacy and immigration support, models like drop-in centers that offer safe spaces for youth to engage in recreational programming, and faith-based institutions that combine targeted assistance with religious practice. And although these categories are listed separately here, most organizations actually focus on multiple aspects of youth development simultaneously.

Community organizations are at the front lines of recruiting opportunity youth to reconnect with college and career pathways, and they tend to use multiple means of outreach as part of that process. First, community organizations tend to be highly present in the community, going out to schools and youth centers to discuss the program, hanging flyers where young people congregate, setting up a table at neighborhood festivals and events, and maintaining an active social media presence to engage youth on multiple platforms. The second main method of recruiting participants is through referrals from other service providers and agencies, including DCF, probation officers, community health centers, and social workers. Finally, many youth hear about programs through word of mouth, particularly from friends or family members who have previously engaged with a program.

Once youth are recruited and brought in to a community program, program staff seek to establish personal connections that will encourage them to return again and again. Building relationships is not just a method of retaining youth, though—it is also a way to transform how young people see themselves and the world. Community programs often hire front-line staff with similar cultural backgrounds and lived experiences to the OY they are serving. This helps create a safe environment for youth to explore their shared identity, contributes to a foundation of trust between staff and participants, and offers role models who can speak about how they persevered in the face of obstacles.⁴⁹ Some service providers also go a step further: in addition to hiring staff who represent the youth population, they also bring young people into the process of shaping programming and informing the future direction of the organization.

While community organizations are central to the OY-serving sector, they often face persistent or recurring challenges with maintaining both funding and staffing. Acquiring space that is accessible and convenient, not to mention inviting for youth, can be an expensive prospect, particularly for programs serving large numbers of youth and those whose programming

demands ample space (such as a drop-in recreational center). And many organizations struggle to bring in predictable funding streams from funders and donors that will allow them to invest in staff and long-term programming. Staff in community organizations are often underpaid relative to their level of experience and have few opportunities to access professional development and training, contributing to high levels of staff turnover. While most individuals working in this field get into it because of a deep commitment to youth and the organizational mission, structural challenges can make it more difficult to retain employees over the long term.

> Connectors

Connectors are an unusual part of the OY sector, since they can originate within any of the other sectors. Rather than offering a unique service, they aim to better coordinate the resources that already exist in the field. They include several types of youth connectors, who help young people access resources and supports from other service providers:

- **Street outreach workers** make contact with young people in their neighborhoods or homes. Sometimes this involves looking for places where OY gather, going to those spaces, and helping connect young people with programs or services; other times, it means knocking on doors to reach young people who have been targeted for services (e.g., those who have dropped out of high school).
- **Case managers** help coordinate services and supports for youth, particularly those facing challenges with behavioral health, a history of court involvement, or other significant risk factors. They may work in schools, community organizations, or government agencies such as DCF, but no matter where they are based, they must have a detailed understanding of each individual client and know how to access resources that meet his or her needs.
- **One-stop shops** bring together multiple youth-serving organizations and agencies in one location. Some cities offer a virtual one-stop shop, such as New York City's Youth Connect initiative, which is a web-based service and toll-free hotline that helps youth access resources and referrals.⁵⁰ But physical co-location of services is also incredibly valuable, so that youth do not need to travel to multiple sites to access the supports they need. One example, still under construction, is the SISU Center in Lawrence. Young people are leading the redesign and rebuilding of the space, which aims to offer "alternative education, vocational training, employment services, mental health treatment, case management, and recreational activities" in a single location for "the most proven at-risk young people."⁵¹

Other types of connectors, meanwhile, are largely invisible to OY themselves. These connectors build bridges between OY-serving programs and institutions, for a range of purposes from case management to resource-sharing to awareness-raising and advocacy. Several forms of connectors are designated by the state to focus on specific populations, often receiving state or federal funding to carry out their work:

- **Charles E. Shannon Community Safety Initiative:** One of the main mechanisms for cities to identify and redirect the highest-risk youth is the state-funded Shannon initiative, which focuses on preventing violence from gang-involved youth. Among other activities, members of a city's Shannon grant steering committee assess the extent of gang involvement, identify "hot spots" of gang activity, and implement evidence-based strategies to curb youth violence and promote prevention.⁵² The Shannon initiative should complement other ongoing working groups focused on youth violence prevention, such as the community-based juvenile justice programs that, under state law, must be coordinated by district attorneys.⁵³ See the text box for more on the Shannon Initiative.
- **Continuum of Care (CoC):** CoCs focus on addressing the needs of homeless families and individuals, including unaccompanied and parenting youth. There are 15 CoCs across Massachusetts—some with a regional focus and some that are city-specific, as in Boston and Lynn—all of which are eligible to apply for funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. State agencies, community organizations, and individuals can all join the CoC planning meetings.⁵⁴

- **Community Service Agency (CSA):** Young people with serious emotional disturbances are frequently involved with multiple systems (child welfare, juvenile justice, special education) and have a range of service providers. The 32 CSAs across Massachusetts are charged with helping coordinate care for young people within their jurisdiction in need of significant behavioral health intervention and support, including by regularly convening multi-sector Systems of Care meetings.⁵⁵

Apart from these state-driven initiatives, local communities often institute their own homegrown efforts to bring together providers. For instance, the Chelsea Police Department convenes weekly meetings of up to 25 participating agencies “to address specific situations regarding clients facing elevated levels of risk, and develop immediate, coordinated, and integrated responses through mobilization of resources.”⁵⁶ The Chelsea Hub model has been recognized for its innovative approach to risk assessment and mitigation and is being replicated in cities and neighborhoods across Massachusetts.⁵⁷

