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# How Apprenticeship Programs for Opportunity Youth Stay Resilient Through the COVID-19 Recession

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## AT A GLANCE

This report looks at strategies for sustaining and expanding Registered Apprenticeship pathways for opportunity youth amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The report draws on promising practices from workforce boards and community-based organizations, and addresses topics including the digital divide, occupational mobility, and the provision of services and supports.

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## About SPR

Social Policy Research Associates is a small employee-owned firm (ESOP) that helps public agencies, foundations and nonprofit organizations, and education and workforce leaders improve work, learning, and livelihoods in America's diverse communities. SPR's research, evaluation, and technical assistance services have supported evidence-informed, equity-focused, and human-centered solutions since its founding in 1991.

## About JFF's Center for Apprenticeship and Work-Based Learning

JFF is a national nonprofit that drives transformation in the American workforce and education systems. For more than 35 years, JFF has led the way in designing innovative and scalable solutions that create access to economic advancement for all, including apprenticeship and work-based learning. These programs are proven methods for connecting people to good careers while providing employers with skilled workers. The Center consolidates JFF's broad skills and expertise on these approaches into a unique offering. We partner with employers, government, educators, industry associations, and others to build and scale effective, high-quality programs. Visit <https://www.jff.org/center>.

## About JFF's Modernizing Apprenticeship for Opportunity Youth Project

JFF's Modernizing Apprenticeship for Opportunity Youth project is funded through an Apprenticeship Expansion and Modernization Fund (AEMF) contract provided by the Office of Apprenticeship within the U.S. Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration. The project's goal is to expand access to Registered Apprenticeships for opportunity youth—young people aged 16 to 24 who are disconnected from the workforce and education systems—by building the capacity of youth-serving organizations, workforce boards, communities, and employers. We are partnering with Social Policy Research Associates, a national leader in research, evaluation, and technical assistance on apprenticeship and career pathways; the National Association of Workforce Boards; and the District 1199C Training & Upgrading Fund to provide technical assistance to [15 sites](#) across the country comprising workforce development boards and community-based organizations.

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## Introduction: The COVID-19 Recession and Its Impact

JFF launched the Modernizing Apprenticeship for Opportunity Youth project in 2019 to expand access to Registered Apprenticeships for opportunity youth—young people ages 16 to 24 who are neither in school nor working and often disconnected from services that could help them achieve their goals. At that time, the labor market was strong. In many communities, the talent shortage was so severe that the rationale for this work seemed obvious.

The project, funded by a federal Apprenticeship Expansion and Modernization Fund (AEMF) contract, aimed to improve the career prospects of

opportunity youth by building the capacity of youth-serving organizations, workforce boards, communities, and employers to reach these young people, and engaging them in high-quality apprenticeship programming. The project sought to address employers' needs for new talent and help disconnected young people bridge an experience, skills, and credential gap that was keeping the more lucrative jobs and career advancement opportunities out of reach. In the process, the project would boost diversity within the workforce of participating employers (and sectors) and promote equity within the emerging apprenticeship system. The timing for this initiative seemed ideal.



But since early 2020, COVID-19 has turned the world upside down. The economic downturn that resulted from shelter-in-place strategies to fight the pandemic meant that any predictions about labor market demand became unreliable. The country entered a recession in February, and hiring slowed or stopped completely for a wide range of industries by late March. The unemployment rate rose from 3.6 percent in January to 14.7 percent in May. Workers were asked to work from home—if their jobs allowed it. Many businesses that maintained operations put their training programs on hold amid social distancing rules, safety concerns, and a climate of economic uncertainty. For all of these reasons, COVID-19 imposed a slowdown or pause on many training and employment programs. Some Registered Apprenticeship programs made the difficult decision not to engage with new apprentices in order to prioritize programs for dislocated workers with families and incumbent workers who could train for new roles and avoid layoffs.

Economic downturns generally hit young people especially hard because they increase competition for entry-level jobs. Opportunity youth, who are already disconnected from the education and workforce systems, face formidable challenges competing with more experienced (and often more educated) workers for jobs. Economic crises also prompt young people from wealthier families to stay in school (until their prospects improve) and encourage workers who lose jobs to engage in training for new ones. This leaves opportunity youth to face more competition within the education environment as well. The impact of the COVID-19 recession on opportunity youth is likely to be severe. Unemployment among Generation Z (those born after 1995) has already surpassed 25 percent, and a 2020 report from Measure of America predicts that after a decade of declines in youth disconnection rates, the COVID-19 pandemic will likely cause those rates to spike dramatically, swelling the ranks of opportunity youth to as much as one-quarter of all young people.<sup>1</sup>

In addition, although interest in connecting high school youth to apprenticeship has grown in recent years, opportunity youth are not typically included in such efforts.<sup>2</sup> That is why the groundbreaking work of the AEMF sites featured in this report is particularly important. Our communities, and their workforce and education systems, cannot afford to leave opportunity youth further behind.

