

MAKING OPPORTUNITIES
WORK FOR YOUTH

Expanding Proven Pathways to College and Careers



Youth Success Stories

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JOBS FOR THE FUTURE
IMPACT



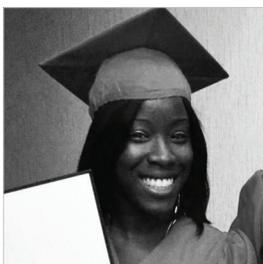
Adonis

finished a prison term at age 20, only to be arrested again a few months later.



Juan

lived for 15 years with foster families, then became homeless when he was too old for state care.



Rogdericka

worked long hours at low-wage jobs and barely slept so she could help support six siblings.

Little has been easy for these low-income young people from Boston, Hartford, and New Orleans. But their past no longer appears to be dictating the course of their future. After struggling through their high school years, all three are on the way to earning college credentials that have a good chance of providing a permanent path out of poverty.

Their accomplishments so far—and their ongoing efforts to overcome setbacks—are part of a new national initiative to dramatically improve the life trajectories of 16- to 24-year-olds disconnected from school and work, often called “opportunity youth.” The initiative, called Opportunity Works, is led by Jobs for the Future (JFF) in partnership with the Aspen Forum for Community Solutions in seven U.S. cities and metro areas (see page 20 for information on all of the sites). Nearly 1,000 youth enrolled the first year.

Each local partnership is a carefully constructed, cross-sector collaborative of community-based organizations, educational institutions, workforce development agencies, youth representatives, and youth-serving public systems. Strategies include a focus on engaging youth and young adults of color—a response to the national call to action from the My Brother’s Keeper initiative. Each site also involves youth who face daunting barriers such as homelessness, foster care, and juvenile justice system involvement.

The immediate goal is to expand individual opportunities. But each local collaborative plays an essential role in an equally significant long-term goal—contributing to a growing evidence base of what works to increase college completion and employment prospects for our



JOBS FOR THE FUTURE IMPACT

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nation’s most vulnerable youth. A third-party evaluation by Urban Institute will provide data on the impact on youth of participation in the initiative. Ultimately, Opportunity Works aims to scale up proven pathways—based on JFF’s Back on Track model—across the country, adapted to the needs of each community.

“Each community is taking a unique approach to implementing the Back on Track model with opportunity youth,” says Lili Allen, a JFF associate vice president who leads the organization’s work on opportunity youth (see the model on page 4). “Not only are the youth in each city gaining a leg up in the labor market, the field will reap lessons about how to build paths to postsecondary education and careers in a wide range of contexts—

from GED-to-college programs to charter schools serving adjudicated youth to ‘learn and earn’ programs with employers.”

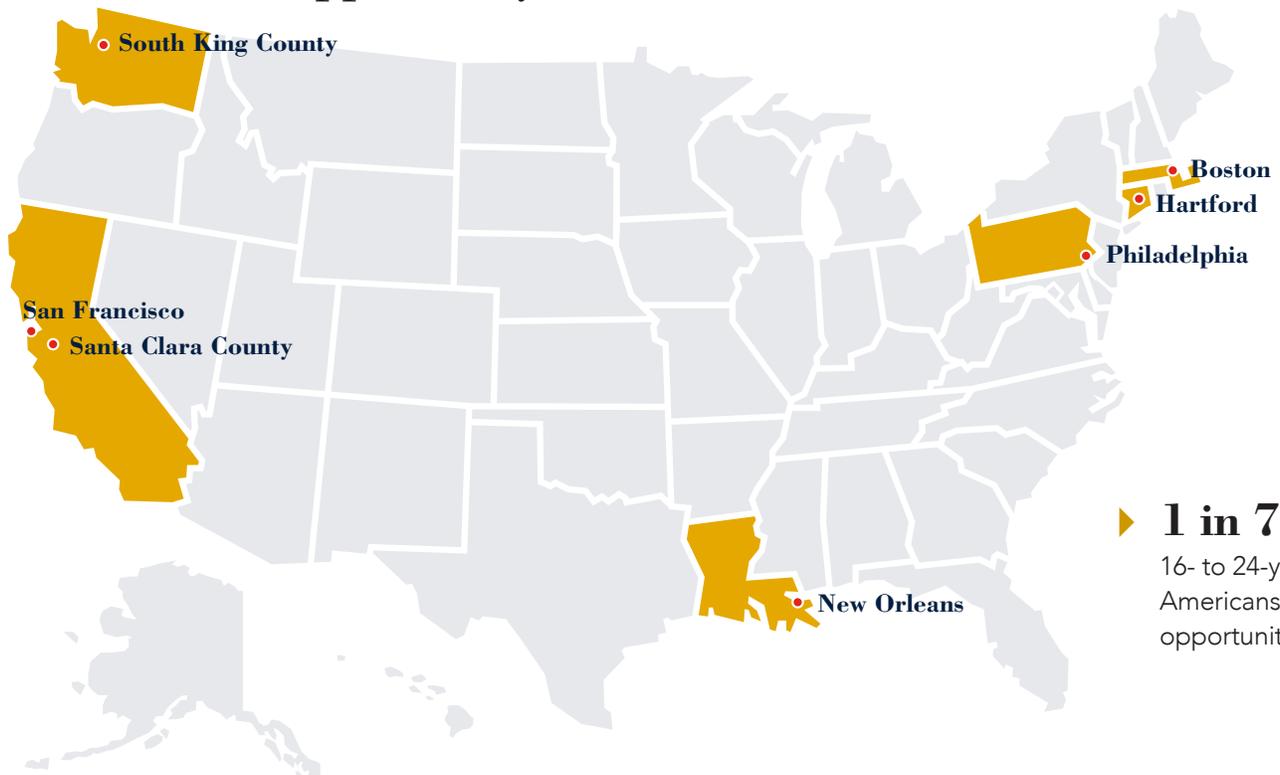
Halfway through the three-year effort, each community has already learned important lessons and is applying them to make improvements. Here are just a few:

- ▶ Understand why youth want jobs but help them see why they need careers;
- ▶ Allow enough time for young adults and their coaches to get to know and trust each other before expecting anyone to change;
- ▶ Create “win/win” relationships between community-based organizations and colleges to help youth persist in postsecondary education.