Other local initiatives focus on orienting providers across a system to address a shared challenge through a collective impact approach. This approach includes five elements: a common agenda, shared systems for tracking progress, engagement in aligned activities, frequent communications, and the support of a backbone organization that facilitates these efforts.⁵⁸ For example, the Boston Opportunity Youth Collaborative (OYC), formed in 2013, brought together a wide-ranging group of stakeholders—young people, representatives from government and higher education, service providers, and others—for a series of public events and meetings aimed at raising awareness of the OY population in Boston and coordinating efforts to address youth needs. The OYC co-conveners (the Boston Opportunity Agenda and Boston Private Industry Council) ensured that data on the OY population in Boston was used to ground conversations about next steps and citywide initiatives.⁵⁹

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF CONNECTING ORGANIZATIONS

Forming and maintaining connections between service providers can promote better care coordination and focus attention on high-risk individuals or situations, as shown by the Chelsea Hub and the three state-driven initiatives described above. Service providers also benefit from having a recurring opportunity to share new resources that may help other organizations and agencies working with a similar population. And regular meetings help build relationships between staff at different organizations and agencies. When service providers need to make referrals to other organizations—for instance, to help a young person find a space in a workforce training program or to link that young person to an agency that provides housing assistance—they often rely on their personal knowledge and connections with other organizations rather than a more systematic process. Furthermore, given the high rates of staff turnover within many service organizations, a personal connection can be a tenuous and easily broken bond; if an employee regularly turns to one contact within an organization to support the referral process, and that contact leaves, the employee might have limited ability to reach out to others within the organization.

On a broader scale, raising awareness of the other service providers in a given area will help improve staff members’ ability to build a support system for the OY they serve. As one school district employee noted, “I think it’s mostly a knowledge gap.... People working with these kids don’t know what’s available.” Another youth worker from the same city commented, “If we know each other, we’ll talk about what our organizations are up to, but for the most part we’re just doing our own thing.” Comments like these highlight the importance of bringing together providers, if only to let those working in the sector know who else is out there and how their work intersects.



Photo from LEAP for Education

Of course, connections across providers are not without their challenges. Multiple, overlapping initiatives can take a good deal of time and attention, especially when many of the same providers are being asked to participate in different groups focused on the same population. To varying degrees, these initiatives also require start-up funding when they begin and ongoing resources to continue—if nothing else, those who attend the meetings are contributing their time to participate, but collaborative efforts also benefit from planning and follow-up, both of which take time (and therefore funding). A number of cities have examples of past initiatives that started strong with dedicated funding but tapered off when the funding stream dried up. Finally, there is always the challenge of ensuring that all of the key players are part of the collaborative effort—one service provider framed this by asking, “How do you work with the people who aren’t in the room? You get to the point where you’re really good at working with people who want to work with you, but a lot of times the important partners are those you haven’t been able to engage yet.”

The experiences of the cities we examined offer a few effective practices that can help promote and sustain engagement in collaborative processes over time:

- **Focus the discussion on a targeted topic**, such as children requiring behavioral health interventions or homeless youth. This will help define who should be part of the conversation and allow participants to clearly understand the benefits of participation.
- **Develop a shared agenda centered on clear areas of need** to help meetings stay relevant over time. Allowing all participants to contribute to a shared agenda will build buy-in and support for the work, particularly when the agenda deals with the highest-priority topics and areas of pressing concern.
- **Turn to well-respected organizations to provide leadership**, since they will have a strong network within the field and can encourage attendance at the first few meetings (after which the momentum of the effort should take over). These organizations also help build a basis of trust among participants, which is essential if the discussion is to go beyond the surface level and touch on challenges or areas of concern.

Perhaps most importantly, all participants (including the convener) should view the connection among providers as a means to an end, rather than the end goal in itself. The real benefits for OY come not from meetings of staff but through the relationships and joint efforts that such meetings can inspire.

A Community Approach to Addressing Violence: The Shannon Initiative

The Charles E. Shannon Community Safety Initiative (Shannon Initiative) builds capacity and provides support to enhance the impact of community-based projects across Massachusetts. The Shannon Initiative aims to reduce gang and youth violence through evidence-based programming and promotes research to evaluate and enhance such strategies to support young people. The program encapsulates key lessons from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention’s Comprehensive Gang Model. This approach involves recognizing the prevalence of youth and gang violence in the community; identifying those involved and where they are geographically concentrated; and determining goals and carrying out an action plan to provide appropriate interventions, services, and activities to mitigate unlawful behavior.

The Shannon Initiative receives funding from the Office of Public Safety and Security’s Office of Grants and Research to sustain its statewide reach. Each Initiative site has a network of cross-sector community partners that collaborate to achieve collective goals of addressing gang and youth violence. In Brockton, for instance, these include the city’s Police Department, MassHire YouthWorks, the Boys and Girls Club, and the Old Colony YMCA. The Shannon Initiative in Brockton prioritizes early intervention for at-risk youth through programs such as Positive Youth Development and Recreation; case management, street outreach and intervention; direct outreach and referrals through the School Resource Officer and school; and community mobilization.



Photo from The Food Project

Recommendations for Strengthening the OY Sector

As the previous sections demonstrate, each component of the OY-serving sector has access to a number of strategies for improving the services offered to young people. But what does this mean for the sector as a whole? How can cities move from an approach that targets each of these individual components to one that addresses the full scope of OY services and supports?

Rethinking an “OY System”

Before diving into specific recommendations, it is important to first recognize the tensions inherent in any attempt to build an “OY system.” To start, the needs of opportunity youth are highly individualized and often extremely complex, particularly when they intersect with the challenges of growing up in areas of concentrated poverty and encountering inequitable systems that perpetuate structural oppression and racism. In this environment, no single pathway—or even a choice of several pathways—can accommodate all youth. Supports for youth must be personalized to meet their individual needs and interests.