## **About This Report**

This report is intended to highlight trends experienced across JFF's AEMF pilot site cohort. It captures the status of those workforce development boards and community-based organizations in the early summer of 2020, a few months after the COVID-19 pandemic became a reality in the United States. The report identifies key challenges as well as crisis-driven innovations. It points toward longer-term strategies needed to keep the Registered Apprenticeship system viable and accessible to opportunity youth now, and evolve it into an asset for recovery later. The report first summarizes the context of the pandemic and the resulting economic downturn. It then documents coping strategies and promising practices from among AEMF sites and provides recommendations for promoting resilience in Registered Apprenticeship programs and among opportunity youth participants.

## Promoting Resilience in Opportunity Youth Through Apprenticeship

The United States has seen a growing movement to expand access to apprenticeship to help young people achieve better labor market and equity outcomes. This movement emerged in response to the realization that college is not a viable path for everyone. It's not just that many young people don't enter college, it is also that college completion rates are low and highly skewed—with students of lesser means much less likely to graduate.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast, youth apprenticeships increase participants' exposure and access to career pathways and paid employment at an earlier age. This is particularly important

for opportunity youth who often lack pathways into education or work, and face more barriers to success once they get there. In order to provide access to a range of opportunities and avoid stigmatizing such programs as academically inferior to traditional college pathways, modern youth apprenticeship programs are often designed to connect youth to college for further training during or after an apprenticeship.<sup>4</sup>

Even in the United States, where the movement is quite recent, a growing body of evidence points to the benefits of apprenticeship,<sup>5</sup> including gains in learning, skills, and confidence for



apprentices; access to skilled workers and a boost in innovation for businesses; and a return on investment over time for communities.<sup>6</sup> Well-designed apprenticeship training can also help increase a participant's positive social interactions and expand their professional networks, which can increase career development or advancement opportunities.

But most youth apprenticeship programs are not designed to address the needs of opportunity youth. The network of AEMF pilot sites aims to change this. By developing new apprenticeship models that emphasize on-ramps and pathways, career advancement after placement, and comprehensive (“wraparound”) supports, the AEMF pilots aim to open new opportunities for opportunity youth and increase equity and inclusion in the apprenticeship system. This effort is an important step toward a comprehensive and integrated youth apprenticeship system that accommodates young people in school as well as opportunity youth.

Programs designed in this way—around the specific needs of these young people—can boost youth resilience by providing young people with more pathways, choices, and access points for learning, training, working, and building good careers. When apprenticeship programs like these are presented as choices along with higher education, students nearing the end of high school have more options, making it less likely that they will disconnect from education altogether at a time when they are most vulnerable.

The benefits to young people extend to the larger economy as well: economies in which youth apprenticeships are widely available are more resilient to downturns than those without these programs.<sup>7</sup> For example, European economies with strong youth apprenticeship systems recovered from past recessions more quickly than those without strong systems, and have kept youth unemployment low. This is an especially important consideration at a time when economic prospects for American young people are dimming and youth unemployment is on the rise.

Furthermore, youth themselves—including opportunity youth—are interested in apprenticeship opportunities. In 2017, Illinois conducted a series of community roundtables to inform the development of the state’s emerging youth apprenticeship programs. When 125 young people—from community colleges, foster care, teen parent programs, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families programs, the justice system, and workforce development programs—rated their interest in apprenticeship, the average was 9.2 on a 10-point scale. These young people pointed to the opportunity to learn in-demand skills through work-based learning, connect to career training (rather than job training), and earn a regular (secure) wage as the aspects of apprenticeship that most appealed to them.

Anecdotally, apprenticeship stakeholders offer hundreds of stories about young people, including opportunity youth, embracing apprenticeship. In 2019, in the middle of the COVID-19 crisis, JFF launched a “Why I Apprentice” video competition and received over [two dozen entries](#). Young apprentices—some of whom were opportunity youth—expressed enthusiasm about learning in the workplace, earning a paycheck, and getting on a pathway to a “real career.” These benefits map to the interests of the Illinois young people and to national youth perspectives more generally.<sup>8</sup>

For opportunity youth, apprenticeship can help maintain a connection to learning and work—and help prevent dropping out. But the current apprenticeship system, while evolving, needs a stronger emphasis on engaging with and supporting opportunity youth specifically.