Several communities have already begun scaling up the pathways, and several have made policy and system changes to support sustainability. In Hartford, for example, the collaborative plans to expand to additional Connecticut communities with large numbers of opportunity youth.

“Having multiple approaches to expanding postsecondary pathways that lead to careers is critical for broadening opportunity for young people,” says Monique Miles, deputy director of the Aspen Forum for Community Solutions. “This initiative also holds significant promise to meet the unique needs of boys and young men of color and will provide timely, rich learnings for the entire field.”

Opportunity Works Communities



▶ **1 in 7**
16- to 24-year-old Americans are opportunity youth

COMMUNITIES TAKING OWNERSHIP TOGETHER

Working with innovators in education and youth development, JFF has designed structured, supported pathways that help young people finish high school, enter postsecondary education, and earn credentials that lead to careers. Based on years of experience working with promising programs, JFF developed the Back on Track model to guide growth in this emerging field. The model provides specific strategies for reengaging and supporting off-track youth to complete a postsecondary credential with value in the local labor market (see graphic below).

Opportunity Works helps JFF spread the model across the country, through a \$6 million Social Innovation Fund grant from the Corporation for National and Community Service, matched by new investments from national and regional funders (see list of funders on page 21).

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The initiative builds on work that the Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund, led by Aspen with JFF, has been doing since 2012 supporting local efforts to forge connections among community-based organizations (CBOs), systems serving youth, education and training providers, and employers in high-growth fields to improve outcomes for opportunity youth. It brings together partners from across sectors to focus on a single problem—an approach known as “collective impact.”

The “backbone,” or lead organization, helps build the necessary partnerships between:

- ▶ CBOs, which are on the front lines of helping youth overcome their many obstacles;
- ▶ Postsecondary partners, which provide advanced academic and occupational study; and

- ▶ Employers, who provide entry-level jobs and career advancement opportunities.

Although community colleges have a long tradition of being open-access institutions, they are not all equipped to provide the intensity of services many opportunity youth need. Most of the CBOs leave their doors open to any young person they have served to come back for guidance and advice after their transition to community college.

“These partnerships are absolutely critical for the opportunity youth population,” says Mamadou Ndiaye, a JFF associate director who leads technical assistance and coaching for Opportunity Works. “The fact is neither the CBO nor the college alone can give young people all the support they need to be successful.”

JFF provides essential expertise: technical assistance, on-site coaching, and leading a peer learning community of all grantees with monthly calls and two convenings each year. A major focus is documenting the successes, challenges, lessons learned, and promising practices. Urban Institute is conducting a formal evaluation for JFF, to measure the initiative’s impact and provide insights into how to replicate the most promising results.

This brief features work in three of the seven cities—Boston, Hartford, and New Orleans—where partners are focusing on one part of the Back on Track model, known as “postsecondary bridging.” Bridge programs provide development of academic and postsecondary success skills, exposure to postsecondary experiences and expectations, and guidance in selecting a college program of study. (See page 20 for summaries of work in the four other communities.)