Second, service providers should be mindful that young people are often distrustful of engaging with institutions (especially when they are told that they need to engage), and therefore look for ways to build trust from the start. In particular, as has been mentioned multiple times, relationship-building is key to carrying out effective youth outreach and engagement; a strong connection with a young person encourages participation in a service or program and keeps that young person coming back for more. Making the OY sector more systemic—for instance, by standardizing the types of information collected through intake procedures—could undermine the creation of strong, authentic bonds between service providers and OY and make the engagement process feel more like a bureaucratic exercise. Furthermore, relationship-building takes time to progress at a natural pace, which may not align with a system’s demands for specific timelines and processes.

Third, service providers must recognize that many OY face barriers that make it difficult or impossible to engage consistently and over a long period of time. Young people may stop attending a particular program or institution—for instance, because they are seeking treatment for mental health concerns or because of challenges finding child care—only to reappear a month

or two later. Especially among the highest-risk populations, it is difficult for programs to expect consistent engagement or attendance. As one provider notes, “Most of the kids we’re working with are not going to show up anywhere every day.” It is difficult within the paradigm of an “OY system” to build in sufficient flexibility for young people who are inconsistently engaged with services.

Even a radical redesign to generate a wholly new OY system would confront some of the same challenges. For instance, one report has proposed creating a community-wide system where youth can build personal portfolios based on interactions with different educational opportunities, inside and outside of school. Another researcher suggested that the community college system be entrusted with oversight of educational programming for youth up to age 24, helping make referrals to small programs rather than having OY navigate a fragmented system on their own.⁶⁰ In both cases, though, there would still be the need for outreach to youth who disengage with the system, support for youth to access information and opportunities, and a focus on relationships to break down distrust of outside institutions—leading to questions about whether making an investment in such a system would lead to appreciably better results than the current situation.

Overall, the characteristics of effective OY supports—personalized, relationship-based, and flexible—are opposed to what most people normally think of as the characteristics of a “system”—standardized, impersonal, and rigid. Against that backdrop, how can those working within the OY sector look for ways to make existing systems of support more amenable to the needs of the OY population? How can the sector move toward a method of addressing OY needs that includes the benefits of systematization (such as predictability and efficiency) without sacrificing the ability to accommodate individual youth? And how can this be done in a way that empowers localities to engage in and lead these efforts in a way that reflects their history, context, and youth population? The following sections offer a preliminary set of recommendations, focusing on the three phases of the OY service model outlined above (prevention, intervention, and retention) and offering local examples to highlight effective practices at each phase.

Prevention

Preventing disengagement from school and college or career pathways should start as early as possible with a focus on relevant coursework, positive relationships, and planning for the future. These elements become progressively more important as students make the (often fraught) transition to 9th grade and move through high school. The transition from high school into college or career preparation is another point where special attention should be paid, to ensure that young people are not able to slip through the cracks and disconnect from a productive pathway.

The previous sections outlined a number of high-leverage, high-potential strategies for preventing disengagement, including the following:

- Applied learning through project-based learning inside and outside the classroom as well as expanded learning opportunities for credit.
- Alternative educational models for students who need additional flexibility and personalized supports. Districts may want to explore how to make these models more targeted to particular groups of students to enable more specialized programming.
- Support with financial literacy (e.g., understanding how to build credit and make a budget) offered in school, within the community, or in conjunction with government services (e.g., public housing).
- Opportunities to build student voice and student self-advocacy, which will help youth express their aspirations and speak up when a program does or does not meet their needs. Such opportunities can be cultivated within classrooms, at the school level, or within the community, for students in both high school and college.
- Alternatives to exclusionary school discipline to dismantle the school-to-prison-pipeline and prevent youth involvement with the justice system.

- Individualized learning and transition plans. These are currently required for students with disabilities, but they are useful tools for all students to think through and plan their next steps beyond high school. By revisiting these plans each year of high school, students can reflect on how their interests and priorities have shifted (for instance, a student may change her mind about wanting to become a doctor when she hears from someone in that role; a student who discovers a passion for writing may realize he would rather study journalism than computer science).
- Support for college-bound students to enable easier access to college enrollment and registration for classes (either by having college staff come to the high school or by bringing high school students to the college campus).
- Expanded early college programming that allows students to earn college credits while still in high school (or while preparing to earn a high school equivalency [HSE] credential) and builds up confidence in their ability to complete college-level work.
- Increased opportunities for career exploration at all levels of the education system (including in HSE preparation programs) and within community organizations. This should include opportunities for students to better understand their own interests and aspirations, learn about the pathways required to access particular careers, and experience what it is like to actually engage in those careers (including through internships and job shadows).

Even if all of these preventative measures were in place, however, there will still be OY who disengage from college and career pathways because life circumstances get in the way of their plans. Therefore, another aspect of preventing disengagement is to help promote stability for young people by implementing strategies to address a range of student needs:

- Establish a partnership between the local school district and housing office to help homeless youth and families access the services they need (including services seemingly unrelated to school or housing but that have a large effect on school attendance and persistence, such as child care for younger siblings or free passes for the public transportation system).
- Coordinate care for students who are pregnant or whose partner is pregnant so that they have a plan for reengaging with school following the birth of a child, and work with parenting students (males as well as females) to help them fully understand their options for accessing high school, HSE, or postsecondary coursework alongside paid employment.
- Provide more intensive case management and support to unaccompanied youth (including new immigrants to this country) so that they can access age-appropriate services and supports, inside and outside of school.
- Offer enhanced mentoring, counseling, and connections with wraparound services for young people aging out of the foster care system.
- Promote equitable access to mental and behavioral health resources within schools and the community, such as through in-school clinicians and tiered systems of support that include strategies for youth in crisis.

Although the specific mechanisms for addressing these needs will look different from place to place and student to student, schools and community organizations that have strategized in advance about how to connect young people with the necessary supports will be better prepared when situations arise that demand immediate attention. Prevention strategies like the ones listed above are inherently proactive, aiming to address challenges before they occur—or at least, before they get too large to ignore. When this type of preventative approach is either absent or inadequate to meet the needs of young people, they are more likely to become part of the opportunity youth population, disconnected from education and employment.