## Keeping Opportunity Youth Connected to Apprenticeship: Emerging Practices

Connecting opportunity youth to education or employment is not easy, even when the economy is healthy and talent is in short supply. Now, in the middle of a global pandemic and an economic decline, that work has become much harder. The AEMF sites have had to conduct outreach remotely and connect apprentices to virtual learning and work opportunities while workplaces themselves are in turmoil. The workforce development boards and nonprofit and community-based organizations managing the AEMF pilots have confronted three primary challenges. The first was the loss of employer hosts for apprentices, as businesses have downsized their own

staffs or been hesitant to commit to hosting apprentices in an uncertain economic environment. The second was supporting host firms, classroom training providers, and apprentices themselves as recruiting, onboarding, and training activities moved online. The third was building new partnerships at a time when most partners, including community colleges, industry associations, community organizations, and many employers were fighting for their own survival. Retooling in real-time became the norm for many.

The AEMF pilots have employed a number of strategies in adapting to this new environment, including:



- **Providing services remotely:** All programs and host organizations, along with most training providers, have shifted to online delivery of key services including screening, eligibility, orientation, site matching, classroom training, and some on-the-job training.
- **Pausing some service delivery:** A few programs have downsized their apprentice cohorts or delayed program start dates. Some programs are on pause—either because the host organization, training providers, or employers are shut down or open limited hours, or because of safety concerns. Some sectors—such as the culinary and hospitality sectors—are facing serious challenges to their business models and are working to adjust their programs accordingly.
- **Redesigning programs as needed:** Some projects have started to adapt their apprenticeship programs to match the evolving COVID-19-related guidance. In some cases, that has required frontloading related technical instruction while shifting it from in-person training to online courses. Others shifted to offering pre-apprenticeship experiences and activities, which are more flexible and thereby create a deeper bench from which to recruit future cohorts of apprentices. A few programs are focusing on registering new programs and strengthening program management processes, so that programs are stronger when they launch.



**“When we design these programs, we’re usually hurried and under pressure—applying for a grant and doing a hundred other things. This pause has given us the rare opportunity to focus on quality to figure out how to deliver the highest-value experience for young people.”**

**– AEMF Program Staff**

- **Diversifying career pathways and focusing on transferability of skills and occupational mobility:** Some programs have begun exploring ways to adapt their existing training programs to meet the needs of different sectors or industries, focusing on the transferability of skills to different Registered Apprenticeships and occupations in order to keep opportunity youth connected to career pathways.
- **Using downtime to regroup and plan:** Where program staff do have extra time available because of delayed or canceled programs, they are using it to invest in employer engagement, partner collaboration, or to design program fundamentals.
- **Prioritizing equity and access:** Many sites are also using downtime to engage staff members and partners in dialogue about systemic racism and equity issues. The goal of these discussions is to identify and acknowledge barriers and, where possible, determine root causes and address them so that access to opportunity, including apprenticeship, is more widely shared.



## Lessons Learned

As the AEMF sites have adapted their work plans and implementation strategies to the new realities brought on by COVID-19, they have navigated myriad challenges at the program, policy, and system levels. Their experiences offer lessons for other apprenticeship initiatives, including those focused on opportunity youth. Although some practices are geared toward the current crisis, others may become part of normal operations as the immediate challenges of the pandemic subside.

### Engaging Opportunity Youth Apprentices

Keeping young people engaged in learning and work requires instructors, mentors, and peers to maintain frequent contact. Consistent touch points and ongoing communication provided by programs help youth advance their educational and career objectives and also support their social-emotional needs.

That's why the social distancing required since the COVID-19 crisis began has hit youth-serving programs particularly hard. The loss of social connections during the shelter-in-place rules that closed most schools for the last quarter of the year was acutely felt by in-school youth.<sup>9</sup> The impact on opportunity youth has been even greater, since meaningful and supportive contact with an educational or career orientation has been even more difficult to come by outside of traditional institutional environments like high school or community college. The community-based organizations, training programs, and workforce boards that serve this population under the AEMF initiative have been greatly affected by the pandemic and forced to employ new approaches to keep young people connected to program activities, and to staff, peers, and supervisors.