JFF’s Back on Track Model

Enriched Preparation

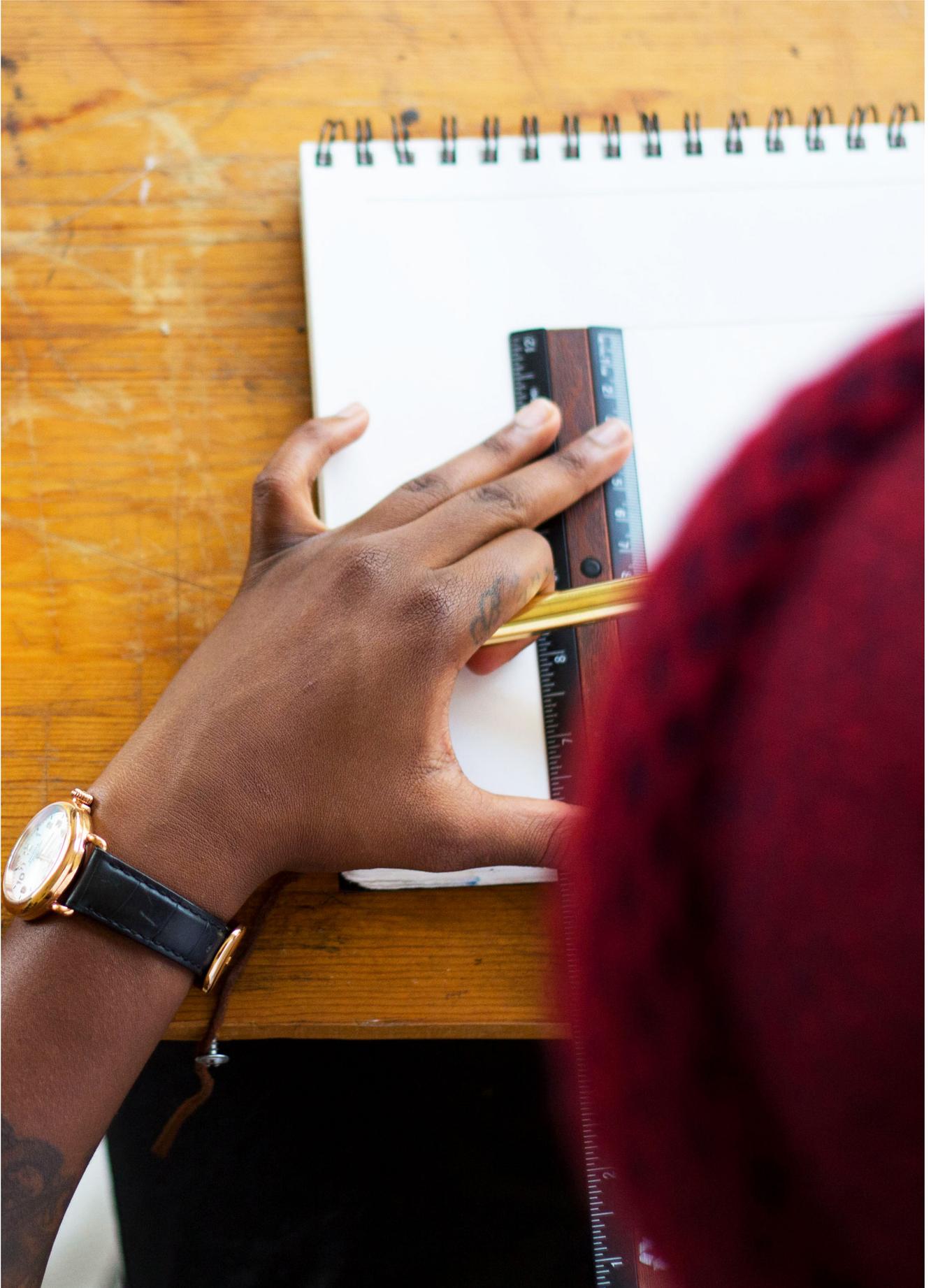
Integrates high-quality college- and career-ready instruction with strong academic and social supports

Postsecondary Bridging

Builds college/career-ready skills and provides informed transition counseling

First-year Support

Offers appropriate supports in the first year of college to ensure postsecondary persistence and success



BOSTO



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FIRST REACHING, THEN TEACHING

When Boston community leaders counted 11,000 young people out of school and out of work in the city, few were surprised. But one fact did strike them: The majority of the disconnected youth actually had finished high school, but they weren't using their diplomas to pursue further education, training, or career employment.

After years of hard-fought gains in high school graduation rates, more than 6,300 young adults between the ages of 20 and 24 had earned a high school credential, but were not enrolled in higher education or pursuing a career. There were hardly any services that were tailored to this particular group, despite its size. And community groups couldn't even figure out how to find them. Because no single state or local agency takes ownership of these young people, there is no school department list of names and addresses.

As part of Opportunity Works, Boston opened a Connection Center in 2015, to provide outreach, assessment, and referrals to postsecondary and training programs for disconnected high school graduates. Modeled after Boston's Re-Engagement Center for returning dropouts, it features success coaches who reach out to young people, assess their strengths and interests, and provide a supported referral to a Back on Track college or occupational training program. The Boston Private Industry Council, which co-convenes the Opportunity Youth Collaborative with the Boston Opportunity Agenda, partners with Boston Public Schools to run the Re-Engagement Center. X-Cel Education is the CBO contracted to run the Connection Center.

Connection Center and Re-Engagement Center staff team up to conduct community outreach—including knocking on doors, distributing flyers, and setting up “pop-up” booths at basketball tournaments and busy shopping areas. The idea is to gain young people's attention and explain some of the education and training opportunities available. They talk to youth on street corners, in train stations, or wherever they can be found.

▶ **11,000**
Opportunity
Youth

▶ **25%**
of city youth
age 18 to 24
(approx.)

Most important, the outreach workers are people from the same distressed neighborhoods that are home to the youth they're trying to reach.

"You have to reach them before you can teach them," says Kedan Harris, director of College Connections for College Bound Dorchester, quoting a longtime instructor. "The staff doing the work on the front lines, they were those students a few short years ago. They come from those neighborhoods, they were in those crews before, there is a language they can speak to those guys. It doesn't come easy; our veterans will tell you it takes probably five different times to break through. But it's worth it." (See student profile on next page.)

In just the first year, several hundred young people sought services from the Connection Center. They sit down with staff who look a lot like them but are a few years older. During a careful intake and skills assessment, the staff help youth identify career interests and personal barriers, and develop a personalized plan for each one to start education and training. Everyone is paired with a coach who follows their progress and provides advice, encouragement, and a push in the right direction when needed.

Boston aims to develop a wide range of options—a portfolio of possibilities, not just a program. The plan is to leverage adult training programs and to provide bridging and retention support to students attending community college. Staff spend time helping youth design long-range plans, but also find short-term employment. The range of postsecondary pathways is impressive: training programs leading to high-demand careers in finance, health care, green building maintenance, and IT; community college programs of study; "earn and learn" options like Year Up. The focus is on helping youth find their "best fit" option.

“You have to reach them before you can teach them...The staff doing the work on the front lines, they were those students a few short years ago. They come from those neighborhoods... There is a language they can speak to those guys.”