Supporting the Transition to Postsecondary: LEAP for Education

LEAP for Education, a non-profit focused on improving college and career outcomes for underserved youth on the North Shore, begins working with students as early as middle school to support their success in high school and their transition to college or a career. Throughout their years with LEAP, young people have access to a range of experiences that allow them to explore their career aspirations, including networking nights, mock interview nights, job shadowing, and internships. Staff also meet with participants at the end of each school year to develop an education and career plan that plots out their next steps. Students can adjust this plan every year as they gain new experiences and modify their goals for the future. This plan helps them select courses in high school and college that will get them where they want to go; it also serves as a source of motivation in the face of obstacles and discouragement. LEAP works with students to ease the move from high school to postsecondary, then meets with students weekly during their freshman year to ensure that they are well-equipped to navigate life on campus and address challenges that arise. LEAP's coaches work with youth throughout college, providing encouragement and helping make connections to wraparound or other services as needed.

➤ Intervention

Once youth have disengaged from school and career pathways, it is insufficient for OY service providers to offer a “safety net”: first, this implies that young people are already falling into a difficult situation, rather than receiving early intervention to prevent further challenges; second, it relies on the young person to take action and seek out support, when not all youth are prepared to do so. Rather, as one service provider put it, the OY sector should function as a “dragnet,” in which young people in need of assistance are identified and helped to connect with appropriate pathways. Put a different way, there needs to be a core range of services that can be accessed from multiple points within the community. Or, in the words of another service provider, “You need to have a huge network of people that you’re interacting with so you don’t lose track of these kids.”

An intervention to help OY reconnect with college and career pathways can originate in the school system, as through a dropout recovery and reengagement center, or from the government, as when probation officers and social workers work with system-involved young people. Most often, though, interventions originate from community organizations that have youth services as part of their mission, since these programs tend to maintain deep connections to the neighborhoods where OY live.

Interventions have multiple phases, starting with outreach to meet young people where they are and help them access a particular program.^C Each of the outreach strategies outlined above in the section on community organizations—being present in the neighborhood, getting referrals from other agencies and organizations, and bringing in youth through word of mouth—can help extend the reach of an organization or agency and inform OY who might not otherwise know about it. Outreach workers play an important role as part of the intervention process, identifying and approaching young people. Since OY can be highly mobile and move frequently between communities, neighboring cities may consider hiring and training outreach workers who are familiar with popular areas for youth to gather in each city. This role can be a particularly good fit for former OY, providing an opportunity for paid employment while benefiting community organizations or the school system.

After the first interaction, the next stage in a successful intervention is to build a relationship and learn more about the young person’s background and interests. Service providers must conduct an intake procedure that gathers sufficient information without overwhelming or intimidating the young person and then work with them to understand their short- and long-term goals. Staff must also identify whether there are any programmatic barriers that would stop them from serving the young

^C “Program” is used here as a general term that covers educational or workforce training and support, regardless of where it is delivered. Even services delivered through a school system or institution of higher education are, for the purposes of this discussion, considered a “program.”

person (such as age requirements or income guidelines tied to funding streams). After that, youth take part in program activities and, in some cases, continue on that track until they achieve the end result of a connection with education or employment.

In other cases, based on the information collected during the engagement process, staff may recognize that a young person would be better served by a different approach or program model. In those cases, staff should help OY identify whether to stick with that pathway or seek an alternative, then follow up that decision with a referral to an appropriate service provider. If a young person decides to move between programs, the original provider would ideally be able to offer a “warm hand-off,” or a seamless transition that supports a connection between the young person and the new organization.

While this referral and transition process may sound straightforward, there are a number of potential pitfalls that can keep it from being fully and satisfactorily carried out:

- Staff may not know the other options that are available, the prerequisites for each one, or employees at those other organizations who can advise on next steps. Because so many connections within the OY sector are based on personal knowledge rather than institutional partnerships, transitions between programs can be challenging when that personal knowledge is lacking. Staff turnover can exacerbate the difficulty of getting to know other options and determining whether they would be a good fit for a particular young person.
- Sharing information across programs can be an obstacle. This applies even to basic data that assists with the intake process, but it is especially true for more comprehensive information related to a young person’s past accomplishments and future goals. Privacy laws that limit the types of data able to be shared by public institutions (such as educational and health records) also make it more difficult for a provider to efficiently access information that can help them plan appropriate interventions.
- In order to maintain strong relationships with philanthropic institutions, community organizations frequently have to demonstrate the impact of their programming, often measured by the number of program completers who successfully navigate college or career pathways. Not all youth who sign on to a program should stay on until completion—some are likely a better fit for a different program—and yet funding incentives make it less likely that service providers will encourage youth to transfer out of their programs.

The third of these challenges speaks to a broader need to reduce competition within the OY sector. As one service provider described, “This city as a whole has a lot of programs to offer across the board but we are competing with each other to provide services for young people....There needs to be a better way to set up the system where programs don’t become possessive over youth.”

A number of potential strategies could reduce this type of competition, but not all may be practical within a particular city, depending on how well-connected providers are to each other and how readily they are willing and able to shift their service models. Greater specialization (i.e., working with a particular subset of the population) may make it easier for programs to refer youth to an appropriate alternative; if a parenting teen is seeking a connection to a college bridging program, for example, it would help if all service providers within the city know that there is a program specifically geared toward youth who are parenting. Of course, with greater specialization comes narrower target populations and more need for strong connections between programs.

Another option for reducing competition is for two or more OY-serving organizations to share space or even staff with each other, for instance by using the same financial coach to work with multiple populations. This can help build a culture where meeting the needs of youth is seen as a collective responsibility.