For example, at Liberty’s Kitchen, an AEMF site in New Orleans, opportunity youth who were normally occupied in bustling food service positions struggled with a sense of disconnection from the program, their peers, and customers when the pandemic interrupted normal operations.

AEMF pilot sites have played important roles in expanding awareness of Registered Apprenticeship opportunities available to opportunity youth despite COVID-19 closures and program delays. These sites have also helped ensure that this population remains engaged and supported during the pandemic. Program staff are providing crucial connections to opportunities and resources during this time, while also finding ways to help young people build skills and prepare for new training or work activities. They are creating bridges to meaningful career pathways and opportunities for economic advancement, despite the challenging circumstances. Additionally, the sites have largely maintained or expanded employer and community-based partnerships, leading to some innovative strategies that hold promise for in-school and adult apprentices and for the community at large.



Culinary Training Manager Tori Nero and a trainee at Liberty’s Kitchen, before the COVID-19 shutdown. *Photo credit: Elayna Yussen*

**Closing the digital divide.** A major challenge when COVID-19 forced shut-downs was maintaining participant access to technology. Not all apprentices or participants in pre-apprenticeship programs had access to personal laptops or home internet connections, or knew how to access these tools. This digital access gap was an issue for both urban and rural pilot sites, and for the schools and other youth-serving organizations in pilot-site communities. That's why most AEMF projects joined community-wide technology acquisition, distribution, and access efforts.

- Some cities, like Philadelphia, set up partnerships, secured funding, and [distributed thousands of laptop computers](#) to students while others, such as Portland, Oregon, set up distribution networks with nonprofit organizations that reached beyond students, workers, and opportunity youth.
- In urban and rural communities, public service providers like colleges boosted their Wi-Fi signals or provided mobile access points from their parking lots. Many libraries, school districts, American Job Centers, community colleges, civic centers, coffee shops, and coworking spaces extended their Wi-Fi signals and left them running during closures to expand access to no-cost internet connectivity.
- A few pilot sites worked to establish technical helplines or other kinds of support for youth, opportunity youth, and adult participants—even turning these services into potential training and future apprenticeship opportunities (see *Bridging the Divide: JEVS's Digital Navigators*).



In some areas, school buses are serving as Wi-Fi hot spots for students without home internet connections.

## Bridging the Divide: JEVS's Digital Navigators

The apprenticeship team at [JEVS Human Services](#) had to pause normal activities when COVID-19 forced a shutdown in the city of Philadelphia. While program staff could no longer connect young people to pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship opportunities as originally planned, team members did continue to engage with young people who were interested in the program, using Zoom, email, and text messaging. However, a lack of reliable, affordable internet access, mobile devices, and technical skills [became immediately apparent](#).

The young people served by JEVS were struggling before COVID-19, and now they were at home—with some caring for children or siblings—and faced with choices about whether or how to engage in planned job training or work-based learning in the middle of a public health crisis. JEVS saw an opportunity: what if these same young people could learn skills remotely and engage in work that could help their communities get through the pandemic?



The JEVS staff worked with the TechServ Scholars program (a partnership between JEVS and AmeriCorps) to create an online-first program designed to help young people gain technology skills, earn recognized certifications, and become “digital navigators”—technology coaches and digital capacity builders. These newly certified professionals would be deployed to grassroots organizations (such as churches and community service organizations) to help them make better use of technology in their own operations and in providing food, health and social services, faith-centered counseling, and other family and community support. Navigators could also help the members and constituents of these organizations use technology to better access these services safely.

JEVS envisions digital navigators safely building the reach and capacity of local crisis responders and community support organizations, and the skills and access of neighbors and community members, while becoming community leaders in their own right. COVID-19 put a spotlight on the existing challenge of digital inequality, but the end result was a new kind of pre-apprenticeship that could establish a path to something more.

**Recruiting apprentices remotely.** The sites also had to overcome a number of hurdles as they began to recruit and enroll participants online, guided by regulations and processes designed for in-person interactions. For example, after a relatively short transition period, the [Shenandoah Valley Workforce Development Board](#) began recruiting applicants and holding group orientation sessions using online software tools, such as Zoom, and conducting counseling interviews using Microsoft Teams. They also used live chat to stay engaged with opportunity youth throughout the process. To facilitate a paperless enrollment process, a number of sites began accepting scanned or photographed eligibility documents and digital signatures.