Developing a network of local organizations, which tap into a variety of public and private funding streams, is a key piece of Boston's strategy to sustain and scale this work. Four partner programs—Asian American Civic Association, Inquilinos Boricuas en Accion, and JVS, as well as College Bound Dorchester—provide specialized college bridging and navigation support, employment coaching and referrals, and job training for opportunity youth. Nine other organizations have agreed to refer

to and accept referrals from the Connection Center, and staff continue to expand the network among local programs and institutions.

Kathy Hamilton of the Boston Private Industry Council notes several lessons the Boston partners have learned so far: the need to synchronize the work with community colleges, the importance of social media in reaching youth, and the importance of part-time employment that will support their participation in education and training.

The biggest challenge is easy to understand, if not solve: Opportunity youth need to pay their bills, just like everyone else. So how does one convince a young person to make a short-term investment in education for a long-term payoff?

Hamilton notes, "What we think is good for young people is not always what they want. We've learned that most young people want jobs, a quick fix, or short-term occupational training. But the reality is that, in Boston, without a college degree, you're not getting far up the salary chain. You need a postsecondary degree to make it into the middle class. We have to help these young adults look at their situations differently and help them think differently about their choices."

ADONIS ALVAREZ



IN PRISON AT 19, COLLEGE AT 21

Adonis Alvarez spent his 19th birthday in prison, and his 20th. Even though he had earned a GED there, when he got out, he went right back to doing what he thought he did best—selling drugs. Within months, he was arrested again, on his way to spending his 21st birthday behind bars, too.

“I’ve got no time for school; I’ve got to pay the bills,” Adonis recalls thinking when he got out. “I’m just going to go back to the same stuff I was doing before. In the neighborhood, you see all these guys, they got nice jewels and cars, they’re partying all day, and the money comes so quick. You could go to work and make \$70 a day, or you could hang out and make \$1,000 a night.”

Adonis was back in court in March 2016 when his probation officer convinced a judge to let him try a college transition program called College Bound Dorchester (CBD).

Ready to make a major change, he showed up the next day. After meeting staff and learning about the opportunities, he agreed to give it a chance.

If he continues to attend class, meet with a college readiness advisor, set goals, and make good decisions, Adonis will start at a Boston community college before he turns 22. Recently he has considered construction, computers, and social work. “I needed to try something new. Obviously, what I was doing wasn’t working,” says Adonis, who was in prison on a gun charge.

CBD is part of a Boston-area network to improve educational and employment prospects for opportunity youth including those who have been involved with the criminal justice system. Boston’s effort is part of the national Opportunity Works initiative led by Jobs for the Future with support from the Aspen Forum for Community Solutions.

Will Dunn, a CBD college readiness advisor, says that at first Adonis came to class just to pass the time. Will, 41, understands like few people can. As a teen, he was in a gang in the same Boston neighborhood, and served five years in prison for armed robbery and other crimes. Will earned a GED in prison, attended college when he got out, and later secured a job at CBD.

It took weeks of daily meetings and difficult conversations just to gain Adonis’ trust, Will says. Eventually, “his attitude turned around.” They

talked about why schoolwork has to come first, how he can be a better father to his young son. “On the streets, for your image, you’ve got to have that gun and be ready to pull that trigger. But for your image in the world, you’ve got to go to school,” Will told him, “You’ve got to go hard to get your life together.”

At a construction site, Will explained the benefits of joining a union; he also made a case for learning to be a manager or a business owner. “It’s opening your mind up to different things,” he says. “At least you see avenues and can make a better decision on what you’re trying to do.”

CBD gives students a \$400 weekly stipend so they can afford to focus on school. Classes emphasize social, emotional, and employability skills as much as reading, writing, and math. “It’s hard when you start and you remember nothing,” says Adonis, who didn’t finish 10th grade. “But they eased me right in, and if I needed one on one, they met with me after school.”

“I’m never going to get those years back,” he adds, recalling birthdays with makeshift cakes of prison pastries. “Now I feel so much more calm, life is so much more calm. You don’t have to look over your shoulder; you don’t have to worry about nothing, like oh damn, I got a bill due next Friday. I know this is definitely going to help me. **It’s been helping me already. The environment changes your mood.**” ■

HARTE



ORD

- ▶ **4,000**
Opportunity
Youth
- ▶ **59%**
of city youth
age 18 to 24
(approx.)

MEETING AN ECONOMIC IMPERATIVE

In and around the city of Hartford, thousands of good job openings are expected within a few years and community leaders aim to fill many with opportunity youth.

By 2020, tens of thousands of advanced manufacturing workers in Connecticut are expected to retire. The more than 4,000 opportunity youth between 18 and 24 years old in Hartford are a potential replacement workforce in waiting.

Until recently, few formal efforts had been made to build post-high-school pathways to middle-skills jobs in the region. Now, as part of Opportunity Works, the area's workforce investment board is leveraging its cross-sector collaborative—called the Hartford Opportunity Youth Collaborative—to develop a career pathway system focused exclusively on opportunity youth. The work revolves around the high-demand fields of allied health, insurance/finance, and advanced manufacturing, with plans for more.

The primary target population is young men of color, who make up almost half of the opportunity youth in the city.

"We frame it as an economic imperative," says Alex Johnson, CEO of Capital Workforce Partners, the nonprofit that serves as the regional workforce development board and the backbone organization for Opportunity Works in the Hartford area.

The most robust program so far is the advanced manufacturing pathway, a partnership between Our Piece of the Pie (OPP), a community-based organization that has served residents for more than 40 years, and Asnuntuck Community College in Enfield, 21 miles north of Hartford. OPP recruits opportunity youth in barber shops, malls, and street corners, assesses their academic and career skills, assigns them a coach, and enrolls them in a bridge program to prepare them for college. Once enrolled at Asnuntuck, youth get follow-up coaching, homework help, financial assistance for transportation, an internship, and peer supports. Asnuntuck provides space on campus for OPP to meet with youth. Students who finish the intensive one-year program earn a certificate in manufacturing technology—either manufacturing, welding, or electronics—a field with relatively high starting wages and opportunities for career growth.