Ultimately, though, the primary method for reducing competition is to change the funding structure and eliminate incentives to hang on to young people through program completion, no matter what. The philanthropic sector and leaders in the OY sector should work together to develop shared models of success that fund based on youth outcomes rather than



Photo from The Food Project

programmatic outcomes. As one service provider noted, “The impacts [of our work] can’t be measured through the indicators that the funder is looking for. With a lot of the interventions, you won’t see the outcomes until much later on,” manifested in things like new perspectives, attitudes, and beliefs. Rather than looking at the number of program completers, funders could examine whether young people have demonstrated progress on one of several indicators of youth development, or whether they have accomplished any of the goals that the youth articulated for themselves. Funders could also look into funding a consortium of providers rather than individual organizations; the Launch initiative, which operates out of the United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley but includes providers from multiple cities, is one example of this collaborative approach.

So far, the obstacles to ensuring warm hand-offs between programs—lack of awareness of other options, difficulties with data sharing, and competition for youth—have largely been focused on providers. For youth themselves, though, referrals can also present a challenge if they need to travel to distant offices or to multiple service centers. Especially where public transportation is limited or unreliable, young people may choose to disengage rather than work with a provider that is difficult to reach. Across the OY sector, an important theme is the value of meeting youth where they are, both literally and figuratively. Cities should look into co-locating services whenever possible, thereby lowering barriers to access and promoting consistent engagement with a range of services. For example, the Family Success Center of the Lynn Housing Authority & Neighborhood Development, which supports a range of needs of homeless families or those at risk of becoming homeless, is located in the same building as the MassHire North Shore Youth Career Center, making it easier to access resources on housing alongside referrals to educational and career opportunities.

For cities where service providers are more spread out, one potential first step is to undertake a mapping process that examines the location of various youth-serving programs, their accessibility to public transportation, and common referral patterns. This map would help highlight the potential barriers for youth seeking services within the community and offer guidance on which services would be good candidates for co-location. Such a project would be especially powerful if combined with a “heat map” that displays neighborhood-by-neighborhood data on risk factors such as youth unemployment, juvenile crime rates, and dropout rates (such as the one that San Diego developed).⁶¹ Together, these tools would help leaders identify areas with high concentrations of opportunity youth but few available services, which could receive targeted incentives and support.

One City, Two Models of Intervention: Roca and the Chelsea Collaborative

While Roca originated (and is still headquartered) in Chelsea, its success in disrupting the cycle of poverty and incarceration for the highest-need youth has led it to broaden its focus—the organization now works across Massachusetts and beyond to support gang-involved and at-risk youth. Roca’s intervention model begins with “relentless outreach” to identify young people and bring them into the program. Roca’s Youth Workers meet youth where they are—at home, on the streets, in court—and refuse to give up until the youth have engaged in programming. Once they are engaged, staff begin the process of building “transformational relationships,” seeing this as a necessary first step toward changing destructive behaviors and attitudes. Roca offers programming ranging from academic support to life skills to job training, all with the assumption that progress will not be linear and that young people will need to continually recommit to the process.

The Chelsea Collaborative, meanwhile, uses its deep roots within the Chelsea community to offer a range of services to local residents and advocate on issues that advance their social and economic health. The only Latino-led organization in Chelsea, it serves as a local hub for connections to employment training and job opportunities, community-building and empowerment, education, recreation, and more. Youth come to the Chelsea Collaborative through word of mouth, outreach to the community, and referrals from the local schools and other providers; once they are engaged, staff work alongside young people to determine the right next steps that will help them accomplish their goals. This includes referrals to outside training programs (for instance, Year Up and local unions), particularly for youth who have dropped out of school and are looking to bridge to a career path. The Chelsea Collaborative also provides critical “connective tissue” to a suite of wraparound supports that benefit young people and their families throughout the city.

One part of the sector that would benefit from additional development is the programming available to older OY, or those aged 20-24. These young adults have aged out of after-school or recreational programs geared at teenagers, but they have many of the same needs as teens. In particular, older OY have limited access to spaces where they can build constructive relationships with peers and adults, receive enrichment and support, and feel a sense of belonging. As one service provider put it, “We have older young people, kids what have aged out of the program and are still looking to the program to find their community.” Another challenge for this age group is that, if they make a mistake and wind up in the criminal justice system, they will enter the adult system and have limited recourse to alternatives to incarceration (diversion programs are generally available only to adults arrested for minor drug-related offenses). Overall, the opportunities are more limited and the consequences of disconnection potentially more severe for older OY, indicating a need to critically examine the types of interventions available and how they might be extended to this population.

➤ Retention

Even when opportunity youth successfully reengage with an appropriate intervention, they often require ongoing support to ensure that they are able to stay on track, access a college or career pathway, and demonstrate success in that pathway. As OY work toward academic and career goals, and especially as they enter college or a professional workplace, they often find themselves navigating new systems, with expectations and norms of behavior that may be unfamiliar. Mentors are invaluable supports who can promote OY success in these environments, whether provided by the institutions themselves (such as workplace mentors) or through external organizations (as with many college coaches and other, more general, mentoring programs). Mentors can also help expose OY to new experiences and opportunities, widening their perspectives on potential career paths and helping build their personal and professional networks. By building a strong and supportive relationship with young people, mentors can draw out—and build—the reserves of resilience and optimism that so many opportunity youth possess.

Mentors must be mindful to support OY as they mull over important decisions without making choices for them. This is true even when the mentor thinks that a young person is making a mistake; as one college coach puts it, the conversation should be: “I am not going to tell you what to do at the end of the day. I will be a support and advise you of some options.” Allowing OY to work out for themselves the best options, even though they may fumble occasionally, helps young people build self-efficacy and self-advocacy skills. Unlike their wealthier and more well-connected peers, opportunity youth do not always have the “luxury of time as well as financial, emotional, and social resources as they transition to adulthood,” and they can be penalized harshly for their youthful mistakes, especially if they wind up involved in the criminal justice system.⁶² Mentors can offer guidance and support to OY that other young people receive naturally from their families and community networks, including the freedom to make decisions and deal with the consequences without falling off-track.