**Providing training services and support.** Next, the sites had to convert in-person apprenticeship programs, including related technical instruction and work-based training, to an online delivery format. Achieving such a transformation in just a couple of months would have been considered impossible until this year. Some sites were able to use downtime (while programs were paused) to put systems in place. Others, including those with business partners that were expecting to increase hiring for essential positions, converted their processes while they accelerated onboarding and devised new training methods.

For example, CVS experienced a high demand for pharmacy technicians and wanted to accelerate the process by which applicants could move through the technical instruction that was normally part of the pre-apprenticeship program. It worked with AEMF site [Philadelphia Youth Network](#), Philadelphia Works (the local workforce board), and the Philadelphia Job Corps Center to fast-track its onboarding process. Partners sought to provide related technical instruction in parallel with work-based training to allow apprentices to reach their graduation dates and convert to regular employment more quickly. Toward that end, it offered bonuses to employee apprentices. To support the process remotely, case managers began communicating with apprentices twice a week by phone or video rather than through in-person appointments or by email.



*Photo credit: Philadelphia Youth Network*

Coaching and navigation support has also become more critical—either because online programming requires a higher level of outreach and engagement or because of the importance of integrating new safety procedures for in-person training and work—prompting programs to boost capacity in this area. Several sites are building job coaching into their programs from the beginning, in pre-apprenticeship programming. This accelerates the adoption of required work processes within the training cohort and helps employers and participants make more informed decisions about Registered Apprenticeship as a next step.

Finally, somewhat unexpectedly, the recent economic downturn has led to a rising interest in apprenticeship among youth, including opportunity youth. For example, at the University of Southern Maine’s pilot site, youth have been expressing an interest in more options for combining learning and work through apprenticeships. As a result, the site will be hosting a dialog on apprenticeship during the next convening of the Young People’s Caucus in the fall of 2020.

## Engaging Employers

AEMF sites reported that many employers' needs have changed dramatically since the onset of the pandemic. The main challenges for programs, beyond remaining engaged with employers, have been assessing current industry needs and communicating how apprenticeship programs can provide value in the current environment and aid in an economic recovery.

## Meeting Current Needs

For IT, health care, landscaping, and some areas of advanced manufacturing, changes have been less dramatic than in other sectors. Although some programs are simply on hold, most sites have adapted existing programs to accommodate new schedules, smaller cohorts, and new safety procedures, and used the slower ramp-up time to train trainers and mentors. Sites have reported common challenges:

- Employers (in health care and in food services) that have furloughed employees are reluctant to hire apprentices until after they have recalled these experienced employees.
- Hiring patterns for different health care occupations have diverged—there is a high demand for patient-care positions while the demand for providers of specialty services and elective procedures is greatly reduced.
- Employers that had been participating in industry/sector collaboratives, such as in manufacturing, are increasingly demanding one-on-one communication with program staff because they are reluctant to share information about hiring and training needs with competing firms in the context of the crisis.
- Some employers with experience in pre-apprenticeship and Registered Apprenticeship programs for adults that had been willing to incorporate opportunity youth into their programs have backtracked because of the perceived risks (and potential

liabilities) of bringing young people into the workplace during the pandemic.

- Some employers in sectors where technology is rapidly changing, such as IT and advanced manufacturing, are using the period of disruption to increase automation, retool business processes, and redesign hiring and training—including experimenting with virtual, augmented, and extended reality as some of Worksystems’ programs are doing in Oregon’s Portland metro area.
- For employers with steady or increasing talent demands, apprenticeship programs are adapting to new COVID-19 worker safety rules and classroom training requirements. For example, The Hershey Company is expanding its manufacturing facility with a purpose-built training center. The company—in collaboration with the Shenandoah Valley Workforce Development Board—is also moving ahead with the fourth iteration of its [Manufacturing Boot Camp](#)—a pre-apprenticeship program that includes opportunity youth, serves as the gateway into Hershey’s industrial manufacturing technician apprenticeship. New distancing requirements mean



that the company will run smaller bootcamp cohorts more frequently. It has also built safety practices required in the workplace to the bootcamp environment (e.g., mask mandates, frequent handwashing, etc.), and served as a model of safe training and work practices.