While the potential payoff is big, the program is tough, the commute is long, and persistence has been a problem. A number of young people initially dropped out because of the length and intensity, says Hector Rivera, OPP's chief operating officer.

Over the past year, OPP has been trying to figure out how to shorten the training time, in hopes of retaining more students. They hope to create a program that can be completed in just six months—half the time—with Goodwin College in Hartford.

A key to success is providing different options for different people. "We have to achieve small wins with them," Rivera says. "If they come in needing skill building, we have to lay out a clear plan for them so they can touch and feel it. Our approach is to make sure they feel they are achieving something so they experience success along the way."

A modified "boot camp" experience for two weeks gives students a feel for college and the chance to see what it takes to adapt. The organization also provides a two-week "Career Competency Development Training" program in 12 areas, designed with the local workforce development board, including literacy and numeracy, job seeking, job keeping, and customer service skills. Students also can brush up on academic skills and positive habits, such as time management and study skills, and receive tutoring if needed. Youth can earn stackable credentials in areas that are needed across many industries, such as customer service and OSHA-10, which covers occupational safety related to advanced manufacturing.

"We spend a lot of time on relationship building with the young people," Rivera explains, "Because most of them have come from three, four, or five other programs where they didn't see success."

Staff build an individual service plan for each student, focusing on immediate needs, then longer-term priorities. OPP gives them food, pays for textbooks, buys work uniforms, and finds other organizations to

fill in gaps outside their expertise, such as housing, transportation, child care, and mental health issues. (See student profile on next page.)

All participants do a six-week internship—with each intern paid by OPP. Students are assessed regularly on attendance, punctuality, and other work readiness skills. Any score below a 3 on a 1-to-5 scale prompts immediate staff intervention and additional support.

Several young people have chosen to forego employment to continue their education after earning an associate's degree in advanced manufacturing. Five students so far have decided to pursue a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering. Although they could have found immediate work paying \$16 to \$18 per hour, they took a longer view and opted to continue college for two more years in order to expand their skills, allowing them to earn \$38 to \$40 upon completion.

A second Hartford-based organization, Blue Hills Civic Association, provides similar services as part of Opportunity Works. Its primary focus is allied health through a partnership with Capital Community College and Goodwin College in Hartford.

The organizations also provide ongoing supports to students who enroll in college. Staff on campus help them navigate

course selection, explain the financial aid process, and negotiate payment plans for some students.

Because the backbone organization is a workforce intermediary that manages federal workforce dollars, and has strong employer representation on the workforce development board, Hartford is in a position to scale regionally and to sustain its work with public funding. The network is branching out to area communities with large opportunity youth populations—New Britain and East Hartford—by expanding the Hartford Opportunity Youth Collaborative, developing career pathway programming accessible to more opportunity youth and young men of color, and aligning all young adult career pathway programs to JFF's Back on Track model.

“We spend a lot of time on relationship building with the young people, because most of them have come from three, four, or five other programs where they didn't see success.”

FROM HOMELESS TO HELPING HIMSELF

Juan Colon had just started college when the best things in his life disappeared. His cousin, grandmother, and best friend, who helped him endure 15 years of family difficulties that kept him in foster care, all died within a couple of months. The toll was too much; he left school, lost his apartment, and landed on the street.



Juan worked low-wage jobs as long as they lasted and stayed with friends and relatives until he tried a Hartford community organization called Our Piece of the Pie, which had previously helped out one of his brothers. He walked through the doors in early 2016, and he's been back every day.

Reva Mingo, an OPP youth development specialist, helped Juan find a temporary apartment, evaluated his academic, interpersonal, and occupational skills, and arranged a paid internship in customer service. Then she helped him return to college, where he studied for a certificate in administrative medical assisting, a high-demand field in Hartford and surrounding towns.

"I didn't know I needed help, but I really needed them," Juan, now 23, says of OPP. "They gave me the structure, so all of the pieces are falling together. Now I can see my future; I can see myself in the community."

OPP is part of a Hartford-area network called Opportunity Works that builds bridges to postsecondary education and career credentials for

opportunity youth—young people ages 16 to 24 who are disconnected from school and work. Many struggle to stabilize their lives after becoming too old for the state's foster care system.

Juan—and Reva—were just getting started in the fall of 2016. Permanent housing was the priority. The apartment was a two-month deal. Juan never again wants to walk the streets all night, fighting to stay awake because he has no place to sleep. He needs a stable income and enough savings for a security deposit in order to secure a home long term. A weekend security guard job fell through, but Reva has other ideas. Meanwhile, Juan started evening classes at Capital Community College.

"He doesn't have family support, so OPP finds all of the resources he needs," Reva says. "But he's very strong and he's very self-motivated. He wants to get to the place where, even though he was at the bottom, he wants to get to the top."

The work is extremely challenging, but Reva grew up in Hartford and knows where to find what her clients need. She was able to become even

more effective when the Opportunity Works funding came through and OPP could hire additional staff. Her caseload fell in half, to about 35, allowing her to focus on the multiple needs of her clients.

