



FORUM SUMMARY BRIEF: Advancing Pathways to Education and Workforce Opportunities for Systems-Involved Youth

September 25, 2017

Background

Young people involved in the child welfare and/or juvenile justice systems often face many barriers to long-term success and struggle to secure postsecondary opportunities and family-sustaining careers. On September 25, 2017, the American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF) organized a [Capitol Hill forum](#) featuring high-quality, research-supported community-based programs from across the country dedicated to supporting systems-involved youth. The purpose of the forum was to explore critical elements at the intersection of policy and practice that could lead to long-term success for systems-involved youth. The panel of experts included:

- **Jefferson Alvarez**, Youth Leader, UTEC, Lowell, MA
- **Gisele Castro**, Executive Director, Exalt Youth, New York, NY
- **Sam Cobbs**, Chief Executive Officer, First Place for Youth, Oakland, CA
- **Gregg Croteau**, Executive Director, UTEC, Lowell, MA
- **Monique Miles**, Director, Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund; Deputy Director, Aspen Institute for Community Solutions, Washington, D.C.
- **Leticia Peguero**, Executive Director, Andrus Family Fund (Moderator)

Jenna Tomasello, Policy Associate at AYPF, opened the forum and introduced the release of AYPF's latest publication, [Supporting Pathways to Long-Term Success for Systems-Involved Youth: Lessons Learned](#). This brief details the last two years of AYPF's work exploring best practices for supporting systems-involved youth. Through this body of work, AYPF was able to identify three key lessons that are crucial to supporting systems-involved youth on pathways to success in postsecondary education, training, and careers. These lessons also served as key themes to frame the panel's discussion: the need to leverage youth voice, provide youth with a comprehensive and diverse range of supports, and align policy and practice to best advance opportunities to secondary and postsecondary success for systems-involved youth. Jenna then introduced Leticia Peguero, the moderator for the panel discussion to follow.

Panelist Presentations

Before introducing the panelists, Leticia Peguero, Executive Director, Andrus Family Fund, offered the audience the following quote as a way to frame the conversation surrounding systems-involved youth:

"Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable...Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals."

– Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

In the context of this forum, she explained that understanding and creating pathways for the most vulnerable members of our society is what she and the Andrus Family Fund see as "human progress." The ability to work towards this progress requires not just "passion and dedication, but also the ability to

imagine that if they – vulnerable young people – are ok and doing well, then we are all doing well.” Peguero then introduced the rest of the panelists and asked them to provide a brief overview of their respective organizations and the work that they do.

Gregg Croteau, Executive Director, UTEC

Croteau began by detailing [UTEC’s](#) history. UTEC is located in Lowell, Massachusetts and was founded by young people to create a safe space in the midst of local gang violence. Since then, he explained that UTEC has gone through its own “theory of change,” to become a values-driven organization. Throughout all of

“A huge part of what we do is making sure that those who are closest to the problem are at the table and well prepared to be active members.”

- Gregg Croteau

UTEC’s work is a strong commitment to a set of values that is displayed front and center on a wall in the entrance to their main building. Although the list is long and varied, the values focus mainly on UTEC existing as both a [family and a catalyst](#) for positive change in the lives of systems-involved youth. UTEC serves youth ages 17-25 with the highest risk of impacting society through gang-related or other criminal involvement. UTEC [focuses](#) on reducing recidivism while

increasing employability and educational attainment. In Massachusetts, youth ages 18-24 have both the highest rate of incarceration and the highest rate of recidivism of any age group, with 52% facing recidivism within one year of incarceration, and 76% facing recidivism within three years. Among UTEC’s participants, however, the rate of recidivism drops to about 10%. [Street workers](#) play a major role in actively recruiting youth into the program. They focus not only on engaging youth in the community, but also youth that are incarcerated, so they have a productive place to go when they are released. Once at UTEC, youth participants have the opportunity to get involved in various social enterprises, work towards obtaining their GED, and actively participate in addressing issues in their community. Croteau finished by focusing on the importance of leveraging youth voice when he emphasized that “a huge part of what we do is making sure that those who are closest to the problem are at the table and well prepared to be active members.”

Jefferson Alvarez, Youth Leader, UTEC

Alvarez then offered his own story and experience with UTEC as a testimony to its value and effectiveness. Before he discovered UTEC, Alvarez explained that “he had a lot of serious problems in the street” and got in trouble numerous times for violence-related crimes. A [Transitional Coach](#) from UTEC approached him to tell him about the program and the sort of opportunities it could provide. After a period of time,

“Once I stepped foot in UTEC, I felt the mad love, I felt like I needed to be there.”