### *Making the Case for Apprenticeship*

Hiring demands have decreased in many industries due to COVID-19, and the shape of a recovery is still unclear. As a result, AEMF sites have reported needing new narratives about the benefits of apprenticeship that are more suited to the COVID environment and are still compelling to employers. For example, sites have been providing evidence to employers that providing training through apprenticeship can reinforce businesses' resilience during the downturn and accelerate recovery. Pilot sites also report that working with new employers has been difficult at a time when many businesses are coping with their own challenges in adapting to the rapidly shifting business climate. Sites have used a variety of strategies in making a COVID-relevant case for apprenticeships:

- **Boosting business engagement capacity:** To address the need for business engagement, the Shenandoah Valley site hired two employer network directors to coordinate all business outreach efforts. This new role will help bolster existing employer relationships and enable the site to provide a more streamlined channel for prospective partners that are considering starting apprenticeship programs.
- **Addressing workforce needs in a new reality:** COVID-19 has disrupted many hiring, commuting, and service delivery processes, and introduced entirely new roles to an increasingly virtual workplace. Over a fairly short period, occupations and the skills required for them are changing as industries adapt to new market conditions. New safety technician and work-from-home support specialist roles are emerging and may

provide new training and employment opportunities—including apprenticeship.

- **Adapting business and training models simultaneously:**  
The culinary sector has been particularly hard hit by the effects of the pandemic. FareStart, one of the AEMF sites, has been working to adapt its training model as its member programs are shifting their focus to institutional food service such as hospital dining and elder meal-delivery services, as well as food service in essential sectors (e.g., grocery store delicatessens and bakeries). FareStart members Catalyst Kitchens and Liberty’s Kitchen are working to determine how the shift to curbside ordering and pickup will affect the skill sets that are needed for those new jobs, and how many jobs will be available. They are also exploring new entrepreneurial opportunities in an effort to expand revenues and enrich, expand, or shift programming for current participants unable to complete programs as originally planned.
- **Advancing apprenticeship as a strategy for recovery:** A powerful argument for an expansion of apprenticeship during an economic decline is the fact that economies with robust apprenticeship programs tend to recover more quickly from such downturns.<sup>10</sup> This is likely because apprentices spend a larger share of their training time on the job rather than in the classroom, and are thus exposed to the changes in those businesses in real time. When the economy picks up again, they are ready to work, and businesses don’t experience a lag before they can staff up. This also means that the career training is more tailored to the needs of the moment.
- **Redesigning jobs through redesigned apprenticeships:**  
Another powerful argument for apprenticeship stems from the fact that apprentices can help reinvigorate workplaces. When these younger workers enter the workplace, they bring experiential (and classroom) knowledge of new technologies, processes, and even market intelligence. As they learn on the job, they may question why things are done a certain

way, inspiring process improvements even absent a formal continuous improvement process. By being embedded in businesses during training, they are able to influence many variables associated with a single job—hiring, worker training, safety, work processes or modes, remote working—at a time when whole industries are being reimagined and redesigned.

## **Advancing Partnerships and Pivoting Programs**

Apprenticeship programs have always relied heavily on partnerships among a variety of stakeholders. In the middle of a pandemic, this raises two critical questions: 1) how can these partnerships be launched and nurtured virtually, and 2) are any of these newly emerging practices worth keeping after the crisis subsides?

A few sites are either developing new partnerships or renewing contact with existing partners in order to repurpose training. For example, Goodwill of North Georgia collaborated with business partners to turn its hospitality training program into a pre-apprenticeship program for management employees. The same site has enhanced its relationship with a major employer in the IT sector, boosting the range of occupations it hopes to be able to offer to qualified opportunity youth. Similarly, The Cutler Institute at the University of Southern Maine had planned a major apprenticeship system-building effort this year. Despite having shifted to working remotely, staff managed to support the development and submission of a major grant proposal (for the Maine Youth Apprenticeship). They also remotely launched a major multisector partnership—planned before the COVID-19 crisis—that convened in June. Cutler serves as the backbone organization for this effort, as well as for several related initiatives it hopes to link to apprenticeship. In that capacity, Cutler provides technical, data, and training support; serves as lead convener for the effort; and looks forward to connecting the university itself to apprenticeship programming in the form of university apprenticeships.



Finally, Capital Workforce Partners serves as the backbone organization for the Hartford Opportunity Youth Collaborative in Connecticut, and is also currently implementing the region’s summer youth employment and engagement plan. To ensure the sustainability of its youth apprenticeship work, Capital Workforce Partners worked with the state to widen the reach of its Apprenticeship Connecticut Initiative to include opportunity youth. This allows the organization to focus much of the recently awarded \$2.2 million Apprenticeship Connecticut Initiative grant—targeting pre-apprenticeship and credential-based programs in the manufacturing, health care, and construction sectors—on opportunity youth.