Near the end of 2016, Juan earned his certificate, and in early 2017, he was waiting to hear from Hartford Hospital about a part-time paid internship as an administrative medical assistant, which can lead to a permanent position. He could continue on for an associate's degree in the future. But for now, the certificate is enough to virtually guarantee Juan work at a decent wage, says OPP workforce development specialist Chaz Gatewood. And, most important, he found permanent housing—with the cost covered for a full year.

Juan's work history includes retail, demolition, painting, warehouse, babysitting and a few activities he wouldn't list on a resume. Ultimately, he wants to be a cook, but he knows that must be a longer-term goal. **"Right now, it's let me get these credentials onto my resume," he says. "Then it's my turn to help myself." ■**



NEW OR

EXPANDING THE OPTIONS

New Orleans Parish is home to nearly 7,000 opportunity youth, and unfortunately, there have been few post-high-school options available for them.

But Opportunity Works is changing that—in partnership with the Cowen Institute at Tulane University, Delgado Community College, Bard Early College of New Orleans, and the Youth Empowerment Project (YEP), whose adult education program is the city's largest literacy provider to young people ages 16 to 24.

"What we're trying to do is build a model and a landscape to better integrate really high-quality supports for opportunity youth," says Amy Barad of the Cowen Institute who oversees the Opportunity Works initiative in the New Orleans area. "When we started this work, there were so few college and career bridging opportunities available for this population, and where they did exist, they weren't aligned with other programs in order to create pathways."

OpportunityWorks funding has allowed the New Orleans organizations to add staff to serve more young people more effectively—for example, through case managers for each young person who walks through the door. Known as "navigators," they help participants create an individual success plan outlining educational and career goals. Navigators stick with their students for six months to a year after program completion. Current occupational pathway options are in health care, IT/creative digital media, and skilled crafts.

Tulane's "Earn and Learn" program, which provides paid work experience and on-the-job training linked with college classes, is doubling its capacity. Delgado Community College's Accelerated Career Education (ACE) provides a three-semester program that starts with a non-credit, industry-based course and ends with for-credit courses leading to industry-based credentials in demand in the region. ACE also supplies success coaches who help students persist in college through social, personal, and other barriers.

LEANS

- ▶ **7,000**
Opportunity Youth
- ▶ **39%**
of city youth age 18 to 24 (approx.)

YEP is the first step for young people who need more intensive basic preparation for college and career opportunities, such as communication, working in groups, and other academic and “work readiness” skills. YEP also provides an array of critical social services, such as helping participants open a bank account, obtain official identification, and pay for basic necessities like clothing, books, and transportation. (See student profile on next page.)

Michele Seymour and Samantha Miller of YEP are the organization’s first staff dedicated to focusing intensively on postsecondary bridging and meaningful employment for opportunity youth. They say coaching and collaboration are key to growing students’ academic, cognitive, and social-emotional skills to be college and career ready.

There are many circumstances that can create barriers that people must overcome in order to persist through postsecondary education. For example, child care may be difficult to find at an affordable price or may fall through. Students may not have stable housing. They may have difficulty paying utility bills. They may run out of bus tokens and be unable to get to class. When immediate needs are not met, it becomes increasingly difficult to focus on college coursework.

Among the services that young people find most inspiring are the career exploration workshops held at YEP’s offices throughout the year. For example, over four weeks last summer, students explored their skills and interests and learned about a variety of jobs, including the annual pay and the cost of education and training for each. Seeing all of their options laid out before them, many completely changed their ideas and opinions about the kind of work they wanted to do. “It was great to see the young people explore careers and develop a better sense of what career paths they wanted to take, and what steps would be needed to get there,” Samantha Miller says. Surveys of students who completed the workshop found that 90 percent gained confidence in what they wanted to do and in their ability to gain the skills they need moving forward.

Opportunity Works also provides professional development and technical assistance to ensure the bridge programming prepares youth for what comes next. A new shared data system with the 20 organizations of the Employment and Mobility Pathways Linked for Opportunity Youth (EMPLOY) collaborative is critical, increasing appropriate referrals based on student need and interest and tracking outcomes.

Bard Early College teaches an intensive writing and reading seminar two days per week for Earn and Learn and YEP students. Students who complete the seminar can receive college credit through Bard, which runs early college programs around the country. As Aundrea Gregg, manager of Opportunity Works in New Orleans, says: “Academic scaffolding is something we’re looking at much more intensely. Everyone starts at a different developmental academic stage, so we need to think about what supports they need.”

One key to New Orleans’ scale model is creating tools for quality implementation across programs. For

example, Bard is developing a “playbook” that will outline instructional strategies that are most effective for opportunity youth. It is intended to hold students to high academic standards while ensuring that lessons are engaging and relevant. So far, a key feature has been co-teaching teams, composed of a Bard instructor and a CBO staff member who already knows the students and can make quick adjustments to adapt to individual needs.

The New Orleans model aims to create a set of pathways that can meet people along a developmental continuum, each serving individuals at a different stage of life, rather than being in competition with one another for students. All of the programs are being refined and will continue to change and improve in the coming years.

“It was great to see the young people explore careers and develop a better sense of what career paths they wanted to take, and what steps would be needed to get there.”



STILL REBUILDING AFTER KATRINA

Rogdericka Ellis never had a chance to go to high school after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans. She doesn't like to dwell on details, but says her mother found it "a little hard to get things together" with seven children, no home, and no job.

The family squeezed into temporary housing and Rogdericka barely slept so she could help care for her siblings while working part time. But her mother eventually rallied and Rogdericka returned to school. At 18, she found a program built for teens like her—the Youth Empowerment Project, the city's largest literacy organization, specializing in young adults. With several years of academic, emotional, and practical support, she earned a GED and went on to college. After finishing

an associate's degree from Delgado Community College, she is studying elementary education at Southern University at New Orleans.