- Jefferson Alvarez

and with repeated recommendations from different members of UTEC, Alvarez finally decided to go. He remembered how “once I stepped foot in UTEC, I felt the mad love, I felt like I needed to be there.” UTEC showed him a new, more positive and productive type of fun as opposed to what he had been exposed to in the streets. Instead of engaging in risky or violent behavior, Alvarez got a job and was able to make money to support himself. Right now, he explained, he is working in a woodshop making cutting boards that are sold to local customers and larger companies such as Whole Foods. UTEC has a variety of [social enterprises](#) available to youth entering the program, beginning with UTEC’s mattress recycling operation as a transitional start into the workforce. From there, youth can move up to a position at the UTEC-owned cafe and catering business and then to the woodshop that Alvarez now works at. Through UTEC, Alvarez has been able to get a number of career and technical certifications, and has simultaneously been working to get his GED. In closing, Alvarez echoed his previous comments about UTEC being a safe place where disadvantaged and systems-involved youth can gain access to opportunities, skills, and a positive community.

[Gisele Castro](#), Executive Director, exalt youth

Castro introduced exalt, an [internship program](#) that includes a unique curriculum focused on cultural relevance for systems-involved youth. Instead of concentrating solely on workforce readiness, exalt centers its curriculum around larger scale societal issues that have affected all of the youth in its program. Exalt is the only organization in New York City to “serve youth on a voluntary basis.” This means that systems-involved youth ages 15-19 enroll in exalt of their own will, where they are then able to “select and think through their own road map.” Castro emphasized exalt’s commitment to providing a space for youth to exercise their free will, while recognizing that each individual’s needs and goals are different. The commonalities among all exalt participants, however, is that they are all systems-involved, and they

“Starting at week one, we focus on giving our youth the language around their experiences.”

- Gisele Castro

all have felt dissatisfied with their previous education’s ability to engage and challenge them. Upon entry into the program, 59% of exalt’s youth have prior suspensions, and the organization seeks to provide them with a curriculum that allows them to have fun and [feel engaged](#) with the learning process. Once accepted to the program, participants have six weeks of intensive training with a focus on giving these youth

the “language around their experiences.” Castro provided the example of their week one curriculum, which is centered on the school-to-prison pipeline. She explained that youth critically engage with this topic and the systemic issues that have allowed its creation and existence, while also discussing ways in which they can work to reverse it. The next part of the program is an eight-week internship. Exalt staff help each young person target a career path they want to explore, and they are then able to work with different organizations and businesses to gain experience. Castro finished by highlighting the importance exalt places on making each student a “cultural critic” so they can move into the workforce or other secondary opportunity [prepared with the skills](#) to make such a major life transition. Their curriculum is embedded with the challenges of thinking through how exalt “can shape students to navigate their world post-graduation.”

[Sam Cobbs](#), Chief Executive Officer, First Place for Youth (FPFY)

Cobbs began by sharing that [FPFY’s](#) vision is to “[eliminate those disparities](#) between young people who have experienced foster care and their non-foster care peers.” Foster care youth are [disproportionately more likely](#) to be incarcerated, live below the poverty line, and drop out of all levels of schooling than their non-foster peers. These, and other disparities, are what FPFY seeks to address. Cobbs then noted that there are two main avenues that the organization

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- Sam Cobbs

uses to work towards this: direct service and policy change. The direct service portion focuses largely on housing. Cobbs explained that the barriers youth face in securing stable housing is a major hindrance in their ability to enter postsecondary pathways. FPFY assists foster-care youth in [locating and then maintaining a stable living space](#). In terms of policy changes, FPFY also recognizes the need to address the greater societal issues that create disparities for foster care youth in the first place. They seek to do this by elevating the voices of those directly affected in order to have the most impact. Impact is something very important to the mission of FPFY, as Cobbs emphasized their commitment not just to [outcomes](#), but to also working with the youth that they can have the greatest impact on. He finished by touching on the role that data plays, noting that social workers with FPFY use the organization’s data when they are speaking with youth. The reason for this, Cobbs said, is because ultimately “young people don’t make bad decisions, they make misinformed decisions because they don’t have all of the information they need.”

PPFY seeks to provide that information to help young people make the best decisions for themselves moving forward.