Helping young people decide for themselves about their future path may also mean leaving a particular community-based or educational program, or career, when it becomes clear that it is not the right choice. In this way, a focus on retention should not mean keeping students engaged at all costs. Just like other young people who are exploring their identity and feeling out their place in the world, OY need the flexibility to say “no” to some opportunities and access others that seem like a better fit. These are sometimes referred to as “off-ramps,” and they should allow youth to change their minds about participation in a given pathway without starting again from the very beginning. Programs and institutions should think more critically about what these off-ramps might look like and how youth can be directed to alternative options rather than disengaging completely from education or employment. Additionally, staff should document the progress of young people who choose to leave a program so that they can restart from the same point if and when they decide to reengage later.

Beyond mentorship and guidance on how to connect (or disconnect) from specific college and career pathways, several other strategies can also be useful for promoting retention in those endeavors:

- **Leverage the power of peers:** Connecting OY to a supportive peer network can help them build confidence as they navigate unfamiliar terrain in higher education and the workplace. Colleges should think about how to create learning communities of students interested in similar fields, while employers should consider cohort models, in which multiple OY are hired together.
- **Enable easier access to critical information:** The unwritten rules and customs that govern the worlds of academia and business can be particularly challenging for OY to understand. Colleges and employers should aim to make as much of this explicit as possible, for instance by offering clear checklists of registration requirements and suggested course pathways, or descriptions of workplace expectations (e.g., dress code, work schedules, etc.).
- **Promote a supportive culture for youth from diverse backgrounds:** Postsecondary institutions and employers can take proactive steps to ensure that OY feel welcomed and that their culture is affirmed. Staff from both sectors would benefit from training in cultural responsiveness and avoiding implicit bias.

Finally, it is worth noting that many of the recommendations listed under “Prevention” can also help support retention—in this case, by preventing further disconnection from educational and employment opportunities.

INCREASING RETENTION BY PROMOTING STABILITY

OY benefit from strategies that help them advance along college and career pathways, like those outlined in the previous section. At the same time, such strategies do not address the ongoing need for stability that many OY encounter. Helping OY meet their basic needs will allow them remain focused on attaining success in college or a career.

Housing is one of the most critical needs identified across communities. With the prices of rents continually climbing, many youth making minimum wage (if they are earning anything at all) cannot afford even one month of rent, much less the first month/last month/security deposit combination that many landlords require. While some shelters exist to house homeless youth, they are often geared to an adult population, which is not an ideal environment for a young person. Those working in

the housing field attempt to connect OY with owners willing to invest in youth, but it is difficult to find these spaces and ensure that landlords are not taking advantage of young tenants. And although public housing can be a useful source of support for young people—and an entry point for offering additional services—there is often a long waiting list before such units become available.

To address the shortage of affordable housing for youth, some service providers are offering their own OY-focused housing solutions. For instance, the North Shore Community Development Coalition, which administers the local YouthBuild workforce training program, also recently open 16 affordable housing units that give preference to 18- to 24-year-olds who are homeless or aging out of foster care. Several of the units are now occupied by YouthBuild participants, allowing them to focus on completing that career pathway program rather than accessing stable housing. And at Father Bill's & MainSpring homeless shelter, headquartered in Brockton, unaccompanied youth aged 16 to 24 can go to a separate floor of the shelter to help them feel more comfortable. They can lock up their possessions there, giving them a safe space to stay during the day, and they receive case management and connections to jobs. The latter example also illustrates one strategy for addressing the needs of homeless and unaccompanied 16- and 17-year-olds. Because they are too young to sign for their own apartment, youth under age 18 are one of the most difficult homeless populations to serve. Dedicated shelter spaces for the youth can at least serve as a temporary landing spot while other options are identified.

Beyond housing, OY often have significant unmet needs related to mental health treatment and recovery services for those struggling with addiction. Providers see these needs as increasingly prevalent (and pressing) within the populations they serve, but frontline staff within the OY sector are often ill-equipped to identify when participants could use a behavioral health intervention, and they may not know where to turn even when they do recognize the need to refer OY for treatment. This is a sector-wide challenge, and institutions from secondary schools to colleges to community organizations and workplaces would benefit from additional training in how to recognize the need for additional support and opportunities to connect youth with appropriate forms of care.⁶³

Of course, the basic needs that confront OY extend beyond housing and behavioral health treatment. Particularly when unexpected situations arise and threaten to derail young people's attachment to college and career pathways, it is useful for youth to have access to flexible sources of funding to address immediate challenges. For example, a case manager working with the North Shore Housing Action Group has a pool of money she can use to cover the costs when youth are "backed up in rent, help with weeks or months of child care, put money on bus or train passes to help them get around to interviews," and more. Similarly, community organizations may consider setting aside some

Promoting Retention through Holistic Support: X-Cel Education

Boston-based X-Cel Education focuses on two types of needs—personal and academic—as it encourages students to persist on the path to a high school equivalency (HSE) credential and beyond. On the personal side, X-Cel promotes strong relationships between students and program staff by hiring alums who live in the same neighborhoods, face the same challenges, and often share the same culture as the students it serves. Two-thirds of X-Cel staff members are program alumni. Staff serve as peers, mentors, and advocates for OY, offering candid advice and feedback to help guide youth toward their next steps. In addition, last year, X-Cel initiated a new program that allows youth to earn wages and develop work-readiness skills while attending HSE preparation classes. Early indications are that this program led more youth to stick with their coursework than otherwise would have done so. On the academic side, staff work with young people to identify their passions and determine a career path that builds off those passions. They then assist youth every step of the way to identify an appropriate educational or career program and work through the enrollment and financial aid processes. X-Cel continues to support youth throughout the postsecondary experience, standing alongside them all the way until program completion.

flexible funds to help cover minor costs with a major impact on young people's ability to access further opportunities, such as the cost of a high school equivalency exam, college application, or textbook.⁶⁴

A final basic need that providers can help fulfill is the need for community and a sense of belonging. The need to “fit in” is a powerful driver for adolescents, including OY, and youth who can access constructive sources of peer support will be less likely to seek out the destructive kind. Shelters and residency programs that cater to the youth population may host community dinners and holiday celebrations, while drop-in centers and community organizations offer recreational activities to youth seeking to connect with peers. For instance, the Chelsea Collaborative offers youth pop-up nights, because there is no youth center in Chelsea where young people can gather to watch movies and relax.