"They definitely had my back 100%," Rogdericka says of her YEP advisors, with whom she remains close. "It has definitely impacted my life in a great way."

YEP is part of a New Orleans-area network that works to dramatically improve life trajectories for opportunity youth. Many grew up with parents who struggled to support their families before Katrina, not just after. JFF leads the Opportunity Works initiative, which provides bridges to college and careers in seven cities, including New Orleans, with support from the Aspen Forum for Community Solutions.

YEP's postsecondary transition coordinator, Michele Seymour, was Rogdericka's go-to staff member. She helped Rogdericka apply for financial aid and get a job as a YEP tutor, which helped cover expenses while making it ultra-convenient to continue to receive the services she needed during her transition to college. That became essential when she found herself in several difficult courses for her nursing degree.

One day Rogdericka broke down at work because she again failed an English course she had taken three times. She was ready to give up. Michele convinced her that she hadn't failed life, and she could still finish a degree. Would she consider a different

major? Rogdericka chose general studies and completed her credential.

"If I got stuck, I'd stay stuck," Rogdericka, now 25, recalls of her younger self. "It's like a life lesson Michele taught me, when you're stuck on something, you need to move on, and come back to it later—and get help to figure it out."

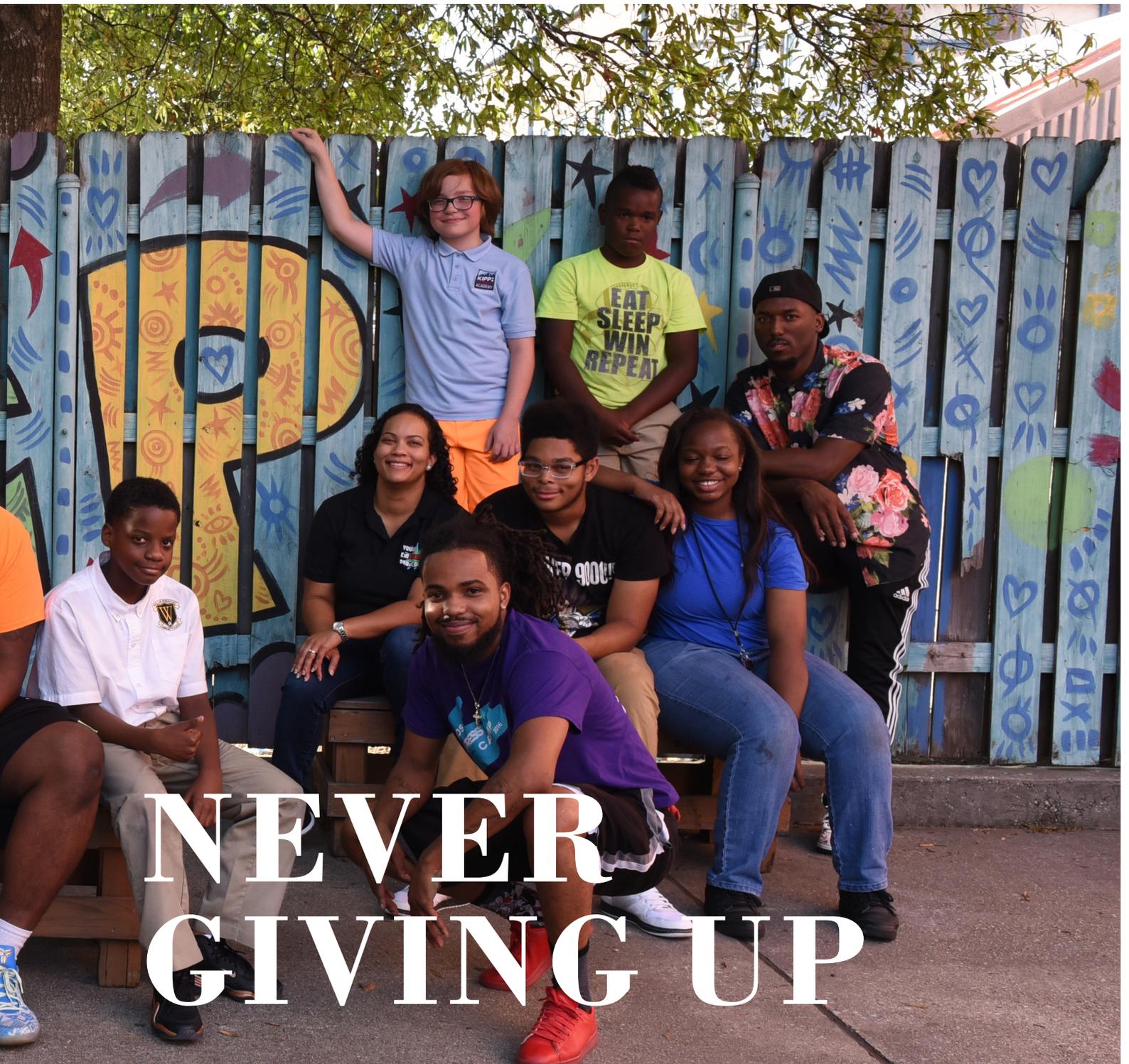
Although she moved on from tutoring over a year ago, she stays in touch with Michele and other staff. "Anything that I'm unsure about now, I still call," she says.

And between beginning a new college program, working at the New Orleans Boys and Girls Club through AmeriCorps, running her own candle-making business, and helping her mother and siblings, Rogdericka still gets little sleep. But she has her own apartment and is holding things together.