[Monique Miles](#), Director, Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund & Deputy Director, Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions

Miles focused her presentation on the work of the [Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions](#) and [Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund](#) (OYIF). She explained that the OYIF is working with [twenty-four communities](#) across the country to “bring together cross-system and cross-sector partners” to actively work against the many systemic barriers faced by systems-involved youth. These partners include actors in K-12 and postsecondary systems, in philanthropy, in the private and nonprofit sectors, and in local governments. The Aspen Institute works to do this by focusing on the inequitable policies that ultimately maintain the barriers to youth success. They then consider policy changes that could be made to help bring systems together in supporting the pathways to success for these young people. She summed up the systemic work that this organization does as: “coordinating a *community-wide* strategy and a *community-wide* approach that leverages data to bring together a *community-wide* plan to reconnect young people to these education and workforce pathways.” Miles emphasized that the twenty-four communities the OYIF is working with are not only concentrated in urban centers, but in rural locations

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- Monique Miles

as well. They are committed to addressing youth issues in a geographically diverse set of communities ranging from New York City, to Hopi, Arizona, to southern rural Maine. Many of the rural communities have experienced disinvestment, an issue that Aspen is deliberately trying to address. Miles discussed the importance of implementing practices and strategies that are aligned with their values and mission. She explained that the saying “nothing about us without us” is a central tenet to their mission. Youth are always at the center of their problem identification and solution design process, both at the local and national levels. Keeping in mind these

values of equity, justice, and leveraging youth voice, Miles finished by explaining that the Institute is planning to expand their work to additional communities in the fight to dismantle inequitable policies and systems.

Moderated Panel Discussion

Following presentations from each panelist, Peguero moderated a discussion centered on three key themes: 1) leveraging youth voice; 2) providing youth with a diversity of supports and experiences; and 3) aligning youth-serving systems and policies.

[What is youth voice and how do you incorporate it into the mission of your organizations?](#)

According to Castro, young people need to understand that they have a voice and that their voice matters. The first week of exalt’s curriculum is dedicated to exploring the ways that their personal narratives can be used to change policy. Exalt enables young people to understand the language of the court. This provides youth with a better understanding of their individual verdicts and allows them to contribute to the greater discourse surrounding juvenile justice.

The problem, Croteau noted, is that young people have had their stories defined for them by others. At UTEC, youth use their voice and personal experiences to drive policymaking decisions, and using their voice as a lever for change also gives youth confidence to pursue their educational and workforce goals.

“Young people need more opportunities to collaborate with policymakers on youth-related legislation,” said Miles. Miles cited the [Southern Maine Youth Transition Network](#) where local policymakers in Maine reached out to youth to receive their input on [foster care legislation](#). The youth knew exactly what they needed, the various problems, and their solutions. The youth just required the support and the opportunity to voice their opinions.

The support UTEC gave Alvarez taught him how to “be himself,” and express himself in ways he could not in the streets. He has learned how to “read a room,” assess a given environment, and present himself professionally. Through UTEC, he strives to embody one positive value a day. “On the streets, they see a change in me,” he said.

[How do you provide culturally appropriate services to young people and why is it important to provide them?](#)

Castro pointed out that culturally relevant services can further engage young people in the school system, thereby decreasing suspension rates. Youth often are convinced of the idea that they cannot improve themselves. Repeating a grade reinforces the thought that they cannot succeed academically. There is an enormous amount of stress involved in the transition from school to prison and vice versa. Education, therefore, needs to go beyond academic requirements of a student to address their emotional needs as well. Exalt includes lessons on hope, critical thinking, resource management, and communication skills in their curriculum. Through internships, students can witness the practical value of these skills. Castro emphasized that the path to a student’s success involves setbacks, and educators need to be equipped to deal with them.

Croteau agreed that students need a safe space to fail. “UTEC isn’t merely equipped to be a second-chance program,” he said. “It has to be a seventh- or eighth-chance program.” When young people exit the juvenile justice system, their top priority is to avoid re-incarceration. Having three in-house enterprises allows UTEC to give young people jobs, which prevents them from joining gangs and committing crimes.

[What is the diversity of services and programs that you provide to address structural issues?](#)

Cobbs asked the audience to think critically about programs that serve opportunity youth. He argued that programs serving opportunity youth, a population defined broadly and inclusive of many subpopulations, can sometimes only benefit the top twenty percent of systems-involved youth and therefore not necessarily reaching the hardest to serve youth. “It is important to keep youth from falling through the cracks,” he said. “But it is just as important to pull up the people who have fallen through.”

He recommended that policies should call for the categorization of young people into subgroups and offer specialized help for their different needs. Citing ‘[Connected by 25](#),’ a paper by Stanford University, he explained that unless young people are connected to supports they need to thrive in the workforce by the age of 25, the income they could have generated will be lost.

[How do you collect data and utilize it to better serve youth? What data challenges would you like to tackle at the national level and how do you see that having an impact on policy?](#)

One of the biggest challenges in data collection, Miles noted, is for partners to agree upon what indicators to track and how to measure success and impact. There is a need for a system that brings youth-serving programs in agreement to streamline data, avoid duplicate services, and direct services to where they are

needed most. To Cobbs' point, the problem of opportunity youth, for instance, could be dealt with by disaggregating the data collected about them into subgroups.