## Conclusion

It's too early to say which effects of the COVID-19-induced economic shifts are temporary and which will be permanent. Practices and strategies emerging now are responding to fast-changing circumstances. However, there are early indications of how emerging trends might affect opportunity youth and their ability to access career pathways through apprenticeships:

- **Opportunity youth run the risk of being further marginalized.** The current reliance on online education has exacerbated the digital divide because it favors those who are digitally connected either at home or through their schools. Opportunity youth often lack such connectivity and, as a result, face further barriers to reconnecting to educational and career pathways.
- **Youth apprenticeships are gaining currency with employers.** For employers, the ability to customize training to their most immediate needs and escalate pay based on skills gains and productivity make apprenticeship particularly attractive at a time when work processes are subject to frequent changes, even if some of the training has to be shifted online.<sup>11</sup>
- **Four-year college degrees are losing some of their previous competitive advantages,** accelerating a trend that preceded the COVID-19 era. The high price of a college education was already prohibitive for many career seekers, including opportunity youth. The fact that pandemic-related social distancing rules are keeping most campuses closed in the fall and forcing most classes to move online further favors apprenticeships.<sup>12</sup>
- **The COVID-19 effect favors certain career pathways while disadvantaging others.** While some industries were able to

expand remote work fairly seamlessly—especially if it was already common before COVID-19—in other industries, the transition was much more difficult or even impossible. This rapid acceleration of moving jobs online also increased the need for a range of IT jobs, in particular in the areas of cloud computing, cybersecurity, and related support occupations, that are needed to support the digitization of work processes.

- **Programs have had to pivot in order to remain responsive to the needs of employers.** Some are shifting their training from declining industries to adjacent industries or occupations. Others have quickly accelerated their recruiting and onboarding in industries that experienced a surge in demand once shelter-in-place ordinances were lifted in some parts of the country.
- **Some programs have used the COVID-19-imposed pause to engage with their partners** in an effort to enhance the apprenticeship ecosystem with new services, partners, and supports, or to boost system capacity to provide young people with articulated pre-apprenticeship-to-apprenticeship career pathways.

As more industry trends stabilize, employers are expected to get better at estimating their hiring needs. This should allow the AEMF sites and their networks to adjust their recruitment strategies and ramp up training accordingly. As they adapt, innovate, and share their new approaches, we plan to update this preliminary summary as well.

## Appendix: Resources that Support Program Resilience and Recovery

The following is a curated collection of guides, platforms, and tools that sites may find useful as they build their own COVID-19 resilience response plans:

### Advancing Partnerships

- [“A Super Simple Guide to Launching New Initiatives in the Era of Covid-19”](#) combines a few tools to get started with planning, scoping, and goal-setting, based on the needs and experiences of projects in the moment.
- MIT Media Lab’s [“Tips for Small Online Meetings / Online Courses \(2-25 participants\)”](#) (you can use and contribute to this emerging crowdsourced document).
- Additional tools specific to youth programs are included as an appendix in The Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions’ [1.0 Digital Summer Youth Employment Toolkit](#).

### Making the Case for Apprenticeship During a Pandemic

- The blog post [“We Must Sustain Apprenticeship in a Post-Pandemic Downturn”](#) is available on JFF’s website.
- A recent New America webinar, infographic, and resource collection, [“Why Should Employers Invest in Youth Apprenticeship?”](#), was developed as part of the organization’s Partnership to Advance Youth Apprenticeship effort.
- The New America blog post [“Youth Apprenticeship Programs Adapt to Meet Crucial Needs in Pandemic”](#) describes how programs across the United States are helping young adults, employers, and communities adapt to rapid economic change.

## Searchable Solutions Platforms

- [COVID Innovations](#) is a collection of crowdsourced practices, ideas, and resources, searchable by sector; you can also subscribe to a weekly newsletter.
- The National League of Cities and Bloomberg Philanthropies have created an extensive, topic-indexed [COVID-19: Local Innovation Action Tracker](#) resource.
- United Kingdom-based Catalyst’s [Services Recipes for Charities](#) is a social-care-centered resource for responding to the COVID-19 crisis.
- The Organization for Economic Development has created a global [Observatory of Public Sector Innovation COVID-19 Innovative Response Tracker](#).