Building Connections Across the OY Sector

Collaboration between members of the OY-serving sector is important, but it must be done thoughtfully so that it augments each member's efforts to serve OY rather than distracting from them. Conveners must have a clear sense of the purpose of collaboration—such as case management, sharing resources/best practices, working collectively to address community-wide challenges, networking to strengthen relationships between providers, or advocacy—and structure the effort with that goal in mind. Structures can be very complex, with dedicated staff and the measurement of shared outcomes, or very simple: one example from a service provider described a case worker who would send out an update each week on a particular situation, and others would reply within the email thread to coordinate their efforts. No matter what the model, though, all members of the collaboration should be clear on the purpose and their own role in the process. Youth should also be brought into the conversation whenever possible (i.e., when members are not discussing sensitive public safety issues) and encouraged to share their perspectives on the best forms of support for OY.

One potential function of cross-sector collaboration is to raise awareness within the field of the challenges that many OY face every day, thereby helping to promote empathy within each of the systems that intersect with the OY population. Understanding the sheer numbers of youth who are facing homelessness, or the impact of hunger on a young person's ability to concentrate during the work day, or the difficulty of balancing a full-time job with college courses and family responsibilities, may change the mindset of staff within educational institutions, government offices, and businesses if they see OY struggling to stay connected with college and career pathways. Community organizations, in particular, may be well-placed to offer trainings on topics such as cultural proficiency, racial justice, and trauma-informed (and healing-centered) care, since they are often at the front lines of addressing these issues and their effects on youth. Youth can also be incredibly powerful spokespeople to help build awareness, promote empathy, and advocate for systemic changes that lead to more effective support for young people.

PREVENTION

1

Promote stability by addressing student needs, especially for youth who are homeless, expectant or parenting, aging out of the foster care system, or experiencing behavioral health challenges.

KEY THEMES

- Start early
- Make school more relevant to students' futures
- Prioritize relationship-building
- Help students set goals and plan their next steps

POTENTIAL STRATEGIES

- Apply learning inside and outside the classroom
- Develop student voice and self-advocacy
- Seek alternatives to exclusionary discipline
- Adopt individualized learning/transition plans
- Enable easier access to college registration and enrollment
- Expand early college programming
- Offer more opportunities for career exploration

INTERVENTION

2

OUTREACH

- Be present in the community
- Seek referrals from other agencies, organizations, and youth
- Hire youth and alumni to serve as outreach workers

ENGAGEMENT

- Take time to build a rapport
- Work with youth to understand their goals
- Help youth connect with wraparound services
- Seek opportunities to support older youth (aged 20-24)

REFERRAL/TRANSITION (if needed)

- Get to know other providers to understand the services and supports available within the field
- Aim for a "warm hand-off" to other providers
- Share as much information as possible about youth progress and goals
- Consider co-location of services to minimize travel for youth

RETENTION

3

Promote stability by seeking ways of addressing the most pressing needs of youth, especially housing, mental health and recovery treatment, flexible funds for use in emergencies, and a sense of belonging.

MENTORS ROLES

- Offer exposure to new experiences
- Help navigate unfamiliar systems
- Build personal and professional networks
- Support youth decision-making
- Help youth address the consequences of mistakes (including by pursuing "off-ramps" from a program or institution)

WAYS TO ENCOURAGE RETENTION

- Connect youth to a supportive peer network
- Make unwritten norms explicit
- Create a welcoming and supportive culture
- Train staff in cultural responsiveness
- Focus on preventing future disconnection



Connection with a College or Career Pathway

Conclusion

In cities across Massachusetts—indeed, across the country—an opportunity youth population with tremendous potential and deep wells of resilience nevertheless struggles to engage with education, employment, and service delivery systems. To address this challenge, a diverse OY sector has emerged, offering a range of services and supports focused on preventing disconnection, intervening to help disconnected youth access college and career pathways, and retaining youth within these pathways.

This report intends to help cities move toward a more integrated and coordinated approach for supporting the needs of OY across the three phases of prevention, intervention, and retention. This work will not be easy—the very concept of an “OY system” can seem like a contradiction in terms, as opportunity youth tend to thrive in personalized, flexible environments and chafe under the requirements of a more regimented system. Yet, digging in to the practices and connections that sustain the sector, there are many opportunities to integrate systematic and thoughtful approaches to meeting the needs of OY.

While there is certainly work to be done to better align the OY sector, there are also many strengths to build upon, starting with the gifts of the young people themselves and the deep commitment of individuals working within the OY sector. These offer a solid foundation for city leaders eager to build a stronger and more responsive system for opportunity youth—and they offer hope that, someday, all young people will be well-served and well-supported to reach their full potential.

A Framework for Analyzing the OY Sector

City leaders interested in improving the local OY sector can use the following three-part analysis to identify strengths to build on, as well as areas for improvement. The three parts are not necessarily chronological, and they do not need to be completed in this order, but all will contribute to understanding the current status of services for opportunity youth within the city. Each part is framed around a key question and includes a series of suggested action steps that can help city leaders answer that question for themselves.

What are the key needs of youth in the city?

Gather information on the major needs of young people

- Collect data on various aspects of the youth experience (e.g., dropout rate, youth unemployment rate, gang involvement, youth homelessness, and the disconnection rate generally).
- Speak to service providers about the primary needs they encounter among the youth they serve.
- Speak to youth about their experiences, reasons for disconnection, and persistent challenges they are facing.