Cobbs suggested improving the way data is given back to the people who use it every day. He called for more assessment and analysis of data, rather than its mere collection.

Audience Q&A

[How do organizations serving systems-involved youth assist youth with disabilities with secondary transitional services?](#)

Cobbs explained that FPFY works with youth that have both physical and learning disabilities. For individuals with learning disabilities, FPFY seeks to understand how they learn and perceive information in order to tailor their supports specifically to what will work best for them. For youth with physical disabilities, FPFY works to find housing that will help them feel safe and connected. Ultimately, however, Cobbs made it clear that they will also direct youth with disabilities to organizations and groups better equipped and specialized to help them address their specific barriers to success.

[What advice would you give to teachers working to reengage high school youth?](#)

Alvarez explained that it is vital for teachers to maintain an atmosphere of positivity and good energy in their classrooms and in their relationships with students.

[What legal services are offered by organizations working with systems-involved youth?](#)

Castro noted that although exalt does not have any legal representatives in the organization itself, they do work very closely with the District Attorney's office, judges, and additional attorneys. She urged legal groups that are looking to support organizations that serve systems-involved youth to focus on addressing positive changes that can be made at the policy level. She focused especially on fair sentencing laws and explained that there have been cases in New York City where judges and district attorneys have been able to reduce charges for some of the young people involved in exalt. She emphasized the significance of this, especially for first time offenders or youth with no serious prior offenses.

[Is there collaboration occurring between school districts and organizations to work with youth on reengagement?](#)

Castro explained that exalt designed a pilot program, called the Adopt-a-School Initiative, with the Nelson Mandela High School in Brooklyn where they implemented their program for students. Due to the success of the program, they are working with the Department of Education in New York City to expand that initiative and have met with principals from all the New York City schools.

Croteau then mentioned UTEC's commitment to helping systems involved youth obtain their high school equivalency diploma. Many of the youth at UTEC have children themselves, and Croteau explained that they have a multigenerational approach to working with school districts to "provide the continuum" of support systems-involved youth need in the process to reengagement.

[Have any of these organizations received funding through the Workforce Investment Opportunity Act \(WIOA\)?](#)

Croteau pointed out that a few years ago, UTEC "respectfully declined funding because it just didn't fit, and the outcomes they requested just weren't going to happen." He expressed frustration at the fact that funders often do not fully take into consideration the significant cost to do the work that these organizations do.

Cobbs added that FPFY has been able to access money from WIOA in some of their counties and cities. He emphasized that not every funding source that an organization gets is going to fit every young person involved in the organization. Therefore, at FPFY, they work hard to be creative and “blend and braid funding together” from different sources in order to cover the wide array of services they offer and youth that they serve. Miles followed up by explaining the similar approach that the Aspen Institute takes to braiding together funding from a diverse range of sources.

[What advice would you give to school personnel who work largely with disadvantaged youth?](#)

Alvarez thought back to his time in middle and high school and explained that one of his greatest issues was with teachers that were “always on their rules.” Instead, he emphasized that teachers and all school personnel need to be themselves. He explained that “being yourself, showing these kids that you’re there for them and yourself too” makes a world of difference in building connections and helping students feel supported and engaged in their learning. He continued by urging teachers to “show your inner you” to their students in order to be more empathetic.

Final Remarks: Recommendations to Policymakers

To finish, Jenna Tomasello asked each panelist for their recommendations to policymakers. Miles referred back to the concept of blending and braiding funding. She stated the need for more legislation that gives organizations and communities the flexibility to blend and braid funds. Cobbs called for reform around [Title IV-E](#) of the Social Security Act so that youth transitioning out of foster care are given the financial support they need to succeed. He also mentioned that more funding needs to be given to organizations that have seen results and can provide data to show that their approach and model is effective. It is vital to “fund only what works” because everything that exists to serve youth is not necessarily successful in doing so. Castro echoed a similar sentiment and explained that exalt is 99% privately funded because government funding does not allow for innovation. Therefore, in order to test their model, they had to look elsewhere for funding.

Croteau’s recommendation was to “decriminalize our young people as much and as often as we can.” Alvarez called for expungement and support for an [expungement bill](#) in Massachusetts. He expressed his desire to someday work with systems-involved youth in order to continue the work that had such an impact on him, but his record could prevent that from happening. Lastly, Peguero focused on the need for more models in this work that combine advocacy and direct service and greater funding for organizations that already follow such a model. She finished by calling on people to work towards transformative outcomes for youth as opposed to merely transactional ones.

For additional AYPF resources on systems-involved youth, visit our [Foster, Juvenile Justice, and Crossover Youth Resource Hub](#).