She will always be grateful for YEP's personal and professional support, and plans to use those lessons with the children she teaches now and in the future. "When I would get upset about something, they'd help me to calm down and not let my facial expressions give away how I'm feeling—how to leave my problems at the door and remain professional," Rogdericka recalls. **"Now I use that at my job and at school. I work with kids and try to show them how to do it."** ■



Courtesy Youth Empowerment Project



NEVER GIVING UP

For the dozens of Opportunity Works staff around the country, the resources, professional development, and technical assistance the initiative provides are crucial to helping them meet the needs of the young people they serve. But there's another essential element.

As Mark Culliton, CEO of Boston-based College Bound Dorchester, told professionals at a JFF national conference, one of the most important things his organization does is to work with staff constantly

to break down their stereotypes and old belief systems—even though most come from the same neighborhoods as their students. It is all too common for adults to internalize the same low expectations many young people have for themselves.

“Fundamentally, you have to believe in the genius of that young person,” Culliton says. “They don't think they're capable of graduating college. But if you do, they rise to that occasion.” ■

OPPORTUNITY WORKS ACROSS THE COUNTRY

In 2015, JFF and the Aspen Forum for Community Solutions selected seven community organizations across the country for three-year grants from the Social Innovation Fund to develop education and career pathways for youth who were disconnected from school and work. The work in Boston, Hartford, and New Orleans is profiled in this publication. The following are summaries of the work of the four other grantees:

PHILADELPHIA

With the Philadelphia Youth Network serving as the backbone organization, the College Success Program (CSP) offers postsecondary bridging within the city's four E3 Centers, neighborhood-based drop-in centers that provide academic and employment supports to youth ages 16-21 who are disconnected from school and work. Students are recruited into the CSP through the centers' existing population. CSP staff members work in coach-instructor pairs, providing college and career readiness instruction and individualized support to about 80 enrollees per year.

The program is divided into two phases. During the first phase, participants enroll in college readiness courses that focus on key academic strategies and college readiness competencies, alternating daily between academic content (taught by instructors) and non-cognitive skills workshop (taught by coaches). In the second phase, students take credit-bearing college courses at the Community College of Philadelphia while CSP staff provide supports that include assisting with enrollment, monitoring individual's school experiences, and helping students plan for the next steps in their postsecondary education. CSP staff continue to work with students after they complete the bridge program and enroll at the Community College of Philadelphia (or another credential-offering postsecondary institution) for their next one to two semesters.

SAN FRANCISCO

Bay Area Community Resources and its partners in the Road Map to Peace collaborative are providing education, workforce, and wraparound services to 18- to 24-year-old youth of color, with a particular focus on Latino and African-American males who have been involved with gangs or otherwise exposed to violence.

Outreach for recruitment is conducted by youth leaders and through community organization partners and the justice system.

Reengaged youth enroll in Five Keys Charter School, a Sheriff's Office-sponsored state charter school that offers high school equivalency and diploma-granting programs along with dual-enrollment opportunities that help youth become college ready. At the same time, community-based organizations provide wraparound support services and case management, as well as self-efficacy, violence prevention, and career/employment readiness training. Core collaborative partners are also creating subsidized employment opportunities aligned with career and education pathways to help young people develop work readiness skills and prepare for further and more structured technical training.

SANTA CLARA COUNTY, CA

Kids in Common and its partners in the Santa Clara Opportunity Youth Partnership (OYP) have three key strategies: 1) strengthen and expand reengagement options at the San Jose Conservation Corps and Charter School and the Santa Clara County Office of Education's Opportunity Youth Academies; 2) co-locate staff "navigators" at these sites to help remove barriers to engagement and provide extra supports for system-involved, homeless, and pregnant/parenting youth; and 3) work with navigators and school staff to provide career and college exploratory experiences and activities that help young people develop long-term goals that incorporate further education and training.

The County Office of Education, working with OYP partners, received charter school designation for County Opportunity Youth Academies that brought additional professional development funding and a new program design and curriculum partner—SiaTech—to the network. Charter school status gives Santa Clara stable, per-pupil funding to support the Opportunity Youth Academies long term. The inclusion of SiaTech enables programs to utilize a strong computer-based learning platform, offer a tested blended-learning model with more student time onsite, and offer students more career exploratory experience, dual-credit offerings, early career certification coursework, and help in

transitioning to postsecondary education and training. The Opportunity Youth Academies currently serve 175 youth with capacity for more than 300. They are aiming to expand their capacity to up to 500 youth per year in three years.

SOUTH KING COUNTY, WA

United Way of King County and the Community Center for Education Results, with their partners in the Road Map Project collaborative, are implementing postsecondary bridging in reengagement schools and programs that focus on helping youth attain a high school credential. Seattle Education Access (SEA) is a local organization that has developed a set of postsecondary bridging and retention services that show success in helping youth—especially youth of color—succeed in college.

SEA ‘nests’ education navigators in reengagement schools and programs so that these staff can build relationships with youth while they are working on gaining their high school credential and when they are in range of graduation, providing them with small-group and individualized college access and navigation services. These services include creating a college funding plan, facilitating career exploration, fostering self-advocacy, and preparing for postsecondary placement tests. Navigators also provide ongoing supports to students as they transition to and through college. SEA education advocates work closely with case managers at the reengagement schools and programs, and supplement their supports through partnering with AmeriCorps members and college counseling services. ■

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FOR INFORMATION

on how to help fund Opportunity Works, or about JFF services to build education and employment pathways for opportunity youth, contact Lili Allen, Associate Vice President, lallen@jff.org, or 617.728.4446 x105.



JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

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