THINGS TO CONSIDER

- It may be helpful to establish new methods of collecting data if it does not already exist.
- Data collection should not overly burden service providers.

Convene stakeholders to analyze the data and highlight topics in need of further attention

- Invite leaders from the K-12 education system, higher education, government agencies, local businesses, community agencies, and youth themselves to participate in a data-sharing discussion.
- Share what was uncovered through the data collection process and solicit thoughts and feedback from attendees.
- Seek consensus on the 3-4 top tier issues for leaders within the sector.
- Strategize about next steps on each top tier.

THINGS TO CONSIDER

- Convene a subset of service providers working in the field, presenting findings to city officials, investigating successful models from other cities.
- Be sure to assign each follow-up step to a specific individual or organization and set a time to reconvene and discuss progress.

What is the current status of the OY sector?

Gather information on the current OY sector

- Identify the organizations and institutions within each of six core components of the OY sector (secondary education, higher education, workforce, government, community, and connectors).
- Speak to representatives from across the sector to hear their thoughts on the strengths of the sector and areas in need of further development.
- Speak to youth about their interactions with various members of the sector, transitions between different systems or programs, and alignment with their needs and interests

Analyze the state of the sector along two dimensions

- Are there sufficient resources (programming and related support) to serve youth?

THINGS TO CONSIDER

- In what parts of the sector are resources lacking?
- Are there resources available for both younger (16-19) and older (20-24) youth?
- Are resources widely spread across the city or clustered in particular geographic areas?

- Do youth have sufficient access to the resources that are available?

THINGS TO CONSIDER

- Do youth know about the resources that exist?
- Are youth able to access these resources?
- Are youth able to access the appropriate resources?

- Determine where the city falls on the matrix shown below, which plots the two dimensions (quantity of resources and access to resources).

Low resources/High access	High resources/High access
Low resources/Low access	High resources/Low access

Note that this is best thought of as a continuum rather than an either/or choice between low and high.

- Share the results of this asset mapping and analysis with stakeholders and use it to introduce a conversation about strengthening the sector.

- Convene leaders from beyond the OY sector to discuss ways to enhance the quantity of and access to resources within different parts of the sector.

THINGS TO CONSIDER

- How can city officials support this effort?
- How can philanthropy support this effort?
- How can the state support this effort?

The matrix is intended as a snapshot of the system, and is best accompanied by a fuller analysis of the answers to the questions listed in part b.

This matrix could be used to summarize the status of individual components of the sector, along with the sector as a whole.

Who in the city is best placed to lead efforts to strengthen the OY sector?

Gather information on current connections within the OY sector

- Speak with representatives from across the sector to identify current efforts to promote collaboration across OY-serving institutions and organizations
- Identify the individuals or organizations currently leading those collaborative efforts
- Investigate the origin and structure of each collaborative effort
- Speak with representatives from across the sector to determine whether there are any other organizations or institutions that are seen as essential sources of information and expertise on issues related to OY, beyond those responsible for formal collaborative efforts

THINGS TO CONSIDER

- How long has it been in existence?
- Why was it started?
- How often does it meet?
- Who participates in meetings?
- How is it funded (if at all)?

Convene stakeholders (including all those mentioned during the information-gathering phase) to discuss the status of connections within the sector

- Within each of the core components of the OY sector, who serves as a connector to share resources and information, either formally or informally?
- Are there any areas that are lacking a connector?
- Which organizations have—or could build—their capacity to become a connector within areas that are currently lacking one?

THINGS TO CONSIDER

- This analysis should include an examination of specific fields within the sector (e.g., criminal justice, housing, mental health)
- Ideally, these fields would be informed by the analysis of youth needs described in part 1, if this has been completed

Convene leaders from beyond the OY sector to discuss ways to promote leadership within different parts of the sector

- How can city officials support this effort?
- How can philanthropy support this effort?
- How can the state support this effort?

APPENDIX A

Sources of interview

BOSTON

- Boston Centers for Youth & Families
- Boston Opportunity Agenda
- Boston Private Industry Council
- Boston Public Schools
- Bunker Hill Community College
- College Bound Dorchester
- Community Impact at United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley
- East Boston Neighborhood Health Center
- Future Chefs
- Mayor's Office of Health & Human Services
- Mayor's Office of Workforce Development
- SkillWorks
- The Hyams Foundation
- X-Cel Education

BROCKTON

- Brockton Public Schools
- Brockton Police Department
- Massasoit Community College
- MassHire Greater Brockton YouthWorks
- Mayor's Office
- Old Colony YMCA
- Pathways Center, Brockton Public Schools

CHELSEA

- Bunker Hill Community College
- Chelsea Collaborative
- Chelsea Public Schools
- Community Action Programs Inter-City
- Roca

LAWRENCE

- Lawrence Youth Council
- Lawrence Community Works
- Elevated Thought

LYNN

- North Shore Community Development Coalition/YouthBuild
- Lynn Public Schools
- Lynn Youth Street Outreach Advocacy
- Lynn Shelter Association
- Lynn Housing Authority & Neighborhood Development
- Family & Children's Services
- North Shore Community College
- Children's Friend and Family Services
- The Food Project
- MassHire North Shore Youth Career Center

OTHER

- Plummer Youth Promise, Salem
- LEAP for Education, Salem
- Boston Public Schools Office of Social Emotional Learning and Wellness
- Office of Student and Family Support, Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

ENDNOTES

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About the Rennie Center

The Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy's mission is to improve public education through well-informed decision-making based on deep knowledge and evidence of effective policymaking and practice. As Massachusetts' preeminent voice in public education reform, we create open spaces for educators and policymakers to consider evidence, discuss cutting-edge issues, and develop new approaches to advance student learning and achievement. Through our staunch commitment to independent, non-partisan research and constructive conversations, we work to promote an education system that provides every child with the opportunity to be successful in school and in life.

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