## COVID-19 Response Guides and Tools

- [Strada Education Resource Center](#).
- [Equitable Recovery Hub](#) (JFF’s COVID-19 resource center).
- [Youth Apprenticeship Messaging During COVID-19: Tips About Communicating During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#).
- [A Decade Undone: Youth Disconnection in the Age of Coronavirus](#), a report on Measure of America’s youth disconnection research.
- [National Youth Employment Coalition’s COVID-19 Resources](#).
- “[Summer Youth Employment in the Age of Covid-19](#),” a webinar from The Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions.
- [COVID-19 Frequently Asked Questions: Youth](#), from the U.S. Department of Labor.
- [Responding to the COVID-19 Crisis: Evidence-Informed Resources for Practitioners and Policymakers](#), from MDRC.
- “[Strategies for Recovery and Resilience in Youth Apprenticeship](#),” a blog post from New America.

- “[How to Re-Design the World for Coronavirus and Beyond](#),” from Politico.

## Technology and Wi-Fi Locators, Maps, and Services

- Alliance for Technology Refurbishing and Reuse’s [interactive map](#) of nonprofit technology refurbishers and recyclers.
- Public Access Wi-Fi: [Colorado](#), [Connecticut](#), [Georgia](#), [Baltimore](#) (MD), [Maine](#) ([Study-from-Car Initiative](#)), [Portland](#) (OR), [Philadelphia](#) (PA), [Tennessee](#), [Virginia](#), [Washington](#), and Wyoming ([Silver Star](#)).
- Zip-code searchable list of [hot-spot access points](#).
- [Atlantic Broadband](#) Wi-Fi hot spot finder.
- [Cox](#) Wi-Fi hot spot finder.
- [Optimum](#) Wi-Fi hot spot finder.
- Map of [Spectrum](#) public access hot spots.
- [Xfinity](#) Wi-Fi hot spot finder.
- National Digital Inclusion Alliance’s list of [COVID Digital Inclusion](#) efforts by state.

## Endnotes

1. Kristen Lewis, *A Decade Undone: Youth Disconnection in the Age of Coronavirus* (New York: Measure of America, Social Science Research Council, 2020), <https://measureofamerica.org/youth-disconnection-2020>.
2. Brent Parton, *Youth Apprenticeship in America Today: Connecting High School Students to Apprenticeship*, (Washington, DC: New America, 2017), <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/policy-papers/youth-apprenticeship-america-today>.
3. David Leonhardt, “The Growing College Graduation Gap,” *The New York Times*, March 25, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/25/opinion/college-graduation-gap.html>.
4. Lul Tesfai, “Creating Pathways to College Degrees Through Apprenticeships,” *New America*, September 19, 2019, <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/creating-pathways-postsecondary-credentials-through-apprenticeships>.
5. An evaluation of Colorado’s CareerWise effort is ongoing; see <https://www.mdrc.org/project/careerwise-colorado-study#overview>.
6. Robert Lerman, “Building a Robust Apprenticeship System in the U.S.: Why and How” (presentation, Meetings of the Labor and Employment Relations Association Allied Social Science Association, Philadelphia, January 5-7, 2018).
7. Samuel Lüthi and Stefan C. Wolter, “Are Apprenticeships Business Cycle Proof?” (IZA Discussion Paper No. 11374, Institute of Labor Economics, Bonn, Germany, February 2018), <http://ftp.iza.org/dp11374.pdf>.
8. Brent Parton, *Youth Apprenticeship in America Today: Connecting High School Students to Apprenticeship* (Washington, DC: New America, 2017), <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/policy-papers/youth-apprenticeship-america-today>.
9. In fact, 40 percent of in-school youth say that they have not been offered any social or emotional support by an adult from their school. Arianna Prothero, “Teens are Growing Depressed and Disconnected from School, Student Survey Finds,” *Education Week*, June 12, 2020, [https://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/rulesforengagement/2020/06/teen-social\\_emotional\\_health\\_survey.html](https://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/rulesforengagement/2020/06/teen-social_emotional_health_survey.html).

10. Lüthi and Wolter, “Are Apprenticeships Business Cycle Proof?”
11. Madeline St. Amour, “The Future of Apprenticeships,” *Inside Higher Ed*, June 9, 2020, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/06/09/are-virtual-apprenticeships-future-after-pandemic>.
12. Alison McCauley, “How COVID-19 Could Shift the College Business Model,” *Forbes*, April 10, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alisonmccauley/2020/04/09/how-covid-19-could-shift-the-college-business-model/#76d0316b564f>.



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