

Supporting Opportunity Youth on Postsecondary Pathways: Lessons from Two States

American Youth Policy Forum

“What do you want to be when you grow up?”

For many young people, this question is full of possibilities. However, the question of how to get there is more difficult. Opportunity Youth face more pronounced barriers to success. These are young people ages 16-24 who are neither in school nor working. Out of 38.9 million Americans who fall into the 16-24 age range, approximately 6.7 million are Opportunity Youth. They face multiple barriers to postsecondary success – involvement with the justice system, foster care, school suspension or expulsion, poverty, and academic, emotional, and/or behavioral disabilities. These barriers do not have to be permanent, and it is imperative that policymakers understand the strategies that connect Opportunity Youth to postsecondary pathways.

AYPF has documented how programs and policies in two states, Connecticut and Michigan, are responding to the need for postsecondary pathways, especially for this most vulnerable population. In both states, we defined Opportunity Youth and their needs. Next, we surveyed the landscape of programs and policies that are connecting them to postsecondary opportunities. With the help of in-state partners, we interviewed local service providers, state agency staff, advocacy organizations, non-profits, and others to document the range of supports available. Finally, we identified elements of strength and areas for continued action.

Opportunity Youth benefit when programs and policies are specialized to their needs and circumstances. In order to find a pathway of success, justice-involved youth, young people in foster care, academically at-risk students, and others require supportive programs and local, state, and federal policies that acknowledge their unique needs. Actions at the intersection of policy and practice that best support Opportunity Youth require, blending of education and workforce opportunities, collaboration between youth-serving systems, and investment in professional capacity.

Blending of Education and Workforce Opportunities

Opportunity Youth often lack education and employment credentials, and benefit from continuing their education while learning skills that translate directly into the workplace. Programs should be designed so that young people can “work and learn” at the same time – earning necessary educational credits while receiving job training. This requires partnerships between often siloed agencies, community-based organizations, and educational institutions.

AYPF documented programs in Connecticut and Michigan that place Opportunity Youth in industry-recognized training programs with highly trained staff. These programs are especially beneficial to system-involved youth, whose education is often interrupted because of court involvement or multiple out-of-home placements. By blending education and workforce training, young people are able to learn and quickly apply real-world skills.

Cross-System Collaboration

The services that Opportunity Youth benefit from most are often siloed and difficult to access. This includes education, workforce, housing, transportation, child care, health, and mental health. Programs that are most helpful to youth combine the delivery of services through a wrap-around, holistic approach that does not require a young person to seek support from multiple providers and locations independently. Opportunity Youth are able to access continuing educational services as well as supports that provide job training, counseling, transportation, and address needs that previously had prevented them from engaging in education, employment training, or work.

AYPF documented programs and policies in Connecticut and Michigan that encourage cross-system collaboration both at the programmatic level and at the systems level through local efforts.

Investment in Professional Capacity

Opportunity Youth have unique needs that require supportive, knowledgeable professionals at all levels. First, direct-service, frontline staff should be caring, knowledgeable, and culturally competent so that they are able to respond to the range of needs of the young people they serve. This means ensuring caseworkers, program staff, and others are equipped with trauma-informed training, culturally relevant skills, and the personal capacity to care for youth and guide them to appropriate resources.

Additionally, professionals who make decisions about program operation should have knowledge about available resources that benefit Opportunity Youth. They also must know how to best operate at the intersection of many systems, including how to leverage funding from multiple sources and how to facilitate sustainable, cross-system interactions.

In our reports, AYPF documented programs throughout Connecticut and Michigan that are working to serve youth in foster care and juvenile justice at an individual level through mentorship and case management. These examples illustrate the critical importance of investment in staff training and organizational capacity building to ensure young people are effectively guided on to postsecondary pathways.

These three elements represent existing areas of support and programmatic investment that should serve as a foundation for broader conversations about ways that policy can support postsecondary pathways for Opportunity Youth.